

Bengt Larsson, Mattias Bengtsson, Kristina Lovén Seldén\*

## **Transnational Trade Union Cooperation in the Nordic Countries\*\***

This article analyzes how Nordic trade unions cooperate with unions in Europe, and what actors and organizations they cooperate with to influence EU policies. We examine both similarities and differences between the Nordic countries and between unions in different sectors, and make some comparisons with unions in other European countries. As a background, we first present the Nordic model(s) of industrial relations, and some important national and sectoral differences. Thereafter follows an analysis based on a survey carried out in 2010-11. The results show strong similarities between the Nordic countries regarding transnational union cooperation and union action, but also that there is greater diversity between sectors than between countries. The internationally exposed manufacturing sector is the most engaged in transnational cooperation, followed by the construction industry. The more sheltered services sector has a somewhat lower degree of cooperation, and the professional/academic unions are the least engaged. This implies that, besides variation between countries, variation between sectors must be taken into account when analyzing the existence of a common Nordic approach to transnational cooperation.

Key words: **industrial relations, Nordic regime, sector, union action**  
(JEL: J51, J52)

---

\* Bengt Larsson, Associate professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, SE 405 30, Göteborg, Sweden.  
E-mail: [bengt.larsson@sociology.gu.se](mailto:bengt.larsson@sociology.gu.se).

Mattias Bengtsson, Assistant professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, SE 405 30, Göteborg, Sweden.

Kristina Lovén Seldén, Doctoral student at the Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, SE 405 30, Göteborg, Sweden.

\*\* Article received: December 23, 2011

Revised version accepted after double blind review: December 30, 2011.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is common to speak of different *regimes* of industrial relations, based on similarities and differences between countries. The Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are often said to belong to a common regime. Even if regime typologies downplay diversity between and within countries, it seems particularly pertinent to speak of a regime regarding the Nordic countries. The reason is that the variation in industrial relations both between these countries and within them – that is, the variation between different sectors or industries – is less than in many other European countries (Bechter et al., 2011).

The Nordic regime is characterized by strong trade unions and employer associations negotiating collective agreements with a high degree of autonomy, and with wide bargaining coverage, on both the national and local levels in most sectors of the labor market. The peak-level unions are strong, and are organized primarily on an occupation/class basis. Unions are institutionally supported by welfare states with corporatist arrangements and active labor market policies, and have a strong historical basis in social democracy (Esping-Andersen, 1999, p. 78; Dølvik, 2007; European Commission, 2009; Jochem, 2011).

With the exception of Iceland, the Nordic economies entered the financial crisis of 2008 with sound public finances. Even so, all Nordic countries were hit hard in the form of GDP busts, which led to restructurings, lay-offs, and decreasing employment rates (European Foundation, 2011; Jochem, 2011). As in other countries, the Nordic trade unions were forced to make concessions such as wage cuts and temporary layoffs (Glassner & Keune, 2009). In addition, one should note that this happened in a time when union density was decreasing in the Nordic countries. While previously being an exception, the Nordic countries have shown the same tendency of decreasing union density during the last 10-15 years (Scheuer, 2011).

Trade unions are of course not passive bystanders to these problems. The major "revitalization strategies" discussed within unions are membership enrollment, social partnership building, political mobilization, internal union restructuring, and transnational union cooperation (Behrens et al., 2004). In this article, we will analyze transnational union cooperation among the Nordic trade unions, as well as which actors and organizations they cooperate with in order to influence EU policies. The aim is to show what similarities and differences there are between the Nordic countries, but also to what degree there are sectoral differences. In addition, we also make some comparisons between the Nordic unions and unions in other European countries. Thereby we want to address the question of whether there is a common Nordic approach to transnational union cooperation, anchored in a common regime of industrial relations, or whether we can find an underlying variation among unions in different sectors. As a background we will present a more thorough elaboration of the Nordic regime of industrial relations, as well as some results on the Nordic trade unions' attitudes to-

---

<sup>1</sup> The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research. The authors thank Bengt Furåker and the anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

wards cross-national cooperation. The empirical part relies on a web-based/postal survey carried out in 2010-11.

### The Nordic model(s) of industrial relations

In regime typologies, the Nordic countries are often placed in a common regime or model. Depending on focus, these countries are described as being part of a social democratic or universalistic welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1999), a coordinated market economy production regime (Hall & Soskice, 2001), and an inclusive employment regime (Gallie, 2007). From the approach of industrial relations, the common regime is often called *organized corporatism* (European Commission, 2009, p. 49). By overlooking national differences, this regime of industrial relations and labor market governance is characterized by strong and centralized employer organizations and unions. Union density is high, as well as the employer organizations' density rate (European Commission, 2011, p. 25ff.).

Labor law in the Nordic countries is to a great extent *semi-dispositive*, which means that the unions and the employers can agree on exemptions at the local or national level. Nordic labor market regulations are thus based on collective agreements with extensive coverage (see Table 1), which settle wage levels, working time, working conditions, and other labor standards.<sup>2</sup> Agreements are supplemented with legislation on dismissals, consultation and codetermination, health and safety, and work environment, as well as institutions for conflict resolution. However, there are no laws on minimum wages. In addition, this self-regulative collective bargaining model is stabilized by active labor market programs and by more local political measures in times of lay-offs, including training programs, temporary lay-off schemes, etc. (Dølvik, 2007; European Commission, 2011, p. 35ff.).

