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**Abstract:** To date, the emergence of representation of hitherto under-represented workers has mainly been analysed in terms of strategic choices of traditional industrial relations actors. This study – focused on solo self-employed workers (SSE) – instead analyses the interactions between unions, employer organisations, and new collective actors, namely SSE associations. More specifically, drawing on a comparative ethnography conducted in three European countries, it conceptualises the representation of SSE as a ‘subfield’ of the ‘parent field’ of employee and employer representation and shows how interactions between traditional and new collective actors consolidate the subfield of SSE representation by also shaping the industrial relations’ institutions. This article thus contributes, first, to the debate about the representation

of under-represented workers by emphasising the importance of interactions between traditional and new actors in industrial relations, and second, to the theory of fields by conceptualising interactions as a central element of field-level change.

**Keywords:** collective representation, employer organisations, inter-organisational relations, self-employed associations, solo self-employment, strategic action field, subfield, unions

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## **Introduction**

This article analyses the collective representation of solo self-employed workers (SSE) – self-employed workers without employees – in the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovakia. Specifically, it focuses on the relations between traditional actors of industrial relations – trade unions and employer organisations – and other collective actors representing SSE by examining how these relations shape the representation of this group of workers. SSE ‘protect collective interests only through instruments that do not contemplate conflict, at least in its historically determined forms’ (Bologna, 2018: 143) and traditionally associate in organisations alternative to traditional industrial relations actors. However, this distance has evolved considerably (Murgia et al., 2020; Jansen, 2020; Pernicka, 2006), and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has also set one of its priorities as ‘organising and protecting’ SSE (Fulton, 2018: 8). This raises questions about how this representation by traditional actors is reflected in reality, and what the consequences are for the involved collective actors and for the representation of SSE.

In this study, the relations between the more institutionalised collective actors, such as trade unions and employer organisations, and the new SSE associations have been empirically

explored through a six-month ethnography across three European countries. Drawing on this data, the article addresses the question of how the representation of SSE – a category of workers so far under-represented in most European countries – emerges and begins to consolidate.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it shows how the consolidation of industrial relations systems is always in-process and consists of actual interactional ties and networks that are not reducible to traditionally well-established relations stemming from the institutionalised positions of trade unions and employer organisations. More specifically, the study illustrates how the stability of industrial relations systems, which cannot disregard the ability to adapt to and represent new categories of workers, is constructed through relations not only between traditional incumbent actors but also with new collective actors. Second, by conceptualising the representation of SSE as a ‘subfield’ of the ‘parent field’ of employee and employer representation, the study also contributes to the theory of fields. In particular, the findings allow for the identification of inter-organisational relations as a central element of field-level change.

The article is structured as follows: the next section addresses the current debate on the relations between trade unions, employer organisations and other collective actors. To contribute to this theoretical debate, the concept of ‘subfield’ is applied, to show how discourses and practices of SSE representation are created and shaped through the interactions between incumbent and new collective actors of industrial relations. The methodological section presents the comparative ethnography as an especially suitable method to understand the subfield formation and its development. The three country-level case studies are then presented, followed by a discussion of their similarities and differences, which allows conclusions to be drawn about the development and change of SSE collective representation.

### **Inter-organisational relations and collective representation**

Studies in industrial relations traditionally focus on trade unions, but they are increasingly interested in their relationships with other collective actors, such as social movements (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017), ‘indie unions’ (Smith, 2021), ‘new labour actors’ (Bondy, 2021), as well as ‘non-workers’, by addressing people who are unemployed, retirees and students (Holgate, 2021). However, still largely overlooked is how the relations with other collective actors actually shape the industrial relations system in different countries. In the debate on inter-organisational relations, work on the relations between trade unions and social movements has a prominent position, related to the hope that social movement unionism (see Engeman, 2015; Fairbrother, 2008; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017) can lead to trade union revitalisation (see Frege and Kelly, 2003). This thesis mainly focuses on the process of coalition-building and on the potential for unions to supplement their own internal strength through alliances with civil society organisations (see Heery, 2009; Heery et al., 2012). This strand of research sees inter-organisational relations mainly through the prism of benefits for trade unions and identifies factors enabling such beneficial relations. The analysis of these factors refers either to capabilities of single actors, such as trade union’s power resources and internal politics (Kornelakis and Voskeritsian, 2018), or to structural conditions, such as the public discourse (Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou, 2014) and decentralised industrial relations, assuming that traditional and other collective actors can find in their mutual position of weakness the space for cooperation (Fine and Bartley, 2019).

