

**The cooperation between business organizations, trade unions and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: a comparative analysis of the nature of the tripartite relationship**

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*“The outbreak of the coronavirus changed the relationship with the government completely. It has never been easier [for social partners’ organizations] to influence governments and to push our interests.”*

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 outbreak has led to an increase in social dialogue in general and, in particular, to an increase in tripartite cooperation between social partners’ organizations and state authorities. This paper takes a critical look behind this cooperation and investigates the underlying rationales behind the tripartite cooperation in 19 countries. It is shown that even though the cooperation generally fulfilled its problem-solving function, an expressive function that signaled unity was identified to be of equal importance in such a time of crisis. This expressive function is also identified to potentially serve as the basis for a renewed social partnership.

## **Introduction**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread standstill of substantial parts of the economy have had an unprecedented impact on businesses and jobs throughout the world (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; ETUC, 2020; ILO, 2021; ILO and OECD, 2020). Although actions were taken in almost all countries to mitigate the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, many companies lost business and later collapsed with numerous jobs vanishing (Eurofound, 2020; OECD, 2020a). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis is not yet over and is likely to continue to impact economic and social activities for some time (ILO, 2021), even though *state authorities*, i.e., governments and other public agencies or bodies, have developed a number of policies, i.e., strategies and plans to tackle the crisis. In some countries, state authorities acted alone, while in others, they developed and implemented policies in cooperation with representatives of *social partners’ organizations*, i.e., with employers and business organizations and trade unions (Adolph et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2020a; ILO and OECD, 2020; OECD, 2020g).

Although policies, as well as the quality and quantity of cooperation between social partner organizations and state authorities in different countries, varied in their nature and meaning, it soon became clear that in many countries, state authorities and social partners' organizations cooperated in the sense that they worked together to the same end (Bray, Budd, and Macneil, 2020), i.e., they joined forces to develop policies to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak (Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2020a, 2020d, 2021; OECD, 2020e). More specifically, in many countries, social partner organizations and state authorities increasingly engaged in tripartite social dialogue, i.e., in discussions and negotiations, to develop joint policies to manage the health crisis itself as well as policies to adjust the workplace, help struggling businesses to mitigate job losses and alleviate the following potential social crisis (Dobbins, 2020; ILO and OECD, 2020).

On the one hand, this increase in tripartite social dialogue is not anything particularly new, as the literature documents many examples in some countries of such cooperation between state authorities and social partners' organizations in overcoming past economic crises. On the other hand, this stark increase and the fact that it can be observed in many different countries in the world can be considered to be of special interest, as the literature also shows that tripartite social dialogue is not generally successful, but its success is highly conditional on a number of accompanying factors, including political and institutional support of social partners' organizations (Guardiancich and Molina, 2021). In fact, it could also be that if these factors are not met at all, the outcome could be even detrimental (Brandl, 2012). Furthermore, the literature also shows that success varies over countries and time, not least because the important accompanying factors change over time (Baccaro and Galindo, 2018; Crouch, 2012; Traxler, 1999). Hence, tripartite social dialogue should not be used as a policy tool without thorough review because it is certainly not a silver bullet available for policy-makers to overcome any crisis situations. Nevertheless, in some countries, crisis situations were often approached with policies developed via tripartite social dialogue because a tradition for this cooperation existed that explains general differences in the intensity of relying on social dialogue in different countries (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt, 2022; Hyman, 2008; Johnstone, Saridakis, and Wilkinson, 2019). Although this form of tripartite social dialogue that emerged in some countries also changed over time, such tripartite social dialogue and cooperation between state authorities and social partners' organizations is relatively rare in current liberal market economies (McLaughlin and Wright, 2018), happens on an ad hoc basis in so-called peripheral economies and is only relatively common in coordinated market economies to master major economic and

societal challenges (Fajertag and Pochet, 2000; Hamann and Kelly, 2007; Hancké and Rhodes, 2005; Howell, 2008).

Against this background, it is certainly puzzling that since the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, tripartite social dialogue has rapidly increased, and social partners' organizations and state authorities all over the world have cooperated quickly to tackle the challenges caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, and perhaps more surprisingly, this increase is observable not only in coordinated and peripheral economies but also in many liberal market economies (Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2020a, 2020d, 2021; OECD, 2020e). In this paper, this somewhat surprising phenomenon is investigated, and the reasons for this increase in tripartite social dialogue around the world are analyzed in detail. Specifically, this paper also takes a closer look at the rationales for different actors' cooperation and analyzes the instrumental and political logic behind the collaboration. Hence, the paper looks beneath the publicly announced goals and motives of the policies that have emerged from tripartite social dialogue since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address these research questions, the paper derives a theoretical concept of social partnership and state actors' motives and rationales on the basis of (neo-)corporatist theory (Cawson, 1983; Scharpf, 1991; Schmitter, 1985), which is integrated into the comparative political economy literature on differences in business systems and varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 1999; Wilkinson and Wood, 2017). Empirically, the paper makes use of unique information from semistructured interviews with key representatives from encompassing peak-level social partners' organizations and state authorities in 19 OECD countries.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, an overview is given on the increased tripartite social dialogue around the world. The theoretical framework for the analysis of the rationales and motives for the cooperation between actors as well as the reasons for differences between countries is then presented. An outline of the methodological and empirical framework follows, and the results are presented and discussed. The paper ends by summarizing the main results and outlining implications for the future of bipartite and tripartite social dialogue in different countries around the world.

## **The COVID-19 outbreak and the cooperation between social partners and state authorities**

When the COVID-19 outbreak revealed itself as a severe global health and economic crisis in the first months of 2020, both state authorities and social partners in many countries took immediate action to mitigate its impacts (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; ILO, 2020b, 2020c; OECD, 2020e, 2020g; Petherick et al., 2020). Strategies and plans were developed and implemented to support companies and workers (ILO, 2020a; ILO and OECD, 2020; OECD, 2020b, 2020d, 2020f). The reason behind almost all actions taken in different countries was to lend support to companies and workers to adapt to and overcome the short- to medium-term impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. This typically included provisions for rapid development of health and safety measures and guidelines in the workplace with alternative forms of work (e.g., telework) enabled and supported (ILO, 2020d; OECD, 2020c). Furthermore, strategies and policies were developed to support companies to stay afloat and to protect employment, especially in situations of a full or sectoral lockdown of the economy. Although there are differences in the range and scope of the actions taken in different countries (Eurofound, 2020; ETUC, 2020; ILO, 2020 a; OECD, 2020a, 2020e; Petherick et al., 2020), in many countries many of these actions were developed in tripartite social dialogue that included encompassing peak-level social partners and federal state authorities.

Of course, the COVID-19 outbreak was an unexpected and unprecedented event in modern times, creating great uncertainty over the best appropriate responses to manage the health and economic crisis. Actors therefore had to develop strategies and policies in a highly uncertain and changing environment without the benefit of a “rulebook” or standard operating procedures. In such a situation, information is limited, and rational decision-making is challenging (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Hedström, 1998). Typically, within the first months, the priority challenge was to develop policies to ensure that work and employment could continue in a safe environment (OECD, 2020a), often made possible via the strengthening and widening of telework. In this phase, social partners in many countries often played a key role. Social partners not only supported workers via the provision of teaching and learning but also showed a great deal of flexibility in aiding the transition toward teleworking by expediting (ex ante) approval for changed working practices and abdicating from previous roles (OECD, 2020c, 2020g). To react quickly to the new situation, social partners and state authorities in many countries also not only simplified the administrative barriers to the implementation of telework but also supported companies and employees in this transition of work from the office (OECD, 2020d). Furthermore, to ensure the health and safety of workers who were unable to work from home, social partners

also updated and renegotiated collective agreements to minimize workers' risks from the COVID-19 virus in the workplace. Surveys show that both business organizations and trade unions worked together to instruct workers to keep the workplace safe (ILO, 2020d; OECD, 2020d). Therefore, the most intensive and successful cooperation between state authorities and social partners was seen in the rapid development of health and safety measures and policies in the first phase of the COVID-19 outbreak. Just to name a few examples: the development of health and safety guides in Denmark with Guide to the COVID-19 'Job-VET-model' (Vejviser til COVID-19 Job-VEU modellen), Ireland (return to work protocol), or in Spain and France (Protocole national de déconfinement pour les entreprises pour assurer la sécurité et la santé des salariés), demonstrates the scope and success of this co-operation (Eurofound, 2020; ILO and OECD, 2020).