The relations between unions and employer organizations are quite consensus-oriented and dialogic, based on mutual recognition. This does not imply that conflicts are absent, but they are contained within established institutions for dispute settlement: labor courts, mediation offices, and negotiation agreements (Kjellberg, 2009). Thus, the conflict level is quite low in the Nordic countries, with the exception of Finland (European Foundation, 2011, p. 30). All Nordic countries except Norway have statutory rights to use boycotts and sympathy strikes to force employers to sign collective agreements – rights used, though challenged and subsequently delimited, in the renowned Swedish Laval case (Dølvik, 2007; Bücker & Warneck, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As an illustration, in 2009 the Swedish collective agreements covered 82 percent of the employer organizations and 90 percent of the employees (Kjellberg, 2011, p. 86).

<sup>3</sup> In November 2004 the Swedish Building Workers' Union put the Latvian company Laval un Partneri under a blockade on a building site in Vaxholm situated nearby Stockholm, since the company refused to conclude a Swedish collective agreement for Latvian workers. The conflict was later brought to the European Court of Justice which ruled that the free movement of services may impose far-reaching restrictions on the rights to industrial action (Malmberg, 2010, p. 9). The judgment has direct impact on the practice of collective bargaining and the effectiveness of union action, especially in countries such as

Nordic union representation is “single channel” and collective bargaining is coordinated both at the national and local levels, with a strong relation both vertically and horizontally between unions within the peak-level confederations. Company level bargaining is thus contained within a framework of centralized and sectoral agreements including labor peace clauses and pattern bargaining between sectors, based on centrally agreed criteria of productivity. Though decreasing during the last 10-15 years, union density in the Nordic countries is still high by international standards (Scheuer, 2011). In Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, union density is around 70 percent, partly an effect of the union-administered unemployment insurance funds, the so-called Ghent system (see Table 1). The absence of this link in Norway is one explanation for its lower level of union density.

Nordic unions are strong not only among blue-collar workers, but overall. This is partly because of the Ghent system, big public sectors, well-organized employer organizations, and the historically strong standing of social democratic parties in these countries (Korpi, 2006; Dølvik, 2007). A specific feature of union organization, by which the Nordic countries deviate from most other European countries, is that it is divided on an occupational and class basis with separate peak-level confederations for blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, and academics/professionals (Van Gyes, 2006; European Commission, 2011, p. 18f.). In the rest of the EU, unions at the confederate level are mostly based on political and/or religious divisions, public and private sector differences, or regional differences. Irrespective of this class base, the Nordic unions are not politically radical, but have been depicted as “encompassing organizations.” They represent such a large proportion of the labor force that they have been forced to internalize conflicts of interest and take a social responsibility in cooperating with employer organizations and the state (Hyman, 2001, p. 46f.; van den Berg, 2008).

**Table 1: Union density, bargaining coverage, and wage bargaining regulation/coordination**

	Union density* (%) (2008-10)	Bargaining coverage ** (%)(2007-08)	State regulation of wage bargaining (5=high, 1=low) (2010)	Coordination of wage bargaining (5=high, 1=low) (2010)	Extension mechanisms (2010)
Denmark	69	80	2	3	No
Finland	70	90	3	3	Yes
Iceland	79	88	-	-	Yes
Norway	54	74	3	4	Yes
Sweden	69	91	2	3	No

Sources: European Commission, 2011; ICTWSS, 2011.

Note: \*Net union membership as a proportion of wage and salary earners in employment. \*\*Employees covered by wage bargaining agreements as a proportion of all wage and salary earners in employment with the right to bargaining, expressed in percent, adjusted for the possibility that some sectors or occupations are excluded from the right to bargain (Visser, 2011, p.18).

Denmark and Sweden where there are no laws on minimum wages and no extension mechanisms for collective agreements.

### *Differences between the Nordic countries*

The above characterization does not imply that there are no differences between the Nordic countries. In addition to the commonalities, one may also find path-dependent national variations. Here, we will only mention some differences of significance for the subsequent analysis of transnational union cooperation and channels for influencing EU policies.

First, there are national differences in union organization and density levels, periodicity of bargaining rounds, degree of bargaining coordination, coverage of agreements, and existence of extension mechanisms, as well as degree of state regulation and intervention (see Table 1). The trend towards organized decentralization of bargaining – giving the partners an increased power to negotiate wages and working time at the local level – has for example been strong in Denmark and Sweden, and to some degree also in Finland, whereas Iceland and Norway have seen a tendency towards re-centralization. There are extension mechanisms for collective agreements in Finland, Iceland, and Norway, but not in Denmark and Sweden. However, in Sweden collective agreements cover most of the labor market anyway, because of the high density levels of unions and employer organizations. There has been more state intervention in Norway, whereas Sweden has relatively little state settling of bargaining conflicts (Dølvik, 2007; cf. Due & Madsen, 2008; Løken & Stokke, 2009; European Commission, 2011, p. 37f.; European Foundation, 2011, p. 35; Jochem, 2011).

Second, one should take into account that Iceland and Norway are not EU members, though both countries have signed the EEA Agreement and are thus obliged to comply with EU labor market regulations. Iceland has applied for membership and in addition one may note that Sweden, in contrast to Denmark and Finland, is outside the euro zone. When it comes to formal transnational union cooperation, all Nordic peak-level confederations are members of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), and the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS), which has as its main task to coordinate trade union activities in the Nordic countries. In addition, all Nordic peak-level federations, except the Icelandic one, are members of the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network (BASTUN), which has similar aims as the NFS in exchanging information and defining common interests across borders. At the sectoral level, Nordic unions are also members of both the European and the Nordic Industry Federations.