Hypothetically, the difficulties in understanding the implications of the relations between trade unions and social movements could be explained by the inherent fluidity of the latter. However, when the literature on the relations between unions and other institutionalised collective actors is considered, the picture does not change, and the research is still scarce. Behrens (2004) – and later Barry and Wilkinson (2011) in this journal – urge researchers to focus on employer organisations and show how mutual dependence of trade unions and employer organisations

shape the industrial relations field. Nevertheless, this call has not been heard, with a few exceptions (Brandl and Lehr, 2019; Gooberman et al., 2018).

Focusing on the specific category of SSE, Jansen (2020) analyses various types of organisations representing them, such as trade unions, employer organisations and new freelancer associations, but his interest is mainly in explaining differences in the patterns of membership. Osnowitz (2007), in her very rich text about a freelancers' association, reaches the conclusion that the proliferation of non-standard work calls for collaboration across organisations, but she does not develop this finding further as it is the outcome of her grounded investigation, including the failure of the establishment of these relations. Wynn (2015) also suggests studying alternative forms of SSE representation outside of unions, while at the same time emphasising that this is outside of the scope of his study, mainly focused on trade unions.

Within the debate on inter-organisational relations, an interesting angle is chosen by Meardi and colleagues (2021), who show how claims of diverse actors can interact and dialectically reinforce or silence each other. In doing so, they express the need to conceive representation of all workers in a more political rather than legal institutionalist sense, using the concept of 'representative claims' developed by Seward (2006). By focusing on the interactions between different representative claims, this approach moves towards exploring the interactions between unions and other collective actors and shows how they shape the industrial relations field.

A perspective attentive to the relations between traditional actors and other actors is also proposed by Smith (2021), who, drawing on Alberti and Però's work (Alberti and Però, 2018; Però, 2020), conceptualises the UK labour movement as a 'community of practice' showing how sharing strategies, knowledge and resources across organisational boundaries can enhance the synergy between different types of union. Bondy (2021) points out instead that the research on inter-organisational relations – so far conducted mainly in decentralised contexts – is also relevant in centralised or corporatist industrial relations systems. By presenting the case of

Israel, the concept of ‘conflictual complementarity’ is proposed to highlight the challenge new actors pose for trade unions’ traditional dominance and the important role of interactions as a driver of change also in contexts of centralised or corporatist industrial relations.

In sum, so far only a few studies on inter-organisational relations (Bondy, 2021; Meardi et al., 2021; Smith, 2021) have identified elements of interdependence between both traditional and other collective actors and thus go beyond a strategic understanding of these relations. This study takes the interdependence of collective actors as a departure point and focuses on their interactions to analyse their influence on discourses, practices, and institutions of workers’ representation.

### **Inter-organisational relations within a strategic action field: The concept of ‘subfield’**

The sociological theory connecting discourses, practices, and relations between actors considerably advanced with Bourdieu’s theory of social fields (Bourdieu, 1984). However, in this approach, relations are considered as ‘structural relations’ corresponding to ‘objective positions’ of interacting actors (Abbott, 2020: 38). Sympathetically, but critically to Bourdieu’s work, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) developed the theory of ‘strategic action field’ with the ambition to take into account also the actors’ agency (Crossley, 2021). They define a strategic action field as:

a constructed meso-level social order in which actors (which can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 9).

While highlighting shared understandings, relations and rules, however, the strategic action field theory does not specifically address how change actually occurs within a specific field.

Zietsma and colleagues (2017), in their literature review of field types and conditions, note that ‘change has become a constant and enduring dynamic’ (2017: 409). Nevertheless, as they claim, the analysis is often restricted to an evolutionary understanding of fields based on time passed, epitomised using lifecycle labels, such as ‘emerging’ or ‘mature’, assuming linear and irreversible progression to an equilibrium. The authors instead identify more nuanced patterns of change and suggest moving beyond a concept of ‘change as disruption’ (Zietsma et al., 2017: 410). In particular, if a field is composed of actors in networks of relationships and of an institutional infrastructure in which they are embedded, a more nuanced approach to field requires increased attention to which elements in a field change and to what extent they change.

