

**Rhetoric or game changer:**  
Social dialogue and industrial  
relations in education  
midst EU governance and  
privatisation in Europe

## Executive Summary



## The project and its premises

Over recent decades, a global consensus has been reached around the centrality of teacher workforces for the quality of education systems. In this respect, it has been possible to observe a policy tension in the European context. On the one hand, the education sector and the teacher workforce have been acknowledged as pivotal for sustainable economic recovery and growth, yet on the other, austerity initiatives have had major repercussions for education systems and teachers across Europe. Given the global trend towards liberalisation and privatisation of the education sector, the question arises if the status of education as a public good is being undermined by the combination of reform pressure, technocratic governance, budgetary constraints and limited investment.

Industrial relations and social dialogue are at the heart of these processes. There is a widespread consensus that effective structures for the representation of the teacher workforce in policy making, social dialogue and collective bargaining between employers and employees, are fundamental factors for effective reform and quality education. In the wake of economic crisis and austerity measures, European institutions have come to acknowledge that social dialogue needs to be prioritised to counter the disaffection towards democratic structures in many European countries.

Unfortunately, the amount of comparative research focused on industrial relations and social dialogue in education sectors remains limited. Moreover, there is a significant knowledge gap on the relationship between trends in education reform, changing forms of industrial relations and social dialogue and teacher workforces.

To address this knowledge gap, the research project *Social dialogue and industrial relations in education: The challenges of multi-level governance and of privatisation in Europe* (IR-EDUREFORM) has traced how industrial relations and social dialogue in education sectors have unfolded in Belgium (FR), Italy, Poland and Sweden as well as in the multi-level governance of the European Union, since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008. In this respect, the project has had a particular focus on the global drive towards privatisation and liberalisation in education reform, and on the major developments in the EU governance architecture with the Europe 2020 strategy, including the European Semester, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the renewed focus on social dialogue since the mid-2010s.

The project was undertaken by a research consortium including UCLouvain (Belgium), the University of Naples Federico II (Italy), the University of Warsaw (Poland), and the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) as coordinator.

The findings highlight the need for situating member state developments in the context of EU multi-level governance in order to understand the complex dynamic, including the poly-centric decision-making by policy actors with various horizons of action and the relative loss of control for individual member state governments.

## European level governance

In tracing the European Commission's policies concerning teachers in the period 2007-2020, the research identifies an **increased prominence of education and training in EU governance**, such as reflected in the policy areas in the European Semester and principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The findings show that the European Commission's teacher policy includes several **privatisation-oriented components**, including a framework of indicators propagating a competitive and outcomes-focused direction in European education systems, the embrace of public-private partnerships, the commitment to a European ed-tech industry, and the increased mobilisation of private investment for education through EU financial instruments.

The project also demonstrates the integration, or **'institutional lock-in', between EU policy and financial instruments**. With the Europe 2020 strategy, an array of already existing and new policy instruments allowed the European Commission to have a **more hands-on approach and unprecedented capacity for instituting change**.

The EU study identifies a **key tension** between:

- a discourse emphasising **inclusion and stakeholder involvement at all levels**, in the education sector and beyond, including social partners, interest organisations, business and other stakeholders. In this respect, the teaching professions and their representatives are acknowledged to play an important role in the formation and implementation of meaningful reforms, including through **social dialogue**.
- **competition and performance-oriented policy instruments** comparing and pitting member states against each other, most evident in the widening array of benchmarks and performance indicators. These frameworks are coupled with measures and sanctions that drive structural reform agendas in member states, in education sectors and beyond.

With a focus on the education sector, the project shows that this tension of EU governance **plays out very differently in member states**. Depending on their economic and political circumstances, the EU discourses about inclusion and social dialogue might appear hollow from the member state perspective, as the discourses are contradicted by the political measures of the European institutions.

In the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, such **discrepancies between the rhetoric and realities of EU governance** is an issue to be followed closely in the years to come.

## The four case studies: Belgium (FR), Italy, Poland and Sweden

### Changing patterns of industrial relations and social dialogue in the education sector

The four case systems continue to represent different traditions in terms of industrial relations and social dialogue. Highlighting a complex picture of industrial relations and social dialogue in education sectors over recent decades, the project identifies four distinct patterns:

- The strengthening of social dialogue in **Belgium (FR)**, where the involvement of social partners in policy making might be understood as a manner to legitimise increasing state intervention in the education sector.
- An incremental circumscription of the scope of social dialogue and collective bargaining in **Italy**. In this country, reinforced government control, austerity measures and managerialist reforms are creating the conditions for a gradual shift from a centralised and collective-oriented IR system towards a private sector-like labour regulation, where the decentralised level is the most important forum for individualised mobilisation and bargaining.
- In **Poland**, the arrangements for industrial relations and social dialogue in the education sector remain under pressure due to the combination of market-oriented governance, an acquiescent collective bargaining style, and the politically charged context.
- The continued commitment in **Sweden** of social partners and the government to organised corporatism, centred on bipartite social dialogue and collective bargaining, which however over time might become challenged by the incremental expansion and influence of private provision and services in the education sector.

### Industrial relations, social dialogue and their association with patterns of education reform and privatisation

Across the four case systems, the project identifies a trend of new public management approaches to transforming the education sector, in some cases including an embrace of public-private partnerships and privatisation. The trend plays out very differently in each system due to historical legacies and current political, economic and social circumstances.

In **Belgium (FR)**, the nature of tripartite social dialogue in education has been shaped by increased levels of State intervention in education, as regards for example the introduction of new public management instruments such as teachers' evaluation. To some degree, recent State intervention counters the employers' pursuit of more autonomy and education trade unions perceive this to be compatible with their aims to raise the status of the teaching profession.