Regarding employment, in the majority of OECD countries, the actions taken in the first phase of the COVID-19 outbreak to protect employment were linked to short-time working or other forms of wage subsidies. In many countries, short-time working and wage subsidy schemes existed before the pandemic and were often based on social dialogue agreements. However, although some kinds of short-time working and wage subsidy schemes were observable in 2020 throughout the OECD member states, the way the schemes worked and their range and scope differed substantially (OECD, 2020b). More specifically, these schemes differed in terms of eligibility (e.g., part-time employees, temporary workers, minimum period of employment), replacement rates and caps, duration, and funding arrangements. Additionally, as the pandemic revealed itself to be a continuing and ever-changing threat that demanded numerous (short-term) adaptations, the actions and policy measures taken were constantly adjusted and amended in almost all countries (Petherick et al., 2020). A number of studies (Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2020a, 2020c; OECD, 2020a, 2020e, 2020f) conclude that tripartite social dialogue has often played a fundamental role in the adaptation, development and management of short-time working and wage subsidy arrangements to protect jobs, the income of firms and the functioning of the economy and society during lockdowns and beyond. More specifically, the key elements of these important tripartite social dialogue activities were that firms committed themselves to keeping workers employed, trade unions accepted shortened working times and lowered wages, and the state supported both firms and workers with benefits or wage subsidies.

Regarding the implementation of actions and measures taken, surveys show that throughout the OECD, the majority of these actions were implemented via changes and adoptions in legislation, but depending upon the

country context, a substantial part was also implemented directly via collective bargaining at different levels and through other forms of social dialogue (e.g., via agreements with works councils). Recent surveys (Eurofound, 2020, 2021) that ask social partners about their involvement in the development and implementation of COVID-19-related policies and measures show that they were involved in approximately half of the policies. These same surveys also show that the vast majority of actions are implemented via legislation and only up to one quarter of actions via collective bargaining. However, these surveys underestimate the role of social dialogue and social partners' involvement in managing the economic and societal impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. First, many actions refer to emergency situations that aim to regulate citizens' freedom of movement in general (e.g., social distance regulations, travel restrictions) and increased power for the police and military (Eurofound, 2021). Such topics are outside the competencies of social partners, who usually concentrate on regulating employment issues that are only indirectly affected by these other actions. Second, depending upon the country context, a substantial number of actions were implemented directly via collective bargaining at different levels and through other forms of social dialogue (e.g., via agreements with works councils). Therefore, when examining in more detail the specific foci of actions, surveys report very high involvement by social partners in areas such as employment protection and retention policies, the development of policies for economic, labor market and social recovery and income protection beyond short-time work. Hence, social partners have been important actors in the policies and strategies that required continued readjustment in all phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and as the health and economic situation changed throughout 2020 and beyond. Therefore, the increase in bipartite and tripartite activities to manage the economic and societal impact of the COVID-19 outbreak does not conflict with the relatively low share of involvement by social partners reported in some other studies (Eurofound, 2020, 2021). In contrast, a clear increase in social dialogue can be observed since spring 2020 in areas where social partners typically concentrate their activities. In the following, these activities are presented in more detail, the reasons for social partners' and state authorities' cooperation (or not) are analyzed in detail, and their rationales are critically scrutinized.

### **Theoretical considerations behind the cooperation between social partners and state authorities**

In the following, on the basis of Bray, Budd, and Macneil (2020: 118), cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities will be defined as a "working together to the same end." This simple and broad definition enjoys the advantage of capturing a variety of different forms of interaction and engagement by actors on a wide number of issues and themes. As will be shown in the following, this broad definition is not only adequate but also necessary to cover the variety of themes addressed in the different forms of "working together" by various actors, which are embedded in differing institutional contexts in different countries. This means that there will be differences in the types and extent of cooperation discussed along the dimensions outlined by Bray, Budd, and Macneil (2020: 118) with respect to the actors involved, the compatibility of interests, the degree of mutuality and the precise themes on which there is cooperation.

However, most importantly, all cooperations have in common that they cover the "working together" between social partners and state authorities to achieve the "same end," which is to combat the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. It is important to note that this definition is neutral and nonjudgmental, as it does not say anything about the success (or failure) of the cooperation. Since this cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities is often an information exchange and/or negotiation to balance interests between actors, it is in line with the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition of social dialogue, which includes all types of negotiation, consultation and discussions between social partners and state authorities on a variety of issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. Since the issues of common interest relate to economic and social policies, the cooperation between social partners and state authorities is also in line with the broad definition of corporatism as defined, for example, by Pontusson (1991). Using this broad definition of cooperation and social dialogue also allows a comparison of previous "working togethers" between social partners' organizations and state authorities and accordingly related theoretical debates.

### *The debate on tripartite cooperation*

The debate on the rationale and effects of cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities was especially momentous in the 1970s and 1980s, when, in almost all industrialized countries, social partners' organizations were encompassing and highly representative organizations that had great economic and political influence (Scharpf, 1991). At that time, in many countries with different traditions and systems of industrial relations, state authorities often tried to cooperate with social partners' organizations and



included them in public policy planning and making (Baccaro and Galindo, 2018; Howell, 2008). The fact that in the 1970s, for example, even in liberal countries such as the UK, the Labour government invited social partners' organizations to contribute to the development of public policy issues to combat economic difficulties demonstrates how widespread cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities was. However, the latter particular cooperation was short-lived, and therefore, this episode in the "history" of British industrial relations is sometimes labeled a "corporatism of crisis" (Hyman, 1988).

At the same time, in other countries, such as many Nordic countries, cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities was already well established, although constantly contested, meaning that its form and intensity fluctuated over time. In some Nordic countries, e.g., Sweden, the cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities was certainly impeded and disrupted for some time because Swedish employers wanted to break the system of centralized interactions and negotiations (Pontusson, 1991; Pontusson and Swenson, 1996) but was eventually sustained in its idea and structure until the present day (Öberg et al., 2011). Hence, in many Nordic countries, social partners and state authorities base today's cooperation on well-established traditions.

#### *The rationale behind cooperation between social partners and state authorities*

Social partners' organizations chose to cooperate and engage with state authorities in the past because it gave them an important pathway to the representation of their members' interests. State authorities were motivated to cooperate because it can provide them with necessary support for policies from often highly representative and powerful organizations (Baccaro, 2003; Ebbinghaus and Hassel, 2000; Hamann and Kelly, 2010; Howell, 2008). State authorities also integrated social partner organizations into decision-making because their influence was somewhat inevitable due to their substantial power (Crouch, 1993).