In response to this call, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2021) conceptualise particular types of field development that do not originate from a direct challenge to existing logics and associated practices, but it is rather a process of a subfield differentiating itself from a parent field. More specifically, they identify three processes of ‘endogenous subfield development’ – new opportunities, inter- and intra-subfield networking, and distinction – which shape the development of the subfield’s institutional infrastructure, that is to say new categories and organisational models, relational channels and organisational practices, as well as separate governance arrangements. The analysis of these processes and of the differentiation of the institutional infrastructure allows for the identification of the emergence, development, and consolidation of a subfield. These conditions of subfield’s development are nevertheless ‘recursively’ (and non-linearly) interconnected in a possible series of ‘feedback loops’ around the central element of relations between actors (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2021: 1071-1072).

For instance, intra-subfield networking allows subfield members to develop distinct organisational practices, which in turn facilitates focusing on new opportunities, and the distinction process reinforces intra- and inter-field networking as it produces new communication platforms.

Compared to Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) institutionalist understanding of relations, to indicate the recursive nature of the process of field partitioning, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2021) move the field theory debate towards a more interactionist conceptualisation of relations. To further emphasise this point, this study considers industrial relations systems as social structures that consist of actual interactional ties, networks of relations and interdependences between interacting social actors. It then investigates how the interactions of traditional and new collective actors representing SSE shape the discourses and practices of SSE representation and the institutional infrastructure of the industrial relations systems in the three European countries studied.

### **Case studies and methods**

This study is based on a broader multi-sited and cross-national ethnography (Hannerz, 2003) conducted in six European countries (Murgia et al., 2020). It focuses on the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovakia, selected because of their different degree of complexity in relation to the institutional infrastructure embedding the representation of employees and employers, traditionally considered as the main actors in industrial relations systems. Hence, the three countries were identified because of their different institutional and regulatory contexts, where the study investigated how the interplay between the levels of single collective actors, inter-organisational relations, and the traditional industrial relations institutions shape the representation of SSE.

Research included six months of extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted within the headquarters and some local branches of unions, employer organisations and SSE associations. The fieldwork was carried out between July and December 2018 in Italy and Slovakia, and between March and August 2019 in the Netherlands. In the following period, the researchers remained in contact with the studied organisations and continued to collect data to prepare for

the second ethnographic fieldwork planned in Autumn 2020, in the case of Italy and Slovakia, and in Spring 2021, in the case of the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, although becoming more decentralised in recent decades, industrial relations are still characterised by a high concentration of interests on the side of both labour and employers (Mundlak, 2020). This is matched by strong institutionalised tripartite (Economic and Social Council) and bipartite (Foundation of Labour) institutions that affect political decision-making. In this study, the researcher followed the main trade unions *Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV)*, *Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond (CNV)*, *Vakcentrale voor professionals (VCP)* and *De Unie*, represented in the tripartite. Alongside these, the organisations studied included: *Platform Zelfstandige Ondernemers (PZO)*, a platform for the self-employed affiliated to the main employer federation *VNO-NCW*, which also participates in the tripartite; plus *ZZZP Nederland* and *Vereniging van Zelfstandigen Zonder Personeel (VZZP)*, two self-employed associations operating outside of the tripartite. Based on the suggestions of the research participants, the researcher also contacted experts from diverse platforms raising awareness about solo self-employment, such as *ikwordzzper.nl*, *ZiPconomy*, and *Werkvereniging*.

In Italy, industrial relations have become increasingly fragmented with the decrease of concentration of interests on both the labour and employer sides (Pulignano et al., 2018). The tripartite structure is used only occasionally depending on the national government and its strength. This increases the pluralist and competitive dynamics of the Italian industrial relations system. In this study, the researcher followed the three confederal trade unions – *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL)*, *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL)*, and *Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL)* – as well as the *Associazione Consulenti del Terziario Avanzato (ACTA)*, an SSE association that labels itself as quasi-union. Moreover, information was also collected from *Coordinamento Libere Associazioni*

Professionalisti (CoLAP) (the umbrella association of independent professionals), Confprofessionisti (the umbrella association of SSE in regulated professions) and Confassociazioni (the umbrella association of SSE in non-regulated professions).

