Cultural borders as obstacles to European trade union cooperation

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In comparison with other global regions, trade union cooperation is well developed and institutionalised in Europe (Gajewska 2009; Rhodes 2015; Prosser 2016). This cooperation has three main purposes: First, to coordinate national strategies through exchanges of information, organisation of training, and coordination of trade union action; Second, it aims to deliver common statements and agreements through social dialogue and negotiations with European employer organisations – both at the cross-sectoral level, and at the industry level through 43 sectoral social dialogues. Third, trade union cooperation aims to influence EU policies and legislation through lobbying and consultation.

Cross-national cooperation is seldom easy. There are many obstacles, including cultural ones (Larsson 2012). There is much research on trade union cooperation in Europe that *shows* rather that explicitly analyses the role of culture and cultural divergences. For example, it has been shown in research on European Works Councils (EWCs) how linguistic skills, identity and national "rootedness" differ and create problems (Huijgen *et al.* 2007; Knudsen *et al.* 2007; Müller and Rüb 2007; Stirling and Tully 2004). It has also been shown in analyses of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the European Trade Union Federations (ETUFs), and the social dialogues, that not only ideological differences, but also differences in values, identities and expectations have been factors undermining the cooperation (Dølvik 1997; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 172ff.; Larsson *et al.* 2016; Mitchell 2007).

However, cultural factors are often approached as a convenient "'emergency' variable to account for the 'unexplained residua'" of other explanations in trade union and industrial relations research (Meardi 2011: 336; cf. Barbier 2013: 65ff.). Cultural differences are seldom put in the centre of empirical studies, but are rather touched upon more incidentally. This chapter discusses the role of cultural obstacles to trade union cooperation and transnationalisation in Europe more explicitly. The aim is to understand what cultural and other difficulties trade unions themselves believe to be hampering cooperation in Europe, and why.

Empirically, the first part of the chapter builds on a survey from 2011-12, answered by 241 trade unions in Europe.[1] The analyses presented in Tables 1 and 2 are compared means with ANOVA statistics to show regional differences on the individual items. Multiple regressions were also performed for the items significant in the ANOVA analysis to check significance when controlling for sector and size of the organisation. The regressions are not presented in detail, but significant results are indicated in the compared means tables.

The second part of the analysis is qualitative and based on 38 interviews with centrally placed representatives of trade unions from across Europe.[2] Nine of the interviews were done in 2012 and 29 in 2015-16. Both the survey and the interviews targeted only one representative to answer for the whole organisation—presidents/vice, general secretaries, international secretaries, etc. In a few interviews, a second representative took part when suggested by the targeted respondent. Thus the number of people interviewed was 46, though representing 38 organisations. The analyses presented here are condensed versions of a longer text under preparation.

Cultural and other obstacles to trade union cooperation

There is a strong commitment to transnational cooperation between trade unions in Europe. Over 90% of the unions in the survey stated that such cooperation is positive for European workers (Larsson 2012). Many reported an active involvement, but also pointed to major obstacles for cooperation.

Table 1 presents the results for the survey question: *To what degree are the following factors obstacles for union cooperation within Europe?* Since

1 The survey was conducted in 2011-12 and funded by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research. For detailed descriptions of methods and materials, see Larsson (2012; 2014).

2 Interviews were conducted with trade unions from the following countries: BE (2), CZ (3), DE (8), ES (3), HU (3), IT (5), LV (3), SE/Nordic (8), UK (3). Quotes are slightly edited to increase legibility.The interviews were conducted by Bengt Furåker, Bengt Larsson, and Kristina Lovén Selden. The research was funded by the Bank of SwedenTercentenary Foundation.

the items are ranged by the total means, the first column shows that “difference in financial resources” is generally seen as the greatest obstacle of the 10 factors listed, while “differences in national cultures and traditions” is the least important obstacle. Also, the other two items that indicate cultural factors (in bold) are at the bottom half of the ranking, that is, “differences in union leaders’ mother tongue and language skills”, and “diversity of unions’ ideological, political or religious orientations”. However, this does not indicate that cultural factors are unimportant, only that they are less so than other factors, with even the last one having a total mean of 2.51 on a scale ranging from 1 to 4.