The corporatist theoretical reasoning of that time also argued that this tripartite cooperation was particularly frequent and efficient if social partners' organizations were not only representative and encompassing but also characterized by centralized structures of interest intermediation and social dialogue (Lehmbruch, 1984; Schmitter, 1985), for example, in typically corporatist countries such as Austria, Germany, or Sweden (Baccaro, 2002: 330). However, this expectation does not fully correspond with empirical evidence, as in many countries, cooperation was also observable either on a regular or at least an ad hoc basis in countries with

decentralized structures. In fact, as the history of industrial relations shows, cooperation repeatedly emerged and/or was sustained over a long period of time in a number of countries that were not characterized by centralized, i.e., corporatist, structures. Italy is certainly a good example of the latter, and the literature (Baccaro, 2002; Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Regini, 1997; Regini and Regalia, 1997) makes this clear. This means that corporatist, i.e., centralized structures of interest intermediation and social dialogue, are not necessary conditions for tripartite cooperation, since this cooperation may also emerge in a decentralized and fragmented system. This argument is also supported by the tripartite cooperation observed in a number of European countries to address and achieve the targets required for joining the Eurozone (Hancké and Rhodes, 2005).

However, regardless of the question of whether centralized structures were important to a certain degree, currently, tripartite cooperation can no longer be expected to suffice and to be efficient since centralized structures of social dialogue have eroded substantially in recent decades (Baccaro, 2003; European Commission, 2014; Hayter, 2011, Koukiadaki and Grimshaw, 2016, Marginson, 2015). Furthermore, cooperation might no longer be desirable or required by state authorities since the representativeness and power of social partners' organizations has declined substantially since the 1980s throughout the Western world (Rathgeb, 2018; Traxler, 1999).

For this reason, subsequent research that aimed to explain cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities (Culpepper, 2002; Hassel, 2003) no longer focused on the organizational, institutional and structural prerequisites of social partners and the social dialogue but rather concentrated on the questions of the functions and purpose of a cooperation together with an exploration of its effects. To understand the cooperation seen throughout many countries since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper therefore also focuses on the functions and analyzes the effects of the cooperation, rather than the organizational, institutional and structural prerequisites of social partners themselves.

#### *Different logics and functions of cooperation between social partners and state authorities*

In this paper, the functions of cooperation between social partners and state authorities since the outbreak of the COVID-19 outbreak will be considered anticipated effects (Luhmann, 1969); therefore, the effects are considered to follow functional requirements that explain the cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities. More specifically, in this paper, a differentiation between two distinct

functional requirements, as proposed by Parson (1965), is made: first, the cooperation has an *instrumental function* (i.e., goal attainment and problem solving) and second, an *expressive function* (i.e., legitimation of action). This means that theoretically, the cooperation observable in the COVID-19 situation can be understood as a means to achieve economic or societal goals and/or to enhance the legitimacy of the actors involved in handling the situation. Therefore, the instrumental aims of the cooperation correspond with economic and social effects, and the expressive aims correspond to political effects. This also means that from a theoretical perspective, analysis of the cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities needs to differentiate between an *instrumental* and *political logic*, and therefore, both are analyzed in this paper. Of course, as will be shown, both types of logic are not necessarily independent of each other, and a congruence between the instrumental and political logic may exist.

On reviewing the literature, however, there is little research available on the actual role and importance of both types of logic with respect to cooperation between social partners and state authorities. This lack of research is somewhat astonishing, as the question of the functioning and efficacy of this form of tripartite social dialogue should be of fundamental importance not only in general but also in particular now during the management of the COVID-19 crisis, which is one of the most severe in recent centuries. To date, there is only indirect evidence available on the functioning and efficacy of the cooperation and role of instrumental and political logics from previous forms of tripartite social dialogue.

Regarding indirect evidence, some conclusions can be drawn from ad hoc tripartite social dialogue, often labeled social pacts, which were observed in recent decades, especially in the 1990s in many European countries. Overall, these studies (Baccaro and Galindo, 2018; Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Brandl, 2012; Ebbinghaus and Hassel, 2000; Fajertag and Pochet, 2000, Guardiancich and Molina, 2021; Hamann and Kelly, 2007, 2010; Hancké and Rhodes, 2005) do not provide straightforward insights and results on the reasons for this cooperation, how effective they were and therefore which logic was at play. Even more puzzlingly, the evidence suggests that even though this cooperation does not meet the instrumental aims at all, i.e., is continuously unsuccessful in terms of achieving its economic and social goals, actors sometimes still continue to cooperate and engage in public policy-making. This evidence would consequently suggest that the instrumental logic of tripartite social dialogue is of less importance and instead the expressive function and political logic dominates. Hence, all actors involved are simply interested in the expressive function of the

cooperation. Therefore, we must take a closer look at the interests and motives of the actors involved to understand the recent increase in cooperation since the COVID-19 outbreak.

To decide why social partners should be involved in public policy-making, state authorities need to balance the advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, state authorities are interested in cooperation, as it brings the expertise and knowledge of social partners' organizations into policy-making. Social partners do have superior knowledge of the specific needs of their constituencies, i.e., of companies and workers, in a newly emergent crisis situation and therefore by drawing on their expertise, faster and improved policy decisions can be made to optimize the functional logic, i.e., to improve the economic and societal situation. Especially in a crisis situation such as that triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to integrate the expertise and knowledge of a wide range of actors to develop effective policies is certainly beneficial. On the other hand, this cooperation may restrict the policy options of state authorities, and compromises must be made. Furthermore, the integration of other actors' viewpoints might also slow policy decision-making processes, which is a disadvantage in a rapidly evolving and changing situation such as the COVID-19 outbreak.

In any case, the former interests correspond with the instrumental logic and function (i.e., goal attainment and problem solving), but, as convincingly argued by Hamann and Kelly (2007), the expressive function and political logic is also a key factor that explains why state authorities are interested in cooperation with social partners, i.e., it offers state authorities a means of legitimizing public policy decisions. This motive is especially important when state authorities are driven by the need for public support within the population (or at least by voters) for their actions and policies (Pizzorno, 1978). Apart from this rationale, there is further interest in cooperation, as it can contribute to the legitimacy of state actions by exerting control over a wide range of constituents and therefore engaging in extraparliamentary support (Ebbinghaus and Hassel, 2000; Hassel, 2003) and may also generate a process of social learning and consensus building that is important in difficult times (Baccaro, 2003; Culpepper, 2002). One might argue that achieving a wide consensus is especially important when unpopular actions might need to be taken in an uncertain environment such as the COVID-19 outbreak caused.

However, cooperation comes with costs to state authorities not only because it potentially limits the range of policy options but also because it might undermine public opinion on the competencies and expertise of state authorities. In fact, the integration into public policy-making of social partners' organizations with little or no

democratic mandate and that only represent the interests of their limited range of members is problematic since it (potentially) undermines the functioning of the democratic political system (Hamann and Kelly, 2010). As Schumpeter (1950) pointed out, state authorities, i.e., actors that draw authority from an electoral competition are the only legitimate actors who have the power to make political decisions, not any others. From this perspective, incorporating social partner organizations into public policy-making can be considered incompatible with the democratic process of generating legitimacy, since it blurs the distinction between the private and public realms. In this sense, Offe (1984) argued that the involvement of social partners has long-term negative effects on democracies since democratic decision-making is bypassed or at least undermined. Furthermore, this incorporation of social partner organizations undermines the democratic process independently of the wider sociopolitical and industrial relations system in which social partners are embedded and from factors and characteristics of the social partners themselves, such as their degree of representativeness and centralization.

On the other side of cooperation, the reason for social partners' interest in collaboration with state authorities is straightforward, as it provides them with another opportunity to represent the interests of their constituencies. In fact, if social partners are able to influence public policy-making, it allows them to advocate and implement the interests of their constituents on a much larger scale. Hence, there is little reason for social partners to abstain from this cooperation unless they believe the state authorities are simply using them to legitimize unpopular decisions or if engagement in public policy-making creates a collective action problem. In the first case, the authority of social partners would also be undermined, and in the second, a typical collective action problem would be generated in the sense of Olson (1965), as participation in public policy-making yields a public good and therefore free-riding of members is encouraged.