In Slovakia, there is a centralised tripartite structure; however, it has been described by various authors as ‘illusory’ (Ost, 2000) or as a ‘political shell’ (Pollert, 1999), with a low concentration of interests on both labour and employer sides, resulting in the Slovak industrial relations system being decentralised. Indeed, it can be characterised as legalistic or ‘statist’ system (Kohl and Platzer, 2007), with strong influence from labour legislation, and with a main orientation towards government. In this study, the focus was on the main trade union confederation, Konfederácia Odborových Zväzov Slovenskej republiky (KOZ), which represents the labour side in the tripartite. Regarding other collective actors, the researcher followed the Union of Sole-traders and Chamber of Sole-traders – with sole-traders being the legal status of the majority of SSE in Slovakia – both represented in the tripartite through umbrella employer organisations. Information was also collected from the Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders, the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, and the semi-public Slovak Business Agency.

Access to the organisations were negotiated, in all countries, both with the management and with members placed in different positions within the organisations. In all three countries, researchers were allowed to participate in public and (when possible) private meetings, co-working spaces (when present), public events, demonstrations, and pickets, and to conduct informal interviews. They were also provided with a range of materials intended for internal and external use, such as annual reports or internal studies. When participant observation was not possible, interviews with members placed in different positions were carried out – 14 interviews were realised in the Netherlands, 14 in Italy and 21 in Slovakia. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a common interview guide developed before the

fieldwork and refined during the research. The guide was divided into three main sections: organisational discourses on SSE; characteristics of members; and practices of representation.

The study managed to achieve a thorough, formative, exclusive engagement with the fields and a high quality of relationships with informants, and therefore was able to portray the networks of local and translocal relationships between the organisations studied and the formal and informal patterns of collaboration and competition. The fact that, thanks to previously conducted studies, researchers were already familiar with most of the organisations gave them additional credibility and the opportunity to reactivate previously established contacts. Moreover, while conducting the fieldwork, all researchers were hosted as visiting scholars in local universities or research centres, and they could then rely on a network of local experts who could further facilitate their access to the organisations studied.

Both the field notes and the interviews were conducted in English, Italian, Czech and Slovak, and then digitised in English, to make all the collected data available to the whole research team. The monolingual texts were shared via a remotely accessible server every two weeks, to also allow post-data collection based on collective conversations and reflection. The data analysis followed an inductive approach. In particular, a thematic analysis was applied to each set of qualitative research material using Atlas.ti. This method involved the iterative reading of each set of texts (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013), organised by country, to identify relevant themes. During the analysis, it emerged that the organisations studied made sense of their discourses and practices of SSE representation in relation to other collective actors. Therefore, the study focused on the inter-organisational relations, which were then analysed to find patterns of commonalities and differences across countries.

## **Findings**

## *The Netherlands*

In the second half of the 1990s, policies to foster self-employment stimulated the rise of SSE in the Netherlands. The first SSE association, VZZP, was created in 1995, and the first trade union for SSE – FNV Zelfstandigen – was founded in 1999. Its former representative explained that some FNV unionists saw solo self-employment as a unique opportunity.

There was this group of visionaries who said, well, it's the ultimate emancipation of the worker, no boss, but being your own boss. And so that's how they started FNV for the self-employed.

From the beginning, the union was affiliated to the main trade union federation FNV, but the relationship was often ambivalent because of diverging opinions on the importance of SSE representation. Furthermore, in 2000, FNV created a specific union branch for the SSE in the construction industry called FNV ZBo. In 2005, the other main trade union federation, CNV, created a unit, CNV Zelfstandigen, and began to cooperate with ZZP Nederland, founded in 2005 as a website with a helpdesk to provide information to SSE.

On the side of employer organisations, in 2002 a group of IT professionals launched the platform PZO, supported from the beginning by the main employer organisations VNO-NCW and MKB Nederland. As explained by a PZO representative, employer organisations wanted to strengthen their position in representing SSE.