Third, even though all of the Nordic countries are small open economies that are highly dependent on exporting industries, there are differences in industrial structure. Denmark has a strong agriculture industry and many small enterprises. In Finland the most dominant industries used to be in timber and paper, but these are nowadays supplemented by high-skilled industries, e.g., in electronics. Iceland and Norway have long traditions in natural resources exporting industries, but are today strong also in the offshore and maritime industry. The Swedish export industries are based primarily in big multinational companies in transportation vehicles, electronics and paper (Dølvik, 2007).

### *The importance of sectoral differences*

The differences in industrial structure among the Nordic countries are related to the question of differences in industrial relations among sectors. As shown by Bechter et al. (2011), there is often more divergence in industrial relations across sectors within a country than within sectors in the EU27. However, the Nordic countries are marked by relatively low internal variation in industrial relations among sectors, as compared to other countries. There is also less country variation within the Nordic regime, as compared to other regimes. Still, there are differences. Bechter et al. (2011) show that the Nordic countries do not cluster within a common type of industrial relations in any of the sectors analyzed in their study. The point made is that we should be cautious when speaking of regimes of industrial relations, since there is always a lot of internal variation, both among countries and between sectors and industries.

The sectoral level is not only the most important level of collective bargaining within the EU15; in many sectors it is also the level at which the most far-reaching forms of union cooperation and European bargaining take place through the European Industry Federations (EIFs) and the sectoral social dialogue as well as through cross border bargaining coordination (Marginson & Sisson, 2004, p. 97ff.). The convergence of industrial relations on the sectoral level in Europe, as discussed by Bechter et al. (2011), has its basis in the different production processes and work organizations that characterize different industries. Some industries, particularly in manufacturing, are highly exposed to international competition since their product markets are highly integrated and their work organization makes possible a high degree of transferability of production location. Exposed industries in which labor is mobile across borders such as coal, steel, agriculture, transportation, and construction also belong to the “first generation” of EIFs, with longstanding traditions of cross-border union cooperation. These industries are, together with industries that have undergone liberalizations, e.g., civil aviation and telecommunications, and construction because of the Posting of Workers Directive, the ones that have had the greatest cause to collaborate across borders since they are affected by common industrial policies in the EU. It is thus in the manufacturing sector, and particularly in the metal industry, that one finds the most far-reaching transnational coordination of activities between unions (Pulignano, 2009; Müller et al., 2010; Glassner & Pochet, 2011).

The more “sheltered” industries, e.g., public services such as education and healthcare and private services such as hairdressing, are less exposed not only to international competition in their consumer markets, but also to transferability of production location (Bechter et al., 2011; Glassner & Pochet, 2011, p. 13). They have been under less pressure to develop cross-border cooperation and are thus latecomers in terms of European cooperation and sectoral dialogue. As noted by the Commission report on European sectoral social dialogue: “While European sectoral social dialogue largely covers the primary and secondary sectors of the economy... several services sectors are still without an organized social dialogue at the European level” (European Commission, 2010, p. 7).

Following this, it seems reasonable to assume that the sectoral variation in cross-border union cooperation may be greater than that between countries in the Nordic



regime. More specifically, we would expect the degree of transnational cooperation to be higher in manufacturing and peak-level organizations than in services and in the professions, since the former organizations are under stronger pressure to cooperate and since their organizational structures for transnational cooperation are generally more developed and far-reaching (cf. Bieler, 2008).

## Data and methods

The data for the following analyses were collected through a web-based/postal survey sent out to trade unions in Europe in 2010-2011. Here we focus mainly on the Nordic data set. More specifically, we selected only organizations with around 10,000 members or more in order to exclude minor trade unions, and sent the survey to 29 unions in Denmark, 38 in Finland, 6 in Iceland, 34 in Norway, and 39 in Sweden, i.e., a total of 146 organizations. In February 2011, we had received 102 completed questionnaires, implying an overall response rate of 70 percent (Denmark 69 percent, Finland 42 percent, Iceland 50 percent, Norway 71 percent, and Sweden 100 percent). In order to produce good validity, respondents at central positions in the organizations were selected. As a result, just over half of the returned questionnaires were filled out by the secretary general, the president or the vice president, and one-fourth by an international secretary/correspondent.

In this article we analyze the responses on three of our survey questions. The first concerned whether the respondent's organization cooperates with unions in other European countries in the following ways: training programs for union representatives, exchange of information on collective agreements, exchange of observers or negotiators in collective bargaining, and coordination of negotiations concerning plant restructuring and closure (e.g., regarding redundancies, wages, and training). The response options were "regularly," "sporadically," "not at all," and "do not know." In the subsequent analyses we have chosen not to report "do not know," which we re-coded as missing. The second question concerned whether the respondent's organization had participated in any of the following union actions within Europe during the last three years: statements, petitions or open letters; demonstrations or boycotts; overtime bans; strikes or blockades; and sympathy strikes. The third question concerned the degree to which the organization cooperates with any of the following actors in influencing EU policies: the ETUC; EIFs; trade union offices in Brussels; national authorities or political parties; cross-national/regional union networks (e.g., IR-TUCs, Doorn, NFS); other NGOs or networks (e.g., European Women's Lobby, AGE, European Anti-Poverty Network); and members of or political groups in the European Parliament. The response alternatives were "to a high degree," "to some degree," "to a low degree," "not at all," and "do not know." Again, we have chosen not to report "do not know" but instead re-code it as missing in the analyses.