#### *The variety of socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems and the implications for cooperation*

Nevertheless, social partners' organizations are interested in cooperation with state authorities, but the decision as to whether to cooperate rests largely on the state authorities and their interests. Comparative literature shows that there are significant differences between countries as to whether the state makes use of cooperation (Baccaro and Galindo, 2018; Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Budd and Lamare, 2021; Crouch, 1993; European Commission, 2014; Howell, 2008; Hyman, 2008; Traxler, 1999). The motivations for state authorities in some

countries to make use more often or even to traditionally rely upon a cooperative paradigm can be found in country-specific socioeconomic and sociopolitical traditions, which are reflected in different variations of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001). More specifically, the literature shows that while in *coordinated market economies* cooperation is frequent and even institutionalized because social partners' organizations are assigned to fulfill specific public functions, in *European peripheral economies*, cooperation is more often undertaken on an ad hoc basis, while in *liberal market economies* cooperation is almost absent.

Hence, the recent general increase in tripartite social dialogue since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic concurs with different traditions and experiences of actors in cooperation. While for example, in coordinated market economies, the recent cooperation is simply a continuation of previous practices, in liberal market economies, it is completely novel. Therefore, the (anticipated) effects might be different, and the instrumental and political logic behind the cooperation again might differ. Against this background, this paper explores the role of the two types of logic in the different socioeconomic and sociopolitical frameworks and the reasons and motivations for our finding of an increase in cooperative behavior between social partners and state authorities since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Research Methodology and Data**

To explore, identify and analyze the increase in social dialogue activities and the cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities since the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, semistructured interviews and a standardized questionnaire survey were used. In the first step, a standardized (online) questionnaire was sent to national trade union and employer confederations and to relevant state authorities in 19 OECD countries to map and identify any bipartite or tripartite initiatives within countries. The questionnaire survey was conducted from May to July 2020 and was predominantly explorative, as it aimed to investigate the relationship between actors to identify any initiatives by social partners and state authorities themselves as well as any bipartite and tripartite activities to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, various sources of social partners' activities provided by European and international organizations, such as Eurofound, the ILO, and the OECD, were regularly tracked to complete and supplement any social dialogue activities and themes covered within social dialogue related to the COVID-19 outbreak. On that basis, 57 organizations and state authorities were contacted, of which 46 engaged with the questionnaire. In the next step, all organizations that

responded to the questionnaire were asked for their availability for follow-up interviews on the nature and rationale of joint activities. This means that even though two approaches to collect data and information are used, the main source for the analysis is qualitative information based on semistructured interviews with 28 representatives encompassing trade unions, business and employers' organizations, and state authorities.

The interviews were conducted with key representatives from relevant organizations or state authorities who combine the position and knowledge to answer questions on ideas and reasons not only around COVID-19-related activities themselves but also on the background of social dialogue in their country, particularly in terms of cooperation between social partners and the state. All interviewees were high-level representatives within their organization. Interviews were conducted between May and December 2020 via videoconferences or (exceptionally) via telephone. The semistructured interviews, averaging 30 minutes, followed an interview guide and were then subject to an iterative, manual thematic analysis.

Regarding the selection of social partners' organizations and state authorities in different countries, purposive sampling was used, and analytically, the largest organizations in terms of members within each country were targeted. This means that large and encompassing organizations that act on a nationwide basis were selected. Selecting encompassing social partner organizations with a national scope has the main advantage of capturing two organizational properties that are central for nationwide COVID-19 initiatives and policies. First, these organizations have to reconcile the common interests of heterogeneous constituencies across different domains (sectors and regions) and with different characteristics (e.g., large companies and small and medium-sized firms) and therefore ensure a nationwide balance of the costs and benefits of COVID-19 policies. Second, these organizations are traditionally very important interlocutors for state authorities, and therefore, a working relationship between the state and these organizations facilitates the planning and implementation of quickly needed policies and strategies.

To analyze differences in the increase in the nature of COVID-19-related social dialogue activities in countries with differing socioeconomic and sociopolitical frameworks according to Hall and Soskice (2001), Witt and Redding (2013), and Witt et al. (2018), the sample includes coordinated market economies (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), European peripheral economies (France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Spain), and liberal market economies (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America). Although the number of countries in each category

differs, no biases in the overall results can be expected since all categories consist of enough typical examples. For an overview of the countries and the selected organizations and authorities, see Table 1.

- TABLE 1 about here -

The following discussion of the results of the analysis rests predominantly on the primary interview data but was complemented and triangulated with information from recent reports on bipartite and tripartite social dialogue activities throughout the world (Eurofound, 2020, 2021; ETUC, 2020; ILO, 2020a; OECD, 2020a, 2020e; Petherick et al., 2020).

### *Themes and issues covered*

The themes and issues addressed in the cooperation between social partners and state authorities were manifold but can be categorized into four groups of broader themes. First, into cooperation in the context of *short-time working* (or furlough) *schemes*, second, on measures and policies on *income protection* that go beyond the support for workers covered by short-time working schemes, third, measures and policies to *support businesses*, i.e., to help businesses stay afloat and fourth *any other COVID-19-related activities*. An overview of activities and the themes covered with respect to the COVID-19 outbreak is presented in Table 2.

- TABLE 2 about here -

As shown in Table 2, in almost all countries, social partners were involved in the development or adaptation of short-time working schemes. However, not only the names and details (e.g., criteria for workers to be covered, the conditions of short-time work, levels of compensation, etc.) of short-time working schemes differed (Eurofound, 2020; OECD, 2020b, 2020d), but the form and intensity of cooperation and involvement also varied substantially across, as well as within, countries with different socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems. More specifically, the forms of cooperation ranged from relatively informal consultations, which were characteristic of liberal economies, negotiations/agreements that were found to be typical for many European peripheral economies to often formal and sometimes even institutionalized cooperation observable in coordinated economies. Moreover, the intensity of cooperation also varied depending upon the pre-existence of short-time working schemes and cooperation accordingly.

Table 2 also shows that in many countries, cooperation focused on support that goes beyond that provided by the short-time working schemes. In particular, as was often emphasized in the interviews, in the early phases



of the COVID-19 outbreak and when short-time working schemes became a widely used policy, many self-employed and nonstandard workers were not covered by any pre-existing policy. Therefore, in many countries, policies have been developed, and measures have been taken within the cooperation of social partners and state authorities to extend protection to *self-employed and nonstandard workers*. Regarding the third category of policies, Table 2 shows that in many countries, social partners were also involved in finding solutions to support businesses. These often took the form of *subsidies* to businesses (often to cover their fixed costs), better *access to loans*, or specific permissions to *suspend payments* on taxes or other contributions such as pension or social security contributions. Again, while these policies shared the underlying ideal of allowing business to stay afloat, the exact policies differed not only between but also across countries with different socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems. Another typical theme, which is grouped in Table 2 in the category “others,” was the cooperation on *health and safety measures* and, in particular, on *policies to train workers* who are either unemployed or on short-time work because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Again, the details on both health and safety as well as on training activities and policies differ substantially across countries.