VNO-NCW is the lobby for big enterprises, MKB for family firms, middle and small, and we are for the SSE. So, in this sense, VNO-NCW and MKB would not be taken seriously if they say, you know, we are representatives of the SSE.

Hence, especially from the 2000s onwards, new actors, such as VZZP and ZZP Nederland, with their individualised services, began to compete with traditional actors for the new opportunity to represent SSE. Therefore, the main Dutch unions and employer organisations adapted their institutional infrastructures to recruit SSE. The interactions between traditional and new actors

led to the convergence of practices that became similar across organisations, such as discounts on health and disability insurance, legal and fiscal advice for their members, and individual support and training. Despite competition over membership, in the sphere of political influence, the organisations strengthened their relations and often cooperated. A PZO representative explained this mix of competition and cooperation as part of a strategy:

There was no hostility there, sometimes there was... you have different interests, but on a personal and organisational level you just cooperate sometimes and sometimes not, depending on the interest. It's a sort of strategy.

In 2009, the increased visibility of SSE mediated by these organisations led the government to ask the tripartite Economic and Social Council for advice, and in 2010, the Council, in cooperation with the representative organisations, including both VZZP and ZZP Nederland, created the first comprehensive policy document about SSE as a specific category of workers in the Netherlands. In the same year, both FNV Zelfstandigen and PZO gained one seat each in the Council.

After 2010, the representation of SSE thus became formally more stable with the gain of two seats in the Economic and Social Council, however, the relations between different actors evolved dynamically. In 2015, the largest FNV federal unions merged into one union with 900,000 members, to strengthen its voice, with a clear organisation by sectors. FNV ZBo chose to become an independent organisation called Zelfstandigen Bouw, representing SSE in the construction industry, and became a relevant actor in the following years. Then, in 2017, FNV Zelfstandigen – which up to that time had been affiliated to FNV – merged with FNV and became one of its branches. The merger was seen by other actors, especially ZZP Nederland, as a decision of FNV Zelfstandigen to represent employees rather than SSE.

Their opinion shifted from being pro-entrepreneur to pro-employee, so they now are more focused on how to protect entrepreneurs with low income... to not being

entrepreneurs anymore. They want to arrange that an entrepreneur is more expensive than an employee.

In fact, in the 2010s, FNV increased its pressure to regulate solo self-employment but claimed to also represent 'entrepreneurs'. A representative of FNV Zelfstandigen declared that they organised all SSE whose identity of being self-employed is more important than their specific profession. In numbers, this related to 10,000 SSE, while in the other sectoral branches of the union there were a further 15,000 SSE members.

At the same time, ZZP Nederland claimed to differentiate itself from both 'pro-employer' PZO and 'pro-employee' FNV Zelfstandigen by supporting genuine SSE:

This is a big difference with FNV Zelfstandigen and PZO: they look after the lobbying, we are most of the time busy with making the SSE successful.

However, the same ZZP Nederland representative claimed that they agreed with unions in that 'people should not be pushed into entrepreneurship because of fiscal advantage.' ZZP Nederland, indeed, did not want to generalise the problems of vulnerable SSE to the whole population of SSE.

If we solve the situation on the bottom of the pay scale, it is easier to focus on real entrepreneurs. Now, the discussion is blurred.

At the time of the fieldwork, ZZP Nederland had around 45,000 members with the goal to reach 100,000 members in 2022, which would make them 'the most representative actor for the government', in the words of its director. ZZP Nederland was in close cooperation with PZO, which had 20,000 members. However, PZO was more open to the collaboration with the FNV Zelfstandigen than ZZP Nederland, because they were both part of the Economic and Social Council.

This development of inter-organisational relations significantly shaped the institutional framework. In 2019, the Dutch government, together with social partners, reached an agreement over the delicate issue of obligatory disability insurance for SSE. The negotiation involved both FNV Zelfstandigen and PZO, but excluded ZZP Nederland, which did not accept the agreement. A representative of PZO, however, pointed out that the most difficult part of the negotiation would come in the near future, when the concrete proposal must be developed. In his view, it could trigger a broader change in the industrial relations system.

That means that the traditional way of operating is going to progress into something new... but how it will be done, it's not sure, if in the Economic and Social Council, in the Foundation of Labour, or there would be an independent platform... this is still under discussion.