Since the aim is to show similarities and differences between the countries and sectors within the Nordic countries, the results section presents cross tables showing differences both between countries and between sectors. Sectoral boundaries are, however, not as straightforward as country boundaries, and there is variation in how they are drawn in different countries (Léonard et al., 2006, 2011; Keller, 2008). Since our dataset is rather small, we have approached the question of sectoral distinctions

quite pragmatically, on the basis of both the classification of economic activities in NACE and the occupational classifications of ISCO-88 (COM). We use six categories: "manufacturing," "construction," "transportation," "services," "professions," and "peak-level confederations".

The following should be noted about these categories: "manufacturing" includes unions organizing in chemicals, mining and forestry, though with a main interest in the manufacturing industries. The distinction between "professions" and "services" is drawn so that unions mainly organizing occupations at level 1-2 in ISCO-88 (COM), i.e., occupations that require academic education, such as lawyers, engineers, doctors and nurses, dentists, psychologists, teachers, and social workers, are classified as "professions," while those mainly organizing occupations at other levels are classified as "services." In addition, we have separated "transportation" from services in general, since transportation has a higher degree of internationalization than services in general. "Construction" is also separated from services in general as it has been under a growing competitive pressure due to the increase of posted workers following the inclusion of new EU member states in 2004 and 2007 (Dølvik & Visser, 2009; Bechter et al, 2011, p. 27f.). In addition, the figures for classes with less than five cases – i.e., for Iceland in the country analysis and transportation in the sectoral analysis – are put in brackets in the tables, since they are too small to analyze properly.

### **Cross-border cooperation and union action**

As a first point of departure, in order to understand transnational union cooperation one may ask whether such cooperation is considered important by the unions themselves. Not surprisingly, it is. When asked whether cross-national union cooperation will improve the conditions for European workers in the long run, most of the Nordic unions agree (94 percent) – a majority (53 percent) even "to a high degree." However, there are some minor differences between the countries. The affirmative attitudes towards European trade union cooperation are somewhat weaker in Norway and Iceland as compared to the EU members Denmark, Finland and Sweden (data not shown).

As another point of departure, we recall some results from a previous survey of transnational union cooperation among Nordic unions by Nergaard and Dølvik (2005).<sup>4</sup> As many as 82 percent of the responding unions were members of one or several international trade union organizations. A majority of these were members of EIFs or the ETUC. Size clearly mattered as nearly all unions with 20,000 members or more were members of international organizations, while the result for smaller unions was around 75 percent. Nearly half of the unions cooperated regularly with unions in other countries by exchanging wage statistics, negotiation results, or coordinating strategies in wage negotiations. Cooperation with unions outside the Nordic countries was most common among Swedish unions (66 percent) and least common among Finnish and Norwegian unions (33 percent) (Nergaard & Dølvik, 2005, pp. 44-46, 63f.).

---

<sup>4</sup> Nergaard and Dølvik (2005) included all unions with more than 1,000 members in a survey in 2002-2003. From 330 send-outs they acquired a response rate of 74 percent.



The results from our survey confirm many of these results. Most of the unions do exchange information on collective agreements with unions in other European countries on a regular or sporadic basis (Table 2). A majority also collaborate on training programs for union representatives and over 40 percent collaborate on coordination of negotiations concerning plant restructuring (i.e., regarding redundancies, wages, and training). One-third also invite observers from other unions to see how collective agreements are being negotiated and exchange observers or negotiators in collective bargaining – at least sporadically.

**Table 2: Country comparison: Existing cooperation with unions in other European countries (in percent)**

		Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Total
Exchange of information	Regularly	60	69	(50)	46	63	59
	Sporadically	35	31	(50)	50	32	37
Training programs	Regularly	20	19	(0)	17	28	22
	Sporadically	40	56	(50)	35	39	40
Plant restructuring/ closure	Regularly	5	0	(0)	4	5	4
	Sporadically	42	54	50	35	35	39
Observers/negotiators	Regularly	5	7	(0)	8	5	7
	Sporadically	26	40	(0)	21	25	27
n		19-20	11-16	2	23-24	36-39	92-100

The overall picture of Table 2 is that existing cooperative efforts are quite similar in the Nordic countries, despite the less affirmative stance in Norway and Iceland. However, there are some differences that we need to account for. The Finnish unions report the greatest degree of overall cooperation. This may be explained by the fact that our study has an overrepresentation of unions in the manufacturing sector in Finland (19 percent of the respondents), as compared to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (10-12 percent), and as shown in Table 3, there is a high degree of collaboration in this sector. Thus, it seems that the actual differences between the Nordic countries as concerns transnational union cooperation are quite small. We may also note that the Nordic countries have slightly lower numbers than the average of other western European countries, yet less variation than other European countries we sent the survey to – Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland (data not shown).

Studying the sectoral level there is more systematic variation (Table 3). The unions in the internationally exposed manufacturing industries, as well as in construction, are more engaged in transnational cooperation than unions in the more sheltered industries in services and professional/academic work. The peak-level confederations are generally somewhere in between these two poles.

Particularly notable is that all unions in the manufacturing sector are engaged on a regular basis in exchange of information on collective agreements with unions in other European countries and that they have a relatively high degree of exchange of observ-

ers and negotiators in collective bargaining. However, this is not that surprising as the most developed EIFs are found in these sectors (Pulignano, 2009; Müller et al., 2010; Glassner & Pochet, 2011).