The policies and measures shown in Table 2 give the impression that cooperation between social partners and state authorities is most frequent and most intensive in many coordinated market economies, followed by European peripheral market economies, but is rarely observable in market economies. On the one hand, this impression may be considered indicative, but some caution must be exercised, since not all policies and activities taken by social partners themselves or by state authorities are covered. Table 2 only shows policies, measures and related themes that are based on cooperation between social partners and state authorities. Other policies and measures taken by these actors alone are not covered. For example, if the state develops income protection policies without involving social partners, this action is not listed in Table 2, but of course, wide-ranging income protection policies do exist. The latter instance is particularly the case for liberal countries where the state often provided support in all categories, especially to keep business afloat. Furthermore, activities that are pursued at a lower level (e.g., at the company level) are not captured and listed in Table 2. Especially in liberal countries where social dialogue traditionally takes place at a decentralized level, social partners might have been involved in developing a number of actions to protect employees and businesses. The existence of such lower-level social dialogue activities was specifically mentioned in interviews in some liberal countries (e.g., Canada and New Zealand). Many of these activities were reported as focused on the

development of joint health and safety measures and policies undertaken together by employers, trade unions and local state authorities (e.g., communities or cities). However, these lower-level activities are not directly captured in the analysis.

### *Methodological considerations*

The fact that not all activities are captured means that the results presented in Table 2 and the following analyses do not claim to present a comprehensive overview of all the manifold activities and themes covered in all countries. Nor do they offer a generalization of results since not all social partners' organizations within all countries were approached and not all coordinated, peripheral and liberal market economies formed the basis of the analysis. Nevertheless, the information collected from the questionnaire and in particular from the semistructured interviews from a wide range of large economies around the world gives a highly characteristic, indicative, timely and informative picture of important and nationwide social dialogue activities and policies within the first year of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews not only provide detailed insights into the instrumental goals of different actions taken to address the outbreak and therefore also complement existing studies on the role of tripartite social dialogue (Eurofound, 2020, 2021; ETUC, 2020; ILO, 2020a; OECD, 2020a, 2020e; Petherick et al., 2020) but also importantly reveal the prospects for a potentially new role for social partners in some countries, most notably those in which bipartite and tripartite social dialogue previously played a minor role in the functioning of the economy and society.

## **Results**

The analysis suggests that compared with the years preceding the COVID-19 outbreak, since the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, there has been an overall increase in both the quality and quantity of the interactions between encompassing peak-level social partners' organizations and federal state authorities in many countries of the industrialized world. Regarding the quantitative side of the increase, state authorities and social partners engaged in social dialogue in 16 out of 19 countries, which is an increase over previous years where some tripartite social dialogue was only reported in 11 countries. More specifically, tripartite social dialogue was reported in all 8 countries in the sample with a coordinated market economy and in all 5 countries from the

group of European peripheral economies. These results are not surprising for coordinated market economies or peripheral economies, as tripartite social dialogue existed in these countries before the pandemic, either on a regular or an ad hoc basis. Tripartite social dialogue with the involvement of encompassing peak-level social partner organizations is in line here with the literature that analyzed previous periods in time (Hamann and Kelly, 2007; Hancké and Rhodes, 2005; Howell, 2008) and is therefore typical of European peripheral economies as they address nationwide challenges, of which the COVID-19 outbreak is certainly substantial. Most astonishing, however, is the identification of tripartite social dialogue activities in 4 liberal market economies. While there is some tradition of tripartite social dialogue in Ireland (Teague and Donaghey, 2015), this tripartite interaction is certainly exceptional in the other 5 liberal market economies in the sample.

#### *The quality and the “spirit” of the interaction*

Apart from the increase in the quantity of tripartite social dialogue, many interviewees also reported that the quality of the tripartite interaction improved in the sense that the intensity, frequency, and degree of constructiveness between actors improved. More specifically, many social partners reported that they had been actively approached by state authorities and asked to work jointly on policies that would address the COVID-19 outbreak. As will be explained in more detail in the following, representatives from social partner organizations reported that state authorities invited them to work together on the development and implementation of existing policies and asked them to come up with new ideas and policies in a kind of “*brainstorming exercise*,” as labeled by an interviewee from a social partner organization in a liberal country. Regarding the latter, invitations to “open” and unspecified tripartite consultations were reported to have occurred or were at least perceived as very general and informal discussions in countries with a peripheral and liberal market economy in the very early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak. Although it is difficult to generalize too much, the overall picture of the nature of this tripartite social dialogue and the climate between actors within (often virtual by videoconferencing) meetings was perceived by many actors involved as constructive, and the atmosphere was usually described as “*positive*.” One representative from a social partner organization from a liberal country said, “*Actually, since March I feel that [social partner organizations] are united by so many common interests and we forget about any conflicts.*”

However, representatives from coordinated and peripheral economies generally showed less enthusiasm over the cooperation, with interviewees also reporting that the nature of the dialogue sometimes changed over time and was altered when different topics and policies were addressed. Although the nature of the dialogue and the degree of constructiveness within meetings were described as often dependent very much upon individual persons and therefore inferences on any generalizations are difficult, some trends in the development of the tripartite social dialogue throughout the industrialized world appear to be characteristic. More specifically, interviewees from social partner organizations in coordinated and peripheral economies reported that in the very early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak, they were not approached by state authorities on some important policies; instead, state authorities made unilateral decisions on crucial topics. Some interviewees even reported that in the same group of countries, the atmosphere was sometimes conflictual either because social partners' inputs were not considered at all or because some topics were not addressed. However, in the same breath, these interviewees also referred to a change in the quality of social dialogue and an improvement in the atmosphere after a few months. Other interviewees from social partner organizations in coordinated market economies reported excellent working relationships right from the start and that new opportunities had emerged, as well expressed in an interview with a representative from a social partner organization: “... *it has never been easier* [for social partners' organizations] *to influence governments and to push our interests.*” Representatives from state authorities also reported that usually the working relationship was highly constructive and - as expressed by a representative from a state authority from a peripheral economy – “... *we did not have the impression that ... [social partner organizations] ... are simply trying to maximize their self-interests as they often did before, but are truly working together with us in order to find a solution that helps us out of the situation.*”

Although the examples of the interaction and cooperation between social partners and state authorities sometimes express a new quality in the tripartite relationship in some countries, the increase in the quantity of tripartite social dialogue is also remarkable in some cases. Nevertheless, there are still differences in the quality of this cooperation across countries. More specifically, regarding coordinated market economies, the analysis showed that, for example, in Austria, Finland and the Netherlands, peak-level social partners' organizations and state authorities were in intensive and continuous dialogue and concrete actions were taken. In the Netherlands, for example, these discussions were characterized by weekly meetings between social partners

and state authorities in the first months of the pandemic. In Belgium, social partners also reported that they developed a number of policies jointly with state authorities, even though among social partners, trade unions stated that they had less influence than business organizations. Hence, the influence among actors was sometimes perceived to be unequal among social partners. However, both social partner organizations in Belgium agreed that they have developed and implemented a good number of policies together with state authorities to address the COVID-19 outbreak.

In Nordic countries, i.e., coordinated market economies, such as Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, the well-established tripartite social dialogue was reported not only to have continued during the COVID-19 outbreak but was perceived by all actors to have generally intensified both in terms of quality and quantity. However, interviewees reported that some tensions between actors existed, and different perspectives on which actions should be prioritized caused some short-term disruptions in the first months of 2020. However, since different actors and positions are involved, such tensions are not necessarily detrimental but rather inherent to social dialogue. Similarly, in Germany, another typical example of a coordinated market economy, social partners experienced disruptions in cooperation with state authorities in the first half of 2020. The disruptions were perceived to be due to (unnecessary) time pressure by the state to develop policies. However, later in 2020, social partners in Germany and state authorities continued to cooperate effectively, and policies were successfully developed to address the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak.