Table 1. Obstacles to trade union cooperation (means†) (n241)

	Total	North	CWE	South	IR/ UK	CEE	F Anova
Differences in financial resources among unions	3.04	2.99	3.07	2.89	2.78	3.53[3]	4.43**
Diversity of labour market polices and regulations	2.88	2.93	2.75	2.97	2.61	2.97	1.26
Low priority among union leaders	2.84	2.89	2.60	2.94	2.92	2.81	1.08
Employers’ “divide-and-rule” strategies	2.80	2.47[3]	2.98	3.08	2.61	3.28[3+]	6.36***
Low interest among union members	2.80	2.70	2.88	2.89	2.88	2.87	0.66
Difference in leaders’ mother tongue & lang. skills	2.75	2.62[1+]	2.86	2.95	2.27[3]	3.09[3+]	4.94***
Competition between high and low wage countries	2.71	2.61	2.64	2.73	2.52	3.25[3]	3.27*
Diversity in ideological/pol/ religious orientations	2.65	2.76	2.61	2.83	2.57	2.20[2]	3.35*
Differences in union membership rates	2.64	2.68	2.63	2.66	2.41	2.66	0.40
Differences in national cultures and traditions	2.51	2.65[1+]	2.41	2.44	2.36	2.39	1.40
N	215-234	88-100	43-44	35-37	18-24	29-32	

† Scale 1-4 (Not at all = 1, to a low degree= 2, to some degree = 3, to a high degree = 4). “do not know/no opinion” is coded as “missing”, which explains the variation in n. Anova: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Explanation to OLS-regressions: + p<0.1; all others are at the level of p<0.05 or better

[1] Significantly diverges from CWE without control for other variables.

[2] Significantly diverges from CWE with control for sector.

[3] Significantly diverges from CWE with control for sector and size of organisation.

Moving on to the differences between regions of Europe, we see from the means and the regression results that Central Eastern European (CEE) trade unions find the lack of resources, competition between high- and low-wage countries, and the power strategies of employer organisations to be a bigger

problem than trade unions in the reference category (Central Western European, CWE). In contrast, trade unions in the North find employers' power strategies to be significantly less important. This seems intuitively reasonable, as is southern European trade unions finding the power strategies of employer organisations to be a problem, though this result is not statistically significant in the regressions.

Further, comparing the regions on the three cultural factors revealed differences that, to some degree, also hold when performing regressions with control for size and sector. *First*, trade unions from Ireland and the UK (IR/UK) find language issues to be less of a problem than the others, which is understandable since English is the dominant language, as we will see from the interviews. There is also a tendency for language issues to be toughest for trade unions from CEE; however, the OLS regressions were not significant for the latter when controlling for other variables. *Second,* trade unions from the South emphasised the diversity of unions' ideological, political or religious orientations as an obstacle, which is not surprising since they are quite ideologically fragmented nationally. There is also a tendency for trade unions from CEE to find this problem of less importance than the others; however, once again, that result is not significant in the regressions. *Third*, differences in national cultures and traditions are particularly emphasised by the Nordic trade unions.

In order to validate these results, I will now turn to another part of the survey. The survey also contained the question: *To what degree are similarities in the following respects important for successful union cooperation in Europe?* The results, which are presented in Table 2, confirm some of the results from Table 1. From the total means, we see also that when asking what is important for successful cooperation, the cultural factors (in bold) are of less importance than the other listed factors, and the order of the three cultural factors is the same as in Table 1: language is of more importance than ideological, political or religious differences between unions, whereas national culture is of least importance of the six factors listed.

In addition, we see some important regional divergences in means. *First*, the Central Eastern European unions, who also scored highest on language as a problem for cooperation, emphasised the importance of language skills for successful cooperation the most. *Second*, the importance of similar ideological, political and religious orientations seems to be somewhat (though not significantly) emphasised by Nordic unions, and significantly more so for the IR/UK unions, as compared to the reference category (CWE) in the regressions. *Third,* the regressions show that the southern trade unions find the sharing of

similar national culture and traditions less important than the trade unions in CWE (the reference category).