**Table 3: Sectoral comparison: Existing cooperation with unions in other European countries (in percent)**

		Manuf.	Constr.	Transp.	Serv.	Prof.	Peak-level	Total
Exchange of information	Regularly	100	78	(67)	58	37	62	59
	Sporadically	0	22	(33)	42	51	38	37
Training programs	Regularly	33	33	(0)	38	9	15	22
	Sporadically	50	56	(33)	38	31	54	41
Plant restructuring/closure	Regularly	18	11	(0)	5	0	0	4
	Sporadically	73	67	(33)	38	18	45	39
Observers/negotiators	Regularly	25	0	(0)	12	0	0	7
	Sporadically	33	44	(0)	25	23	38	27
n		11-12	9	3	21-24	32-35	11-13	92-100

### *Union action across borders*

It is obvious that not all unions are equally interested in partaking in union action such as manifestations and demonstrations, boycotts, and petitions. When asked whether they think that unions should engage more in cross-national demonstrations, boycotts, overtime bans, and strikes, only 7 percent of the Nordic unions concur to a high degree and 25 percent do not agree at all. We find more affirmative attitudes in Iceland, Norway, and Finland (over 50 percent agree) than in Denmark (35 percent agree) and Sweden (23 percent agree), which is something we will return to in the analysis below.

Many unions are already involved in cross-national union action. The proportion of unions that had participated in such action during the last three years before 2003 was 43 percent in Nergaard and Dølvik's survey data (2005, p. 77f.). The most common kind of sympathy action was signing a petition or similar (69 percent), while it was less common to participate in manifestations (35 percent) or boycotts/blockades (21 percent). As shown in Table 4, we found quite similar proportions in our data. However, very few Nordic unions had engaged in transnational overtime bans, strikes, or blockades during the last three years in 2010. This is not really surprising, though, since there are no clearly defined rights to strike at the EU level. In addition, we note that the majority of transnational union action in which the respondent unions took part was organized by the ETUC and the EIFs (data not shown).

We find only small country differences, despite the more skeptical attitudes towards partaking in transnational union action in Denmark and Sweden. The Finnish unions tend to be more active in signing statements, petitions, and open letters and the Norwegian unions tend to partake in transnational demonstrations and boycotts to a somewhat higher degree than unions in their neighboring countries. For Finland,

part of the result may, as mentioned, be explained by the fact that relatively more unions in the manufacturing sector responded to the survey than in the other countries – as shown in Table 5, the manufacturing sector has the highest level of this specific kind of union action.

**Table 4: Country comparison: Participation in union action during last three years**  
(in percent)

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Total
Statements, petitions or open letters	70	94	(67)	75	79	78
Demonstrations or boycotts	30	30	(0)	42	23	29
Overtime bans or strikes	5	6	(0)	4	5	5
n	20	16	3	24	39	102

With the exception of Finland, the Nordic participation in writing statements, petitions, and open letters is somewhat lower than that of unions in other EU member states in our survey. As regards participation in demonstrations and boycotts it is markedly lower, since the corresponding numbers are between 60 and 100 percent in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Spain (data not shown). This difference may be related to the fact that the power of the Nordic unions is based on a “implicit use of numbers” following their high density, as compared to the more “overt displays of numbers” through demonstrations in which non-members may partake in countries where union density is lower, e.g., France (Peterson et al., forthcoming). Against the background of the Nordic cooperative approach between the labor market partners, and since the state has a less central role in Nordic countries than elsewhere – and one may note that mass demonstrations are most often directed at the state – these differences between the Nordic countries and other European countries seem quite reasonable.

As seen in Table 5, there are once again sectoral differences. Unions organizing professionals and academics were least active in signing statements, petitions, and open letters, and in partaking in demonstrations or boycotts. The high level of activities in demonstrations and boycotts in the construction sector may partly be explained by the fact that large European demonstrations were organized against the initial draft of the Services Directive in 2005 and in connection with the final vote on the Directive in 2006 (Erne, 2008, p. 188).

**Table 5: Sectoral comparison: Participation in union action during the last three years**  
(in percent)

	Manuf.	Constr.	Transp.	Serv.	Prof.	Peak-level	Total
Statements, petitions or open letters	92	89	(67)	88	67	85	78
Demonstrations or boycotts	23	67	(67)	25	6	54	29
Overtime bans or strikes	23	0	(0)	0	6	0	5
n	13	9	3	24	36	13	98

Thus, although the levels of transnational union cooperation and action are quite similar in the Nordic countries, there is some internal variation in collaborative efforts at the sectoral level. This may be explained both by differences in industrial relations and exposure to international competition and by differences in established channels for such cooperation. The fact that the degree of transnational union action in the Nordic countries is relatively low, particularly with respect to strikes and boycotts, as compared to the Anglo-Saxon, Continental European, and South European countries may be explained by their high union density, long traditions of consensus-oriented relations, and the relatively low level of open conflict in the Nordic countries (with the exception of Finland), which is institutionalized in the form of agreements on peace clauses.