The same representative claimed that this negotiation must also involve ZZP Nederland and other smaller but active actors representing SSE, because without them the process would lack full legitimacy. This negotiation was indeed seen as a sort of precedent for future policy making regarding SSE.

A sign of this consolidation of SSE representation, and at the same time of its distinction from the representation of both employees and employers, can be seen in the emergence, in October 2020, of a new collective actor – Vereniging Zelfstandigen Nederland (VZN, United Self-Employed Netherlands) – composed of ZZP Nederland, Zelfstandigen Bouw, the entrepreneur association ONL, and SoloPartners, the association of SSE in healthcare, which was later joined by the SSE association Het Ondernemerscollectief, partly a successor of VZZP. The membership of VZN reached 100,000 SSE, as made explicit in their manifesto. Besides FNV Zelfstandigen and PZO, VZN therefore became the third actor engaged in SSE representation, then starting to work on securing a seat in the Economic and Social Council.

## *Italy*

In the late 1990s, the Italian confederal trade unions reacted to the rise of non-standard work and created separate units to represent workers – including SSE – framed mostly as ‘atypical’: NIdiL within CGIL, FELSA within CISL and UIL-Temp within UIL. This was related to the fact that the issue of non-standard work within Italian trade unions was framed in terms of precarity, and the SSE considered in need of representation were bogus SSE. The separate units of ‘atypical’ workers within unions had rather difficult relationships with traditional branches and did not develop distinctive strategies to approach workers, as recognised by a CGIL representative:

Introducing new topics also means redefining the internal balance of representation.

Very often it’s a problem related to the relationship between insiders and outsiders; the former have a weight in the organisation while the latter do not have it.

Also because of this lack of representation, ACTA – the first national association of freelancers – was founded in 2004, and openly self-identified as a quasi-union. This reflected the effort to highlight the existence of the distinct category of SSE and to emphasise the need for their collective representation. During a public debate, a member of ACTA described the complex position of SSE:

In the situation of weakness towards the market, being part of an organisation that protects freelancers is a way to strengthen the position of freelancers in the market. In this sense, ACTA is experimenting with new ways to aggregate freelancers [...]. In other words, tackling the market collectively means being stronger than tackling it individually.

Over the years, the advocacy of ACTA increased the visibility of this status in Italy. In this period, the contacts with trade unions were difficult, as one of the founding members of ACTA described:

At the beginning, we, and particularly me, I had a lot of meetings with trade unions. They knew almost nothing about solo self-employment. [...] Probably, as we realised, to understand the situation of freelancers, you must have experience of freelancing yourself.

It was only in the late 2000s that trade unions decided to take action on solo self-employment. In 2009, CGIL supported the creation of the so-called ‘Council of Professions’, conceived as a facilitator of communication with existing SSE associations, such as ACTA, Conprofessioni, Confassociazioni, and CoLAP. The declared goal was to collect information from other better-informed interest organisations and facilitate a dialogue and possible common actions with other collective actors.

Participation in the Council varied over time and some of the major actors, such as ACTA – despite their willingness to engage in a dialogue – preferred not to join an exclusively union project. From its perspective, the union arrived too late to engage in SSE representation. Although this led to varied participation, the strengthened relations between trade unions and other collective actors led them to acknowledge the specificity of SSE, as explained in an interview with a CGIL representative:

The Council has been created to think, in a structured way, about self-employment [...] Considering the multitude of employment contracts and working conditions, the concept of ‘atypical’ no longer makes sense. Even the term ‘precarity’ is not useful anymore to define this varied world.

The more nuanced framing of SSE stimulated trade unions to rethink their strategies and organisational structures with the purpose of making them more adapted to this category of workers. For instance, unions developed new practices, such as addressing freelancers in coworking spaces. Moreover, in 2018, CGIL replaced the trade union association Agenquadri with the new branch Apiqa – focused on both dependent and self-employed ‘professionals’ –

which also inherited the work done by the ‘Council of Professions’, although at the time of the fieldwork it was not yet clear how the union wanted to reactivate the network built in 2009. CISL also created, in 2015, the SSE community vIVAce! and decided in the following years to transform it from an online community into physical local contact points, especially in big cities, to support local initiatives for SSE. Similarly, UIL decided to extend their services to SSE, including provision of legal and taxation advice.