Table 2. Factors of importance for successful TU cooperation (means†) (n241)

	Total	North	CWE	South	IR/ UK	CEE	F Anova
Similarities in labour market policies and regulations	3.28	3.28	3.26	3.37	3.04	3.41	1.02
Similarities in occupational interests among unions	3.25	3.20	3.16	3.18	3.65[3]	3.34[3]	2.52*
Union leaders' personal networks and relations	3.24	3.19[1+]	3.42	3.21[1+]	2.87[3]	3.44	3.11*
Union leaders' mother tongue and lang. skills	2.81	2.75	2.88	2.66	2.57	3.26[3]	3.16*
Similarities in ideological /pol./ rel. orientations	2.60	2.70	2.57	2.40	2.83[3+]	2.40	1.62
Similarities in national cultures and traditions	2.47	2.54	2.48	2.17[3]	2.48	2.61	1.75
n	225-232	96-100	42-43	34-35	23-24	28-31	

† Scale 1-4 (Not at all = 1, to a low degree= 2, to some degree = 3, to a high degree = 4). "do not know/no opinion" is coded as "missing", which explains the variation in n. Anova: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Explanation to OLS-regressions: + p<0.1; all others are at the level of p<0.05 or better

[1] Significantly diverges from CWE without control for other variables.

[2] Significantly diverges from CWE with control for sector.

[3] Significantly diverges from CWE with control for sector and size of organisation.

Even though these results may be burdened with errors in measurement due to variations in response rates, they are supported by the interview study. Previous analyses confirm that both the lack of and divergences in financial recourses are very important obstacles to transnational trade union cooperation (Larsson *et al.* 2016). Also, differences between countries in terms of policies, regulations, industrial relations systems and trade union organisation were emphasised as great obstacles. As the qualitative analysis of the cultural factors will show below, these also create problems for European trade union cooperation.

I will now turn to the interview study to detail what the cultural obstacles to transnational trade union cooperation in Europe are—what problems exist, how and why cultural differences create problems, and what cultural borders the respondents find within Europe. The analysis will connect to the quantitative analysis above in that the three surveyed cultural factors will be discussed in the order of importance, as uncovered by results above. First, I will discuss how and why language differences create problems. Thereafter

I will turn to obstacles connected to trade unions' ideological, political or religious orientations. Finally I will discuss what the interviews have to say about cultural obstacles connected to differences and borders between national cultures and traditions.

Linguistic borders

The interviews confirm that differences in mother tongue and lack of language skills are great obstacles. CEE respondents, in particular, see the language barrier as "strong", "essential", "huge" or even "the major obstacle" (cf. Henning 2015b). A few from the English- and German- speaking language areas see less of a problem, since good translations and interpretation exist. Others, however, acknowledge these difficulties:

> We're very lucky because [we're] English (laughter), selfishly! In fact, some of our ETUF meetings are only conducted in English, so that can be a barrier for other organisations. […] Some people come and they never say anything. And then other organisations, they can only send someone who is quite good at speaking English. (#23 UK)

At the ETUC and ETUF congresses there is funding for up to six language interpretations. At committee meetings, there are fewer interpretations, while seminars and working groups generally are in English only, forcing participants to speak "some kind of joint bad English" (#14 SE). There are, however, difficulties in using "international English", since some participants do not have the skills and others are unwilling: "The French never go along with it. Spaniards: very, very bad. And now that we have the entire East side! [But] they're better, I may say, in English" (#13 SE).

Those lacking English skills thus have to forgo or bring their own interpreters (cf. Henning 2015b). Interpretation is not unproblematic either, since the precision or even substance gets lost when translating "from one language to another, to another, to another" (#30 HU). Terms and concepts are embedded in, and always refer to, a cognitive (and often normative) content and a common world of reference (Barbier 2013: 109; cf. Hyman 2004). This creates difficulties both in translating and using "bad English":

> The Nordic countries [have] a different understanding of what "austerity" means; what "crisis" in the public sector means. [---] You need to build a common vocabulary […] to understand

> what the others are saying. And if the words are different – like "privatisation" or "public sector" or what the meaning is of "autonomous", "independent". […] This is the major obstacle. (#36 IT)

As a consequence, translations of central documents may create problems, since "it can become so immensely wrong, and then there can be misunderstandings in the documents that are produced" (#15 SE).