### **Channels of cooperation and influence on EU policies**

As is well known from previous research, a great deal of European transnational union cooperation is not concerned with direct cooperation between unions, as discussed above, but rather aims at influencing EU policies. We are now turning to this other aspect of cooperation by focusing on what actors or organizations Nordic trade unions find most important to cooperate with in order to influence EU policies. As background we can notice that in Nergaard and Dølvik's study, the Nordic trade unions saw their own peak-level confederations and national authorities as the most important channels for influencing EU decision making. Then followed EIFs, the ETUC, and the Nordic union secretariats (trade union offices in Brussels). Of least importance of the listed organizations was the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS). In addition, a general tendency was that the European level was seen as becoming more important over time (Nergaard & Dølvik, 2005, pp. 56, 92-94).

There were obvious differences between the Nordic countries in the perceived importance of different channels of influence, the main one being that the Norwegian unions rated all channels, with the exception of the EIFs, lower in importance than did the Danish, Finnish, and Swedish unions (Nergaard & Dølvik, 2005, p. 92-94). To understand this, one must remember that Norway is not a member of the EU and that the possibilities to influence EU policies thereby might seem smaller than for unions in EU member countries. However, there was also a difference between Danish and Swedish unions in that the former rated the importance of national authorities and their own confederations higher, whereas the Swedish unions rated EIFs, the ETUC, Nordic union secretariats, and the NFS as more important.

Whereas Nergaard and Dølvik asked about what organs that unions found to be important for influencing EU decisions, we rephrased this and asked to what degree the respondents were cooperating with different actors in influencing EU policies. Even so, the results are quite similar (see Table 6). National authorities and political parties were the actors with which one most frequently cooperates, followed by the national trade union offices in Brussels. Despite the growing importance of European trade union organizations reported by Nergaard and Dølvik, our results show that the cross-national union networks (such as the NFS, BASTUN, and Interregional Trade Union Councils), the EIFs and the ETUC are still of less importance than national channels; in Denmark and Finland they are even of less importance than the direct

cooperation with members of political groups in the European parliament. Other NGO networks seem to be of more marginal interest as collaborative partners in influencing EU policies.

From a European perspective, these figures are rather average. Some countries in the Continental and South European regimes have slightly higher degrees of participation with the ETUC (Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Spain), whereas others (France and Switzerland) have proportions similar to the Nordic unions. British unions have a somewhat lower degree of participation with all actors except the EIFs and members of political groups in the European Parliament (data not shown).

**Table 6: Country comparison: Cooperation in order to influence EU policies**  
(in percent)

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Total
National authorities/political parties	73	93	(33)	87	76	80
Trade union offices in Brussels	61	73	(33)	61	71	66
Cross-national/regional union networks	68	54	(33)	78	51	61
European Industry Federations	59	67	(0)	57	65	60
European Trade Union Confederation	44	38	(33)	52	61	52
Members of political groups in the EP	58	60	(33)	9	59	50
Other NGOs or networks	32	21	(33)	25	27	27
n	20	16	3	24	39	102

In contrast to Nergaard and Dølvik (2005), we find that the actual cooperation by Norwegian unions in order to influence EU policies is at the same level as in the other Nordic countries, with one exception: their low degree of cooperation with members of political groups in the European Parliament. The latter is related to the fact that Norway, as a non-EU member, stands without representation in the European Parliament. Being an EU member or not does not seem to have any other significant effect on the choice of actors with which to cooperate among the Nordic unions. A small but notable difference between the countries is, though, that Finnish and Swedish unions rate their own trade union offices in Brussels as the second most important partner in influencing EU policies, whereas in Denmark and Norway cross-national union networks are seen as more important.

The sectoral analysis in Table 7 shows that the peak-level confederations in general collaborate more with all actors, except trade union offices in Brussels and the EIFs, in comparison with the sectoral unions. Not surprisingly, the peak-level unions' most frequent partners for influencing EU policies are the ETUC and national authorities and political parties. Peak-level confederations also stand out with quite a high degree of cooperation with other NGOs or networks. In addition, there seems to be a general tendency for unions in the professions sector to cooperate less with the different actors listed as compared with unions in the other sectors. However, as an exception, they do report a relatively higher degree of cooperation with other NGOs or networks. These results are somewhat surprising, but may in part be explained by the fact that the examples of NGOs provided in the survey question are highly institutio-

nalized: European Women's Lobby, AGE, and the European Anti-Poverty Network. If asked about their cooperation with politically more radical "new social movement organizations," the results could have been expected to be different (c.f. Peterson et al., forthcoming).

**Table 7: Sectoral comparison: Cooperation in order to influence EU policies**  
(in percent)

	Manuf.	Constr.	Transp.	Serv.	Prof.	Peak-level	Total
National authorities/political parties	77	78	(100)	83	71	92	80
Trade union offices in Brussels	69	78	(67)	78	56	64	66
Cross-national/regional union networks	50	38	(33)	75	53	83	61
European Industry Federations	83	75	(50)	76	36	67	60
European Trade Union Confederation	54	33	(33)	56	37	92	52
Members of political groups in the EP	62	44	(67)	54	35	67	50
Other NGOs or networks	8	25	(0)	14	33	50	27
n	13	9	3	24	36	13	98

As compared to the analyses of direct cooperation between unions, we get a more complex picture when analyzing what actors or organizations Nordic trade unions cooperate with in order to influence EU policies. On this issue we do not find the same general difference between the manufacturing and services/professional sectors. However, we can for example note that EIFs have the strongest standing within manufacturing, whereas the importance of trade union offices in Brussels is higher in the service sector.