In **Italy**, major new public management reforms centred on decentralisation, increased school autonomy, evaluation and performance management. They have resulted in the reduced space for collective bargaining, fragmentation and competition among teachers, increasing powers of headteachers, and public-private partnerships. Together, these changes have led to new juridical forms of settling claims and disputes that signal a departure from established forms of collective bargaining and social dialogue.

In **Poland**, it is not possible to identify a clear association between industrial relations, social dialogue and privatisation policies. The number of private institutions is slowly growing, and they tend to provide similar employment contracts and conditions to teachers, since the public sector is used as a point of reference. However, education trade unions are rarely represented in private institutions, and with further privatisation, social dialogue risks to be further weakened.

**Sweden** provides an intriguing example of a country where organised corporatism coexists with a remarkable expansion of privatisation in education sectors since the 1990s. As long existing 'facts on the ground', privatised school provision (including on a for-profit basis), and other education-business appear to have become normalised and taken for granted. In the context of the major 'first teacher' ("*förstelärare*") reform initiated in 2013, the local room for interpretation and associated ambiguity about how to identify the first teachers created a market for standards and evidence-based solutions that could deal with the uncertainty and complex challenges raised by the reform.

## Industrial relations, social dialogue and privatisation in and of education in the context of the European Union governance

The European Union has become an increasingly influential actor in shaping education and teacher policy, in particular through the European Semester as a mechanism to promote reforms in line with market mechanisms and needs, and to engage social partners and other stakeholders in consultations with the European institutions and national policy makers, and the introduction of EU financial instruments encouraging public and private finance mix in education.

In **Belgium (FR)**, the European level is increasingly present in education policy. The reform of the "Excellence Pact" has in the context of the European Semester been endorsed by the European Commission as a systemic reform addressing issues of governance and inequality. The European Semester processes has promoted social dialogue with trade unions and employers and contributed to a reinforced "trade union front" at the national level.

Combined with an unstable domestic political situation and high levels of public debt in **Italy**, the European Union institutions have since 2008 via austerity measures and the new economic governance of benchmarks and indicators played an active role in the privatisation reforms of education and the associated transformations of the labour market. In this respect, the European Semester has provided an important mechanism for human capital-focused reform, with Country-specific Recommendations advocating the creation of a National School Evaluation System (2012-2013) and the *Buona Scuola Reform* in 2014-2015.

The well-consolidated tradition for social dialogue in **Sweden** is reflected in the relations with the European Commission within the cycles of the European Semester, where the cross-industry social partners have been actively engaged. The Swedish government appears to be in a central position for mediating the relations between social partners and the European Commission. The European Semester have also served as an occasion for the Swedish government to establish a meeting cycle with social partners. Persistent policy issues in Sweden regarding student performance gaps, teacher shortages and the attractiveness of the profession, have been continuously addressed within the context of the Semester. The first teacher reform, also mentioned several times in the Semester documents, highlights the similarities between Swedish and EU discourses with regard to teacher and education policy, including the political commitment to open up spaces for commercial actors to offer solutions. Still, the case study has not been able to detect any direct influence of the EU institutions on this reform.

## Implications for education personnel's fair working conditions, professional prerogatives, social dialogue and education quality and equity, in light of the European Pillar of Social Rights

The findings suggest that serious challenges lie ahead in terms of implementing the principles and rights of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) across Europe.

In **Belgium (FR)**, new public management-inspired reforms in the form of teacher evaluation and contractualisation between schools and state authorities are either so recent or still being designed that it is difficult to predict the implications for teachers and other education personnel. Yet, contractualisation might lead to a reduction of professional autonomy, while the schemes of individual evaluation of teachers could reinforce the power of employers and the precarity of teacher employment, in particular for teachers in the early years of their career whose employment is already precarious.

In **Italy**, the government has since the late 2000s, in compliance with EU recommendations and requirements, introduced a set of measures which have profoundly undermined social dialogue and reduced the role of trade unions and employers as economic and political actors. Liberalisation and privatisation in education have negatively affected teachers' professional autonomy, working conditions, salary, job security and workload. Effectively, the system used to regulate employment relations within the periphery of the labour market has been expanded to the core workforce ('insiders') that was largely untouched by previous reforms.

In **Poland**, social dialogue institutions exist yet the processes continue to suffer from the lack of norms. Trade union members agree to some extent that social dialogue is promoted, and that social partners are encouraged to negotiate collective agreements in matters relevant to the workers they represent. However, consultation processes tend to serve as a façade for rapid policy changes, evident during the recent wave of reforms changing the school structure that was primarily informed by the preferences of the ruling party. In a sense, social dialogue is more effective at the local levels of decision making in Poland. Teachers in Poland thus benefit from considerable autonomy in carrying out their professional duties, and they also have some influence over employment and working conditions at their workplaces.

The EPSR has had little influence domestically in **Sweden** although it was launched at the Social Summit in Gothenburg in 2017. Yet, since Sweden is doing relatively well on most of the EPSR parameters, it is not a prominent reference point in Swedish governance. Rather, we might consider the EPSR as an example of how Sweden has sought to influence social policy and models of social dialogue more widely in Europe. While the principles of the EPSR are supported by the main policy actors in Sweden, the case of the first teacher reform demonstrates that also Sweden, a country with a strong legacy of industrial democracy, faces complex challenges in constructing new and robust career pathways that work for teachers individually, for the profession as a collective, and towards quality and inclusive education for all.