These linguistic problems are not only costly and hamper understanding, but they also reduce the possibility for some trade unions to influence the discussion. They are forced to choose between having representatives staying silent or sending representatives on the basis of their language skills rather than their expertise (#23 UK):

> If we have two or three people who are capable of speaking in English, the same people have to be competent in various themes and specific subjects, and it's very hard to do that at a good level. […] It's very hard to come out with an argument or a competent opinion of things. (#21 LV)

The absence of a joint language also makes trust-building harder, since "small talk" gets "difficult" (#22 DE), and "that's where you develop trains of thought" (#11 SE). The effect is that language influences who you cooperate with, since you develop personal relationships on the basis of "talking in between", and "the real business gets done in the meeting beforehand or over lunch" (#24 UK).

Ideological borders

Let's now turn to how and why trade unions' ideological, political and religious orientations may create problems in cooperation. As is well known, there are trade unions with different political and religious roots. Some are more of "business unions" mainly representing their members' interests, while others are more of political or "movement unions" trying to represent the interests of the working class or workers in general. Further, there are differences between organisations connected to radical left political ideas, as well as more reformist and consensus-oriented unions, and even some that are considered to be more conservative (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 1ff; 152ff.; Henning 2015a; Hyman 2001).

The deepest rift in trade union ideology is said to be between consensus-

and conflict-oriented traditions. These are not neatly enclosed regionally, but a main geographic borderline is generally drawn (cf. Henning 2015b; Larsson 2014): "In the Nordic countries you have more of a cooperation model. […] In the South we approach our relationship as a struggle" (#38 IT; #34 IT):

> There is a clear division North-South. We mobilize the workers at the social and political level; we have general strikes, mass demonstrations in the streets. The Nordic unions have collective bargaining at the sectoral level or national level. […]It is, therefore, not easy to establish one [common] way of trade union action at the European level. (#1 ES)

Nordic representatives confirm that their relations with employers is "cooperative", emphasising the wellbeing of both members and companies. This is contrasted with a more "universal" and a "far more confrontational" southern approach (#16 SE; cf. Lovén Seldén 2014). Trade unions in the South are said to be more "campaign organizations" that do not take place at the negotiating table, but instead "go in the streets and shout" (#10 Nord).

Such divergences create problems. Whereas the Nordics try to work "with the employers, also at the European level", and "be a bit more constructive", and give "alternative proposals" instead of "just saying no" (#11 SE), they believe others find them a bit "wimpish", "not passionate enough", or "woody". As stated by an Italian representative, "we can't hide that the vision, the points of view are different" (#34 IT); or in even stronger terms:

> They are less European. […] This is a difference of culture, because in some countries it is a tradition to protect only affiliates. […] We come from a tradition in which the unions fight for all (#1 ES)

But this difficulty in understanding obviously runs both ways:

> To work jointly with the employer as we do in the North. [...] That is not in the mind-set of our colleagues further south. They think that is a hole in the head. They think that we are sitting in the lap of the employer. [---] There is a general lack of understanding, I think. And many times also unwillingness actually to even discuss. Of course: I might feel the same reluctance, because I do not want their system. (#14 SE)

From the Nordic perspective, the strategies of some southern unions also cre-

ate problems in relation to both employer organisations and EU institutions. They become sceptical and “quite hostile”, which makes it difficult to have a dialogue (#16 SE); “But when we present solutions that may also help them, I think you can notice a change in attitude. [...] That we are actually explicitly invited” (#10 Nord).

Beside the North-South division, respondents also talk about a West-East difference (cf. Henning 2015a). Some CEE unions are said to have “a completely different view” (#10 Nord), particularly those that have their roots in the former communist or “post-Soviet system” (#17 SE), or have strong connections to political parties (#30 DE). To some extent, CEE trade unions that still “have union leaders from Soviet times” (#32 LV) acknowledge this, or view their own national political culture as being more “hierocratic” and “post-communist” than “democratic” (#30 HU; #31 HU). Others, who do not acknowledge this, find it problematic that they still are “stuck with the stigma” of being government organisations (#28 CZ).