## Conclusions

In this article we set out to explore whether there is a common Nordic approach to transnational union cooperation, anchored in a common regime of industrial relations. We approached this problem by analyzing what national and sectoral differences and similarities there are in transnational union cooperation among the Nordic trade unions, as well as what actors and institutions they cooperate with in order to influence EU policies.

The empirical analyses show that there are great similarities between the Nordic countries in transnational union cooperation, as well as union action across borders. This is partly explained by the commonalities in industrial relations and transnational networking between unions in the Nordic countries. In general, the Nordic unions cooperate transnationally to a slightly lower degree than do unions in Continental and Southern Europe, and they are also somewhat more passive when it comes to cross-national union action. There also seems to be a somewhat stronger focus on national channels as regards cooperation in order to influence EU policies in the Nordic countries, as compared to other countries in Europe. These results are not that surprising since the Nordic countries, as Great Britain, have a history of skepticism towards both the EU project at large and the confederalist ambitions of giving the ETUC power to negotiate on behalf of their members, which has had a stronger position in Continen-



tal Europe – with Germany as the exception (Dølvik, 1997, p. 162-171, 243-259, 308f; Misgeld, 1997; Dølvik & Visser, 2001; Bieler, 2008; Bieler & Lindberg, 2009).

These different approaches to transnational union cooperation were confirmed also in a recent study, where unions' views on the desirability of future transnational cooperation with respect to wage setting are the most negative among Scandinavian and British unions (Furåker & Bengtsson, forthcoming). Still, the difference between the Nordic approach towards transnational cooperation and that in other European countries should not be overstated. Nordic countries do not stand out as all that dissimilar from the Western European countries studied regarding transnational union cooperation, with the exception of their quite low participation in transnational strikes and boycotts.

Additionally, our analyses show that there is greater sectoral diversity than country variation in Nordic transnational union cooperation. This may be explained by differences in industrial relations, exposure to international competition, and union organization and cooperation on the sectoral level. The general result from the sectoral analyses is that unions in the internationally exposed manufacturing sector are the most engaged in transnational cooperation, followed by the construction industry. The more sheltered services sector has a somewhat lower degree of cooperation and the professional/academic unions are the least engaged in transnational cooperation.

However, these sectoral differences are not as evident in the analyses of which actors and organizations Nordic unions cooperate with in order to influence EU policies. In these analyses, we found a difference between the sectoral unions and the peak-level federations in that the latter cooperate at a higher degree with all actors and organizations in influencing EU policies, with the exception of the EIFs and trade unions offices in Brussels. When focusing on these two organizations, it is within the manufacturing industries that the EIFs have the strongest standing, whereas union offices in Brussels are of more importance in the service sector. As regards the unions organizing the professionals, they give quite low importance to all actors compared to unions in the other sectors, with the exception of collaboration with other NGOs or networks, which is quite developed.

As shown in the first part of the article, it still seems reasonable to speak of a Nordic regime of industrial relations since many features of industrial relations are similar in the Nordic countries. This regime of industrial relations has laid a solid ground for a strong national focus among Nordic trade unions. Although the Nordic countries are small and open economies that depend on exporting industries that are heavily exposed to international competition, it seems that Nordic unions are somewhat less prone to transnational cooperation than unions in many other Western European countries. Some studies claim that there is a particular tendency among Nordic unions in that they prefer exporting their own (Nordic) approach of industrial relations rather than learning from others (see, e.g., Misgeld, 1997, p. 23; Murhem, 2006). This approach is sometimes even explicitly stated in official documents. With the reservation that one should not exaggerate the “otherness” of Nordic unions, we would not be surprised if such claims have a general validity, since unions in the Nordic countries have historically been successful in developing a strong position in relation to employers and the state. Although Nordic unions understand the need for transna-

tional and European cooperation, there might thus still exist some skepticism concerning more far-reaching cooperation, since it might require adjustments to other regimes of industrial relations and union strategies than those that have historically been successful in the national arena. The current economic turmoil with strict austerity measures around Europe, as well as the insecurity concerning the future of the Economic and Monetary Union, makes it difficult to predict how the Nordic unions will act in the near future. Against the background of forecasts of high unemployment levels and low economic growth, they might focus on domestic issues and, thus, delimit their ambitions to “defend and restore” national agreements and labor law (cf. Bieler & Lindberg, 2009).