As far as relations between trade unions and other collective actors are concerned, trade unions progressively started to invite SSE associations and employer organisations to their initiatives and, vice versa, employer organisations and SSE associations started opening their initiatives to unions and other collective actors, such as the Basic Income Network Italy. The intensification of these relations was initially dictated mainly by pragmatic needs, as explained by a vIVAce! representative:

Alliances and relationships always develop on a real pragmatic level, when there is a specific topic on which to discuss and take a position [...] When there are no concrete or urgent issues to discuss, it is extremely difficult to devote time to networking and building alliances.

Hence, despite often parallel or competitive strategies, the organisations became aware of each other and of the new field of representation concerning SSE. In this process, the government played the role of an external factor. According to research participants, during the work that resulted in the 2013 law on non-regulated professions, the consultation launched by the government did not lead to the consolidation of inter-organisational relations due to divergent positions. A few years later, in 2017, the consultation for the regulation dealing with social protection and taxation of SSE instead created the conditions for an informal coordination between different organisations. Each presented its position, but at the same time made an effort

to find a common agreement. This creation of channels was described by a representative of CISL as follows:

I've become a good friend of \*\*\* [*ACTA member*]. As with all things, everyone needs time to understand who's in front of you. Right at the beginning, when we created vIVAace!, she was suspicious. She probably wondered what I wanted to do and if we intended to occupy their space.

Interesting and symbolic evidence of these evolving connections were also observed in common campaigns. For example, in 2019, CGIL, CISL, Confprofessioni and ACTA formulated a common petition for the end of non-paid consultation services solicited by public authorities. In addition, the National Economic and Labour Council set up the Council on self-employment and independent professions, in which all the actors involved in SSE representation were invited to participate. In 2019, this new body urged the Ministry of Labour to activate the permanent technical table on self-employment, which was envisaged by Law 81/2017 but never started. In 2020, a proposal for a law on the protection of SSE was also presented to Parliament, but the activities of the Council subsequently came to a halt.

### ***Slovakia***

In Slovakia, despite the increase of SSE in the 2000s, trade unions dealt with the topic of solo self-employment only sporadically. However, individual initiatives of unionists or people who would contact unions to represent SSE regularly appeared. For instance, in 2008, the Austrian trade union confederation invited the Slovak confederation to work on a joint project on the support of Slovak care workers working as tradeswomen in Austria. After the launch, the project leader in Slovakia, although aware of the specificities related to migrant work, realised that their platform based on lobbying and individual legal and financial counselling to tradeswomen could work as a 'pilot project', as he called it, for dealing with 'quasi-traders' or

‘forced sole-traders’, and proposed this idea to the Slovak confederation. However, he realised that the confederation functioned as a ‘back-office’ rather than a coordinating unit and concluded that there should have been a separate union for SSE:

In principle, members are not members of the confederation, members are members of unions. So KOZ may have a political line, but you need to have someone else, a separate, united union that decides autonomously, which says: ‘yes, we are going to do something like that’.

Similarly, but at the confederal level, around 2013 a group of occupational health and safety experts wanted to create a union with individual membership for a symbolic fee, to cover the increasing number of SSE and to increase union membership. They were, however, refused any financial support from the start, so the initiative had to stop. A few years later, an organiser of a new union in the IT sector was asked by a representative of the confederation to attend the ETUC workshop on representing SSE, which took place in Amsterdam in 2018, on behalf of the confederation. She agreed with the condition that her report would have served as a basis for building a union for SSE in Slovakia.

And so, I agreed that I would go to Amsterdam, just to avoid being non-present, and that if I came across something, it would be applied in Slovakia. I got an answer, ‘yes, of course, bring the report and then we can build on that.’ But then it died. I have urged it several times that I want to present the report, but nothing has happened since.

Apart from these examples, there were also contacts from the workers’ side. The representative of the biggest confederal union in Slovakia – mainly organising workers in the manufacturing industry but increasingly moving into services such as transport and commerce – said in a meeting that they were contacted by media and entertainment workers, who were mostly SSE. She explained that the union status did not allow individual membership, that she was aware

that this could be changed, but was not able to imagine what ‘systematic support’ they could offer to these workers.