These North-South and West-East divisions are, of course, too schematic, which many also acknowledge. Many unions “are somewhere in the middle” (#5 BE), and there are also different traditions even within regions and countries, with some being more homogenous, and some more fragmented: “There is much more variety in the group of the new member states […] it is not a homogenous group like the old [EU] 15” (#6 DE; cf. Visser *et al.* 2009; Henning 2015a; 2015b). Such national heterogeneity or fragmentation is, however, also seen as an obstacle, since it is difficult to cooperate with trade unions that are not even on speaking terms within their own country.

Borders between national cultures and traditions

The factor of least importance in the survey was differences in national cultures and traditions. This is a question on a more abstract level than the previous ideologically related issue, which mainly concerns trade union organisations and traditions. There are, of course, some overlaps between the two issues, but the one on national cultures and traditions concerns broader issues that have to do with more general differences in practices and values across Europe. Obstacles relating to such cultural divergences were mentioned in the interviews: “We have different cultures – that’s the basics” (#38 IT). When discussing what divergences exist in Europe, we once again get some schematic divisions. North-South:

> It is easier for us [Italians] to have cooperation with the Med-

> iterranean countries – I'm talking about Spanish and French […] – because we have more or less the same culture, and it's easier for us to have good relations. […] When we talk with our colleagues from Scandinavia, it's complicated [for them] to understand our problems, because, you know, they are very far from us. (#37 IT)

This difference is mirrored with the Nordics, who sometimes find representatives from some other countries to be "impossible to cooperate with. They have a different tradition" (#10 Nord). In a similar vein, a British respondent viewed their relations with their French colleagues as difficult, and that "that's partly about language, but it's also about the traditions and the way they do things" (#23 UK). This cultural divide is connected to the ideological divide discussed above, but it is seen as going deeper than that:

> The Nordic countries are used to negotiating, the Germans are, and we [British] are. […] It is culture! And it is easier for us to do business with the Nordics and the Germans because they understand, or we have a common interest in doing a deal. Whereas it seems to me – and I am aware that I am stereotyping culturally – the French and the Spanish and the Greeks in particular, come to those meetings to make a point, to make a speech. (#24 UK)

These differences are not only in basic values and conceptions, but in traditions and everyday practices: "You have slightly different views on what is expected in social situations; and you express yourself in very different ways" (#10 Nord). This includes everything from how delegates from various countries adhere to the starting times of meetings, to how much they talk and how they interact socially. These things may seem trivial, but they affect the internal processes in their joint European organisations. One example is the difference between the more "talkative" southern delegates and the more "taciturn" Nordics, as shown in a study of speech patterns at ETUC Executive Committee meetings (Furåker and Lovén Seldén 2015). At such meetings, the Nordics are strongly coordinated through their joint organisations: their position is already negotiated and they have little room and need to mark a unique position: "So we give a few statements to explain our position, and then the others get to talk" (#16 SE). This is said to lead to confusion and even irritation from others, who, in contrast "must express their organisation and its ideas, values and agenda", irrespective of others voicing a similar line of

argument (#10 Nord).

Cultural differences are also important to how member organisations perceive both the content and legitimacy of joint decisions. One Nordic representative thought that the decision-making in these organisations "does not have the same strong formalistic approach to democracy that we have here" (#10 Nord). There is seldom any voting except in congresses, and the process is rather one of consensus-seeking, followed by an attempt to spell out the decision in an understandable summary:

> We have our model in Sweden—how to do it. The Germanic model: then you have the question "Who is for; who is against; someone who abstains?" We don't do it like that here. This must be learned. If you don't, you immediately will kick up a row. And why: because then they will not understand what they have decided [...] So, clearly, cultural differences makes it difficult. And that's why it is necessary to understand these cultural differences. [...] I have seen those who have failed with that. The consequence was crazy decisions – if any decisions at all. (#13 SE)

The consequences of cultural differences can thus be quite serious. They affect not only whether decisions are perceived as legitimate, but also how their content is understood—and may as a consequence also affect how well they are implemented.