## References

- Bechter, B., Brandl, B., & Meardi, G. (2011). *From national to sectoral industrial relations: Developments in Sectoral industrial relations in the EU*. Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Behrens, M., Hamann, K., & Hurd, R. (2004). Conceptualizing union revitalization. In C. Frege & J. Kelly (eds.), *Varieties of unionism. Strategies for union revitalization in a globalizing economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bieler, A. (2008). Labour and the struggle over the future European model of capitalism: British and Swedish trade unions and their positions on EMU and European co-operation. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 10 (1), 84-104.
- Bieler, A., & Lindberg, I. (2009). Swedish unions and globalization: labour strategies in a changing global order. In A. Bieler, I. Lindberg & D. Pillay (eds.), *Labour and the challenges of globalization – What prospects for transnational solidarity?* London: Pluto Press.
- Bücker, A., & Warneck, W. (eds.) (2010). *Viking – Laval – Riffert: Consequences and policy perspectives*. Report 111. Brussels: ETUI.
- Dølvik, J.E. (1997). *Redrawing boundaries of solidarity? ETUC, social dialogue and the Europeanization of trade unions in the 1990s*. Oslo: FAFO.
- Dølvik, J.E. (2007). *Den Nordiska kollektivavtals- och fackföreningsmodellen*. Stockholm/Oslo: NFS/Fafo.
- Dølvik, J.E., & Visser, J. (2001). ETUC and European social partnership: a third turning point? In H. Compston & J. Greenwood (eds.), *Social partnership in the European Union*. Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Dølvik, J.E., & Visser, J. (2009). Free movement, equal treatment and workers’ rights: can the European Union solve its trilemma of fundamental principles? *Industrial Relations Journal*, 40 (6), 491-509.
- Due, J., & Madsen, J.S. (2008). The Danish Model of industrial relations: Erosion or renewal? *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 50 (3), 513-529.
- Erne, R. (2008). *European unions. Labor’s quest for a transnational democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1999). *Social foundations of postindustrial economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Commission (2009). *Industrial relations in Europe 2008*. Luxembourg: Publication Office.
- European Commission (2010). *European sectoral dialogue. Recent developments*. Luxembourg: Publication Office.
- European Commission (2011). *Industrial relations in Europe 2010*. Luxembourg: Publication Office.
- European Foundation (2011). *Industrial relations and working conditions development in Europe 2010*. Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Furåker, B., & Bengtsson, M. (forthcoming). *On the road to transnational cooperation? Results from a survey among European trade unions*. Under review.
- Gallie, D. (2007). *Employment regimes and the quality of work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Glassner, V., & Keune, M. (2009). *Negotiating out of the crisis? Collective bargaining in Europe during the economic downturn*. Turin: Centre of the ILO.
- Glassner, V., & Pochet, P. (2011). *Why trade unions seek to coordinate wages and collective bargaining in the Eurozone: Past developments and future prospects*. ETUI Working Paper 2011.03. Brussels: ETUI aisbl.

- Hall, P. A., & Soskice, D. (2001). *Varieties of capitalism. The institutional foundations of comparative advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hyman, R. (2001). *Understanding European trade unionism. Between market, class & society*. London: Sage.
- ICTWSS (2011). *ICTWSS database*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies AIAS.
- Jochem, S. (2011). Nordic employment policies – change and continuity before and during the financial crisis. *Social Policy & Administration*, 45 (11), 131-145.
- Keller, B. (2008). Social dialogue – the specific case of the European Union. *The International Journal of Comparative Labour Law and Industrial Relations*, 24 (2), 201-226.
- Kjellberg, A. (2007). The Swedish trade union system in transition: High but falling union density. In C. Phelan (ed.), *Trade union Revitalisation: Trends and Prospects in 34 Countries*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Kjellberg, A. (2009). Fackliga organisationer och industrial relations. In T. Berglund & S. Schedin (eds.), *Arbetslivet*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Kjellberg, A. (2011). The decline in Swedish union density since 2007. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 1 (1), 67-93.
- Korpi, W. (2006). Power resources and employer-centered approaches in explanations of welfare states and varieties of capitalism. *World Politics*, 58 (2), 167-206.
- Léonard, É., Rochet, D., & Vandebussche, I. (2006). The challenges of enlargement. In A. Dufresne, C. Degryse, & P. Pochet (eds.), *The European sectoral social dialogue. Actors, developments and challenges*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A.
- Léonard, É., Perin E., & Pochet, P. (2011). The European sectoral social dialogue: Questions of representation and membership. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 42 (3), 254-272.
- Løken, E., & Stocke, T. (2009). *Labour relations in Norway*. Fafo-report 2009:33. Oslo: Fafo.
- Malmberg, J. (2010). *Posting post Laval - International and national responses*. Uppsala: Uppsala Centre for Labor Studies.
- Marginson, P., & Sisson, K. (2004). *European integration and industrial relations: Multi-level governance in the making*. Houndmills Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Misgeld, K. (1997). *Den fackliga Europavägen*. Stockholm: Atlas.
- Müller, T., Platzer, H.-W., & Rüb, S. (2010). Transnational company policy and coordination of collective bargaining – new challenges and roles for European industry federations. *Transfer*, 16 (4), 509-524.
- Murhem, S. (2006). Implementation of the sectoral social dialogue in Sweden. In Dufresne, A., Degryse, C. & Pochet, P. (eds.), *The European sectoral social dialogue. Actors, developments and challenges*. Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang.
- Nergaard, K., & Dölvik, J.E. (2005). *Internasjonalisering og fagorganisering. En undersøkelse av de nordiske fagforbundenes internasjonale arbeid*. Stockholm: National Institute for Working Life.
- Peterson, A., Wahlström, M., & Wennerhag, M. (forthcoming). Swedish trade unionism: A renewed social movement? *Economic and Industrial Democracy*.
- Pulignano, V. (2009). International cooperation, transnational restructuring and virtual networking in Europe. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 15 (2), 187-205.
- Scheuer, S. (2011). Union membership variation in Europe: A ten-country comparative analysis. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17 (1), 57-73.
- van den Berg, A. (2008). *Flexicurity: Theory, practice or rhetoric?* Paper presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the Centre for Labour Market Research (CARMA), Aalborg, Denmark.
- Van Gyes, G. (2006). The social partners as membership organisations: an overview of forms and trends in the Member States. In European Commission, *Industrial Relations in Europe 2006*. Luxembourg: Publication Office.
- Visser, J. (2011). *Data base on institutional characteristics of trade unions, wage setting, state intervention and social pacts, 1960-2010 (ICTWSS)*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies AIAS.