In peripheral economies such as France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, the analysis showed that state authorities cooperated with social partners on COVID-19-related actions and policies. However, similar to the situation in coordinated market economies, in the first phase of the outbreak, the working relationship was sometimes described as ambivalent in the sense that a consensus over the correct actions was not always found between social partners themselves or with state authorities. Nevertheless, in all peripheral economy countries, state authorities consulted social partner organizations not least because it is generally the norm in these countries. Moreover, in some of these countries, tripartite consultations are not only the norm but also legally and institutionally intended. However, in all these peripheral economies, social partners reported that many actions were often based on unilateral state decisions and not upon a consensus between all actors. This was especially the case in the first half of 2020, when social partners had limited time to react and to negotiate with one another.

Nevertheless, all actors also agreed that tripartite social dialogue intensified both in quality and quantity as they reviewed the whole year since the COVID-19 outbreak.

### *The role of different traditions in the cooperation between social partners and state authorities*

In countries with coordinated market economies and peripheral economies, cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities is based on previous interactions that are either regular or on an ad hoc basis. This is different from countries such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Poland, the UK, and the US, in which, with the exception of Ireland, cooperation between state authorities and social partners is (very) exceptional. Against this background, it is somewhat surprising that the analysis showed that state authorities in some of the liberal countries actively approached social partners' organizations to develop policies and strategies to address the COVID-19 outbreak. More specifically, even in the early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak, state authorities and peak-level social partners' organizations in both Ireland and the UK expressed unity and announced publicly that they were cooperating to respond to the emergency. In Poland, which is categorized as a peripheral economy but shows characteristic features of a liberal market economy, where social partners and state authorities are often described as being rather critical of each other, state authorities invited social partners for consultations and in cooperation with each other developed policies to address the outbreak. Exceptionally for Poland, the tripartite cooperation also produced policies that resulted in legally binding acts. Australian state authorities also worked with unions and business organizations on policies to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, with both the Australian "JobKeeper" strategy, which provides wage subsidies for workers, and the Australian "Job Maker Plan" to restart the economy after the lockdowns, being largely shaped by a tripartite cooperation. However, although an increase in social dialogue activities in general was observable in 2020 in many liberal countries, and in particular a cooperation between high-level organizations and state authorities, these situations were not universal. In other liberal countries, such as Canada and the USA, social dialogue responses to the COVID-19 outbreak did not include higher-level organizations and national (federal) state authorities. This, of course, did not mean that social partners were not active or that they did not engage with state authorities. In contrast, initiatives at local levels were reported in many of these countries.

This conclusion on the increased quality and quantity of tripartite social dialogue around the world after the COVID-19 outbreak triangulates with evidence from other studies (Eurofound, 2020, 2021; ETUC, 2020; ILO, 2020a; ILO and OECD, 2020; OECD, 2020a, 2020e; Petherick et al., 2020). Furthermore, the analysis also suggests that the interest of the state in engaging with social partner organizations has noticeably increased in the industrialized world in 2020. As argued before, this increased interest could be based on problem solving or expressive logic. Of course, both types of logic are not necessarily complementary but could also be substitutes. Evidence is found in the interviews that both logics are at play, although there are differences across countries with different socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems.

#### *The role of the expressive and problem-solving function*

Interviews with representatives from state authorities in almost all countries emphasized that the rationale for approaching social partners' organizations was that their expert knowledge and advice was welcomed for the development of COVID-19-related policies. Against the background that the COVID-19 outbreak was unexpected and decisions had to be made urgently and under a high level of uncertainty, any expert knowledge and advice was important by state authorities. As stressed by one interviewee, in the fundamentally uncertain situation in which all actors found themselves in spring 2020, "*we clutched at every straw and tried to take up as much advice as possible.*" Hence, this cooperation in uncertain times is in line with previous phases of uncertainty and the need to make difficult decisions (Baccaro, 2003; Culpepper, 2002). More specifically, some interviewees mentioned that state authorities wanted to bring in the expertise of social partner organizations as they work closely with companies and workers and therefore know the exact needs and demands much better than state authorities. Furthermore, one interviewee from a state authority mentioned that an important reason for including social partners in policy-making was that it could then be (better) guaranteed that the support was precisely targeted, where it is most needed: including social partners in the implementation of public policies meant that "*... when we are spending lots of money, we want to be sure that the money goes there, where we want it to go.*"

Representatives from both types of social partners' organizations reported that one main motivation for their engagement with state authorities was that it provided an important pathway for them to raise support and funding for their constituencies rather than without cooperation with the state. In other words, cooperation with

state authorities enabled social partner organizations to direct and influence public funding for their constituencies and therefore was a clear incentive to engage with state authorities. In addition, some social partner organizations reported negative effects from the COVID-19 outbreak on themselves as organizations. More specifically, because of struggling companies and the increasing unemployment (or short time employment) of workers, the income of organizations via fees often declined substantially. This was reported to be highly problematic for some social partners' organizations since the COVID-19 crisis meant additional efforts and support for their members was needed. Therefore, engagement and cooperation with the government not only provided social partners with the opportunity to raise aid and funding for their constituencies but also for themselves as organizations, since both were often negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hence, the interviews revealed evidence of the importance of the instrumental logic that was at play and why actors cooperated and developed joint policy responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. The fact that this cooperation was in the interests of all actors and enabled them to best master the challenges together can be summarized by a quote from an interviewee from a state authority who said that “... *it is impossible to stem the burden of the coronavirus crisis alone and we need to work together.*”

However, the interviews also showed that the situation is not always as rosy as sometimes described, as some social partners reported that they had the impression that their advice was not always that welcome. For example, one representative from a social partner organization from a liberal country stated, “*I sometimes had the feeling that the government only wanted to hear our advice only when it matched with the ideas they had before.*” This perception points toward the importance of the political logic and the expressive function of the cooperation. In fact, some social partners observed that state authorities were most interested in cooperation when the effects of policies were unclear and when hard decisions were required. Regarding the latter, especially for decisions on sectoral or national lockdowns, state authorities were reported to have been keen that this was widely supported by social partners. This evidence suggests that for state authorities, the expressive function was often of equal, and sometimes even of higher, importance than the instrumental function of cooperation.

However, the analysis shows that in many liberal countries, where there is no tradition of cooperation between state authorities and social partners, the expressive function appears to be at the forefront of cooperation. A



good example of this is the UK, where representatives from the government made joint statements and press releases together with representatives from the main social partners' organizations without presenting concrete plans and strategies. All parties involved appeared jointly in the media and explained that they will jointly address the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, few details on how this will be done were presented. This interaction between the parties was widely covered in the media and clearly conveyed a sign of unity in a time of crisis, enabling the government to show that the government's policies and actions have wide support. Hence, the importance of the expressive function is evident. This British example also shows that the expressive function might be more important than the problem-solving function, since the cooperation did not lead to intensive and formal interaction on specific policies or actions in the later phases of the pandemic. In fact, what followed were a few more joint statements that signaled broad mutual support for the plans of the government and separate statements that proposals by social partners are more or less in line with each other. Nevertheless, there was cooperation and joint action between the state and social partners that was new (or not seen in the UK since the 1970s). In other liberal countries, such as Australia, Ireland and New Zealand, where cooperation between social partners and state authorities was observable in 2020, public announcements were observable even though the echo in the media was smaller. This cooperation, however, is different from that in other countries where the expressive function and unity between the government and social partners was not that widely signaled or covered in the media.