Also, some cultural borders between the East and the West are mentioned, and they connect quite closely to the question of ideology above. Some CEE societies are said to be "hierocracies" and "post-communist" rather than "democratic" (cf. Henning 2015a). This is acknowledged both by respondents from the West and from some CEE respondents. There is, however, also some resistance to such categorisation: A respondent from Latvia emphasised that the Baltic states are not part of a CEE culture, but have more in common with the Nordic countries "in legislation, in our approach, in our, let's say cultural mentality" (#32 LV). Also, a Hungarian representative dismissed the idea of a great cultural divide, arguing that the cultural divergences in Europe are nothing compared to that between Europe and other continents:

> Today in Europe, this is no problem; more and more people work in England, Germany, Sweden. More Hungarian people work in Sweden. I think there is no distance in culture. No problem. Other nations: Asian nations, Muslim, or African na-

> tions have other cultures, but Hungary, no problem. Hungary is very, very similar to Germany. We have a lot of German companies. (#35 HU)

This kind of relativity of cultural borders is also shown when focusing on regions that are presented as culturally homogeneous. For many, the Nordic countries make up such a region: they “live in the same cultural world” and “see things the same way” (#13 SE; #11 SE). However, when viewed more closely, that similarity dissolves. In practice, there may actually be such cultural heterogeneity that the joint Nordic organisations brought in consultants to increase understanding:

> The Danish […] are very straightforward [...]. If you are quiet, you have nothing to say, from a Danish perspective. While in Finland, it may well be that you are talking in a different way, you have a bit longer pauses and so, but if you sit in a meeting you are expected to be asked by the chairman of the meeting about what to do. And if you are not asked, you leave the meeting feeling trampled on. (#10 Nord)

Discussion and conclusions

Let me end this short empirical analysis of cultural obstacles to European trade union cooperation with a few conclusions and some reflections.

A *first* conclusion is that cultural divergences make up quite some obstacles to transnational trade union cooperation, even though some other structural or institutional factors are even greater obstacles. However, in this connection, it is important to note that I worked without a precise concept of culture, though still with the influence of a general sociological approach in which culture often is thought of as collective values, conceptions, identities and practices (Smith 2016; Porpora 2016). For the future, it seems important to theoretically elaborate more specifically upon the cultural aspects of factors that matter, on what level, and why.

Second, different aspects of culture seem to matter to differing degrees across Europe. Language is less of a problem for organisations from the big language areas, particularly the English-speaking ones, but also for the quite English-proficient Nordics. It is a much bigger problem for trade unions in the CEE areas, in which trade unions are also often smaller and have fewer resources and personnel for transnational work. In contrast, the CEE trade unions find divergences in ideological, political and religious orientations to

be less of a problem, while trade unions from southern Europe find them to be more significant than other trade unions do. As concerns more general national cultures and traditions, it seems that the Nordics have a particular problem with these, both according to the survey and interviews. There are, in other words, cultural and other factors that influence what aspects of culture that are seen as more or less important obstacles for cooperation across Europe.

Third, cultural differences and cultural homogeneity are relative. As seen from the analysis, what is similar, and what is different, depends on choice of comparison. There are multiple ways to depict cultural borders within Europe, and cultural difference is always understood from the context of the observer. There have been, of course, attempts to measure cultural differences in more "objective" fashion (e.g. Black 2005). The method chosen in this study was, however, a "subjective" approach. That is, we have asked the trade unions themselves how culture creates difficulties in their work.

A problem with this approach is that the accounts of cultural differences might be based on prejudice or stereotypes. However, if you are interested in cultural differences that affect transnational cooperation, it does not really matter whether the respondents' experiences are "correct" or "biased", since they affect cooperation in any case, in line with the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). A prerequisite for the analysis to not be too biased, however, is that the analysis views experiences from different cultural horizons in Europe. In this case, we see that there exist similarities in how differences are depicted across cultural horizons.

As a final point, I would like to highlight the importance of not over-exaggerating these results. With a focus on culture, you will end up seeing cultural difference. As implicated in some quotes above, it is not impossible for actors to overarch these. As stated by an Italian representative: "It's not easy at the very beginning. But if you participate in many meetings, during many years, you can do it." (#38 IT). In order to work with that, however, it is crucial to understand how these differences are experienced for representatives from different parts of Europe.

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