This becomes clear when looking at cooperation in coordinated economies. For example, in Germany, representatives from the government had various meetings with social partners beginning early in 2020, where policies and measures were discussed and developed to confront the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak. A similar interaction was seen in Austria, where social partners had meetings with the government on several issues and themes. Both countries represent typical continental European countries but are in line with the situation in Nordic countries. For example, the interaction between government and social partners' representatives in Finland was also very intensive in 2020, but their interactions were not widely reported to the public and in the media. In contrast, Finnish social partners only confirmed publicly via the "normal" press releases that the current system of interaction and problem solving, which was a continuation of previous social dialogue, works. Furthermore, unlike liberal countries, the announcements usually included the presentation of policies or strategies, even though some of the outcomes were preliminary and still had work to be done.

These differences in expressing and announcing cooperation and unity clearly show that the expressive function does not have the same role in all countries and that differences between coordinated and liberal countries are evident. However, expecting social partners and state authorities in liberal countries, where there are no traditions and institutional structures in place, to develop concrete policies and plans that could be announced quickly would be too much. Hence, showing and announcing unity publicly is easier or even the only thing actors can do in a crisis situation that needs quick (re)actions. Nevertheless, regardless of which logic or function dominated in which country and situation, the analysis shows not only that constructive and problem solving tripartite social dialogue can work very swiftly and even smoothly in a crisis situation, but also that it can be very goal-oriented and effective.

The analysis also showed that in some countries, both social partner organizations and state authorities developed a new understanding of the nature of social dialogue. In fact, social partners advised that this tripartite social dialogue was a “*new experience*” since they were not sitting on opposite ends of the table in negotiations, but, this time, usually on the same side. Some interviewees even reported that the invitation by state authorities to engage in tripartite social dialogue enabled them to obtain a better understanding of the other side in the employment relationship. In a similar vein, interviewees also advised that they were able to build up trust with each other, which allowed them to look to their mutual (long-run) interests and not to their (short-run) self-interests.

Hence, the analysis showed that while the COVID-19 outbreak was certainly challenging for both state authorities and social partners’ organizations, overall, tripartite social dialogue proved to be capable of delivering all its functions. Although the problem-solving function enabled the development of policies that helped overcome the health, economic and social crisis directly, the expressive function played an important role, not least because it allowed actors to show unity. Regarding the latter, in liberal countries where there is little or no tradition of tripartite cooperation, expressing unity in times of crisis is not only important by itself but also the only thing that can be expected. In this sense, the expressive function is almost the only substitute that is available for social partners and the state. Moreover, the analysis showed that in some countries (tripartite), social dialogue has changed in its nature compared to the recent and even historic past. Whether this new development of tripartite social dialogue and cooperation is just a flash in the pan or a more long-term development is yet to be seen and countries might follow different pathways.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The analysis showed that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 led to an unprecedented increase in tripartite social dialogue in many industrialized countries in the world. More specifically, this paper showed that in many countries, state authorities actively engaged with peak-level business and employer organizations on the one hand and trade union organizations on the other, i.e., social partner organizations in a dialogue to develop common strategies and policies to tackle the economic and societal impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. Although the intensity of such cooperation between social partners' organizations and state authorities was found to vary across different countries and was certainly not observable in all countries, a general trend of an emerging and more intensive and cooperative tripartite social dialogue was observable since the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020.

In this paper, a closer look behind this newly emerged cooperation between peak-level social partners' organizations and state authorities was taken. More specifically, by interviewing representatives from national peak-level employers and business organizations, trade unions, and state authorities, the rationale and motives of the involved actors were analyzed. The analysis showed that in the first shock and awe of the pandemic in spring 2020, actors clutched at every straw to manage not only the emerging health emergency but also the unprecedented economic and societal crisis, which became increasingly apparent in the short and long term. In this sense, instrumental motives, i.e., the need to manage the crisis for everyone involved as well as possible were identified to be at the forefront of the cooperation. The analysis also showed that in the early phases of joint policy-making, quick decisions were needed and made, but often only very general announcements were made and vague policies developed. Important details on how policies were built up, refined and implemented were often hidden under a veil in the first half of 2020. This analysis has also lifted this veil and shown that not only instrumental but political motives were at play, i.e., expressive reasons also played an important role in why actors engaged and cooperated with each other.

Regarding instrumental reasons, the analysis showed that social partners' organizations engaged with the state, as it enabled them to represent the interests of their constituencies much better. More specifically, in many countries, trade unions were able to influence labor market policies and to prevent (mass) unemployment and ensure some kind of job security with support from the state. What was also found to be new is that in many

countries, novel labor market policies also included groups of workers that were previously less well protected, most notably, the self-employed and other kinds of nonstandard workers. Employer and business organizations were also able to smoothen the disruptions of business and to provide companies with a safety net that often took the form of temporary tax suspensions, access to emergency loans and subsidies. For state authorities, cooperation with social partners was beneficial, as they could access the expertise and knowledge of specialized organizations and were therefore able to develop tailored plans that worked rapidly and effectively to support both companies and workers.

However, the analysis also showed that such instrumental motives are related to expressive functions and political motives. Particularly for elected state authorities, who depend heavily on public support or support from voters (Baccaro, 2002), this cooperation with social partners lends their actions and policies developed with wider legitimacy and support (Culpepper, 2002; Hamann and Kelly, 2010). The analysis showed that this legitimacy motive was especially important in an emergency situation of great uncertainty where any policy choices are difficult, have advantages and disadvantages and require the balancing of different interests, a prime example for instance being decisions on full economic lockdowns. Against this background, cooperation with social partners ensured that different perspectives and interests were well considered and that balanced decisions were made. Furthermore, if different actors are involved in decision-making, it can prevent any “smart-alecky blame gaming” and further conflict between politicians, employers and workers in such turbulent times.

The analysis also showed that while in some countries this cooperation and the development of joint tripartite policies was new or had not been seen for some decades, in others, this behavior was based on a long-standing tradition. It is too early to draw any conclusions as to whether this increase in tripartite social dialogue activities is sustainable in those countries in which joint reactions by social partners are weakly developed or previously never existed. In fact, as it was made clear by Bray, Budd, and Macneil (2020), such a cooperation is constantly threatened by the tension between mutuality and self-interest and may therefore end quickly or gradually “slide down” in the upcoming years. Moreover, this threat of erosion or breakup of the cooperation exists in all countries, not just those states that have recently (re)adopted such tripartite decision-making, since institutional differences in the social dialogue system only affect the speed of erosion and potential breakup.

Nevertheless, this cooperation has certainly laid the grounds for a possible new relationship in some countries. Bray, Budd, and Macneil (2020: 115) argued that cooperation can succeed if actors' perceptions of cooperation are aligned, and in this sense, 2020 clearly confirmed this argument. Specifically, it showed that a cooperative social partnership can work well if actors prioritize their mutual (long-term) interests and not their (short-term) self-interests. Furthermore, regardless of state authorities, the year 2020 showed that in many countries, employer and business organizations and trade unions sat next to each other in negotiations and consultations to manage challenges and not in opposite corners. Thus, the year 2020 brought a shared history and a new quality to the relationship between social partners, as well as to their relationships with the state, which may form the basis for trust building between them.

As history has shown, a sustainable and successful tripartite cooperation that goes beyond vague announcements, as seen in the first shock and awe of the pandemic, is difficult to maintain. In fact, successful cooperation is conditional upon a number of factors, including the existence of mutual trust between the parties, political support and an effective mandate that includes the organizational capacity and institutional (e.g., legal) support of social partners to implement the agreed policies throughout their organizations and constituencies (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Brandl, 2012; Guardiancich and Molina, 2021). Against this background, it could be argued that the erosion of social partnership systems in the recent past might have had a detrimental effect on effective cooperation and may need to be rethought and perhaps even reversed by state authorities.

The upshot of these social dialogue activities that emerged in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 outbreak is that it showed that cooperation and the focus on mutual interests can be successful. Clearly, the reason why the relationship between social partners changed was exogenously induced by a "common enemy," i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to work together. Hence, the cooperation between social partners and state authorities may be considered yet another variant of a "corporatism of crisis," which was observed in the past (Hyman, 1988). Of course, as examples from history show, when a common enemy is defeated, successful alliances and cooperation often break up, and the self-interest of parties returns to the fore. What the future brings and the sustainability of the newly emerged relationship is, of course, not known, but it is up to the social partners themselves what they make of it (or not).

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TABLE 1

## LIST OF SOCIAL PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS AND STATE/GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITIES

Country	Business System	Business and Employer Organization	Trade Union	State/governmental authority
<i>Australia</i>	Liberal	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Australian Council of Trade Unions	Department of Employment
<i>Austria</i>	Coordinated	Austrian Chamber of Commerce	Austrian Federation of Trade Unions	Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection
<i>Belgium</i>	Coordinated	Federation of Belgian Enterprises	General Federation of Belgian Labour	Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue
<i>Canada</i>	Liberal	Canadian Employers' Council	Canadian Labour Congress	Employment and Social Development Canada
<i>Denmark</i>	Coordinated	Confederation of Danish Employers	Danish Trade Union Confederation	Ministry of Employment
<i>Finland</i>	Coordinated	Confederation of Finnish Industry	Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions	Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment
<i>France</i>	Peripheral	Movement of French Enterprises	General Federation of Workers	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Vocational training and Social Dialogue
<i>Germany</i>	Coordinated	Confederation of German Employers' Associations	Confederation of German Trade Unions	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
<i>Ireland</i>	Liberal	Irish Business and Employers' Confederation	Irish Congress of Trade Unions	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
<i>Italy</i>	Peripheral	General Confederation of Italian Industry	Italian Workers' Trade Unions Confederation	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
<i>Netherlands</i>	Coordinated	Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers	Federation Dutch Labour Movement	Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
<i>New Zealand</i>	Liberal	Business New Zealand	New Zealand Council of Trade Unions	Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment
<i>Norway</i>	Coordinated	Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise	Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions	Ministry of Labour
<i>Poland</i>	Peripheral	Employers of Poland	All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
<i>Portugal</i>	Peripheral	Confederation of Portuguese Businesses	General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers	Directorate for Employment and Labour Relations
<i>Spain</i>	Peripheral	Confederation of Spanish Employer Organizations	Federation of Workers' Commissions	Ministry of Labour and Social Economy
<i>Sweden</i>	Coordinated	Confederation of Swedish Enterprise	Swedish Trade Union Confederation	Ministry of Labour
<i>United Kingdom</i>	Liberal	Confederation of British Industry	Trade Union Congress	HM Treasury
<i>United States</i>	Liberal	United States Council for International Business	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations	U.S. Department of Labor

*Note: Classification of countries along different business systems is based on Witt et al. (2018). Coordinated denotes coordinated market economies; Liberal denotes liberal market economies; Peripheral denotes European peripheral economies. Please note that business system defined by Witt et al. (2018) correspond with varieties of capitalism systems defined by Witt and Redding (2013).*

**TABLE 2**  
**OVERVIEW OF INDICATIVE THEMES AND POLICIES DEVELOPED BETWEEN SOCIAL PARTNERS AND STATE AUTHORITIES**

Country	Short-time working/furlough schemes	Income protection	Support for businesses	Others
<b>Liberal</b>				
Australia	-	Consultation on policies to <i>keep jobs</i>	Consultation on policies to <i>support business</i>	Consultation on policies for <i>young workers</i>
Canada	-	-	-	-
Ireland	Consultation on development of <i>temporary COVID-19 wage subsidy scheme</i>	Consultation on development of COVID-19 related and induced <i>unemployment payment</i>	-	-
New Zealand	-	Consultations on various options for <i>income protection</i>	Consultation on <i>easier access to loans</i>	Involvement in development of <i>health and safety</i> regulations in public sector
United Kingdom	Informal consultations, joint statements, and presentation of <i>job retention scheme</i> and of adopted continuation	-	-	-
United States	-	-	-	-
<b>Peripheral</b>				
France	Consultation on adaptation of <i>partial unemployment scheme/short-time working scheme</i> and development of long-term partial activity scheme	Consultation on protection for <i>self-employed and non-standard workers</i>	-	Consultations on adoptions of regulations on the <i>taking of leave</i> and rest breaks Consultation on <i>training plan</i> for partial and unemployed workers
Italy	Consultation on various adaptations of <i>partial unemployment/short-time working scheme</i>	Agreement on <i>wage subsidies</i> for workers in cooperation with banks if employers cannot pay	-	-
Poland	-	-	-	-
Portugal	Agreements on exceptional and <i>temporary measure on short-time work and layoffs</i> to protect jobs	Agreement on easing and extension for access to <i>unemployment and social benefits</i>	Agreement on temporary <i>exemption of payment of social security contributions</i> due by employers and other <i>support</i> for “normalization” of <i>business activity</i>	Development of extraordinary <i>training plan</i> for partial and unemployed workers
Spain	Agreements and consultation on various adaptations of <i>short time work and partial unemployment scheme</i>	Agreement and consultation on special <i>unemployment protection scheme</i>	-	Consultations on introduction of new minimum <i>living income</i> Development of regulations and easing of <i>remote work</i>
<b>Coordinated</b>				
Austria	Involvement on adaptation of <i>short-time working scheme</i>	Involvement in development of policies for support for <i>self-employed</i>	Involvement in development and administration of policies for support for <i>subsidies to cover fixed costs</i>	Involvement in development and administration of ( <i>re-)</i> training programmes for short time workers and unemployed
Belgium	Involvement in development and adaptations of <i>temporary unemployment and short-time work scheme</i> due to force majeure	Consultation on payments for <i>self-employed</i>	-	-
Denmark	Involvement in development and adaptations of <i>short-time work scheme</i> and related wage compensation	Involvement in development of compensation scheme for <i>self-employed</i>	Involvement in development compensation scheme for <i>corporate fixed expenses</i>	Involvement in development of programmes on jobsharing and flexible work
Finland	Involvement in adaptations of existing <i>short-time working scheme</i>	Involvement in regulating relaxation of requirements for <i>unemployment benefits</i>	Involvement in planning of temporary <i>deductions to employers’ pension contribution</i>	Involvement regulation of temporarily shortened duration of employer-employee <i>negotiations on lay-offs</i>
Germany	Involvement in adaptations of existing <i>short-time working scheme</i>	Involvement in development of compensation scheme for “solo” <i>self-employed</i>	Involvement in regulations on <i>deferral of tax payments; (“easy”) access to loans</i> for medium-sized enterprises; and development of an <i>economic stabilisation fund</i>	-
Netherlands	Close consultations/involvement in adaptation of existing temporary emergency measures and <i>short-time work</i> for the preservation of jobs	Involvement on policies to support for <i>self-employed</i>	Involvement in development of <i>subsidies for entrepreneurs</i> in affected sectors	Involvement in <i>training activities</i> (The Netherlands keeps learning)
Norway	Involvement in adaptations of existing <i>temporary layoff and short-time work schemes</i>	Involvement in adaptations of <i>unemployment and social benefits</i>	-	Involvement in adaptations of <i>training and development schemes</i> for unemployed
Sweden	Involvement in adaptations of existing <i>short-term working schemes</i> and related allowances	Involvement in regulations on easing and extension for access to <i>unemployment and social benefits</i>	-	-

Source: Own data, ETUC (2020), Eurofound (2021), ILO (2020a). Note: Measures and policies presented are covering policies for which state authorities co-operated with social partners.