They have their own professional associations, and the task of these associations is to represent the interests of these subjects. They are on a commercial basis.

To summarise the union approach, the vice-chairwoman of the confederation concluded that trade unions reacted very slowly to new forms of work. And because ‘politics and membership belong to them, not the confederation,’ the effort to organise SSE would have required the creation of an autonomous platform. This was, however, difficult for the confederation, although she knew that ETUC had set organising SSE as one of its priorities.

On the employers’ side, three umbrella organisations were present. As highlighted for trade unions, the representation was highly fragmented, and the fragmentation also concerned the representation of sole-traders, the legal status of most SSE. Although all three Slovak sole-traders’ organisations – Slovak Association of Sole-traders, Slovak Chamber of Sole-traders, and Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders – had long criticised all employer organisations for representing only the interests of ‘big employers’, they did not join forces due to historic grievances, but instead relied on their own individual channels to influence the government. As a result, the sole-traders associations were competing for the same membership, and targeted mainly craftworkers, such as painters or plumbers. This narrow vision of solo self-employment complicated their communication with public authorities as well as other actors because they were considered as speaking only for a segment of SSE. Moreover, their weak position vis-a-vis employer organisations resulted in framing this group close to ‘entrepreneurs’.

The only organisation taking a distinctive position, at least partially, was the Slovak Association of Sole-traders. It mainly targeted the professional aspects of craftworking, such as safety regulations, while the other organisations mainly promoted legal deregulation to support

entrepreneurship. Until 2016, the association was a member of one of the umbrella employer organisations. This membership allowed its representatives to participate in meetings of the tripartite and to meet trade unions representatives. Even though the association, in the opinion of unionists, behaved as if it represented the employers rather than the sole-traders, a union representative explained that during their rare interactions they were able to find some common points, which helped to improve the position of sole-traders, especially in the construction sector. The interviewed representative gave examples about bogus self-employment, safety regulations or public procurement conditions. In 2016, the association ceased to be a member of the umbrella employer organisation following a conflict, and thus stopped attending the tripartite. Even individual contacts with trade unions disappeared, which clarified why during the fieldwork the unionists framed the interactions with sole-traders' representatives only as something from the past. However, the association continued to focus on the enforcement of the regulatory framework for self-employment. In 2017, it was the only industrial relations actor supporting taxi drivers in their effort to regulate Uber in Bratislava. In the same way, in 2018, it successfully lobbied for the move of the painters' trade from free back to regulated trade, as it was before deregulation in the 2000s. Moreover, in 2019, after much effort and negotiation with the other two employer organisations, the Slovak association of sole-traders managed to join the newest umbrella organisation of employers. The future evolution of this relationship will show whether this will mean increased attention on SSE. In any case, in 2020, their openness to cooperation with the government and the effort to enforce the regulatory framework for SSE slightly disrupted the strictly entrepreneurial framing of SSE based on deregulation. This was also related to new organisational practices, such as daily online contact with sole-traders. At the same time, it is also worth pointing out that, after the arrival of the new liberal-conservative government in 2020, the trade union confederation left the tripartite after a conflict, probably once more reducing the possibility of building a space in-between the representation of employees and employers.

## **Discussion**

In the Netherlands, the competition for the membership of SSE led all the organisations studied to adopt strategies, positions, and organisational models similar to those initially developed mainly by SSE associations, such as the personalised services of insurance, advice, and training. At the same time, the competition over membership was complemented by a combination of competition and cooperation in the sphere of political influence, and by the development of SSE representation as a subfield of the 'parent field' of the more established representation of employees and employers. For instance, traditional actors and SSE associations cooperated in the creation of the first comprehensive policy document on SSE, which later led to the assignment of two seats in the Economic and Social Council to SSE representatives, who were nevertheless connected to traditional actors of Dutch industrial relations. At the same time, while the assignment of the two seats strengthened the consolidation of SSE representation and was the result of cooperation, it also strained relations between traditional and other collective actors. During the fieldwork, in fact, the newly created umbrella organisation of SSE associations was pushing for a change in the institutional infrastructure in order to obtain a seat in the Economic and Social Council to an SSE representative not necessarily associated with trade unions or employer organisations.

In Italy, in the 2000s, trade unions hesitated to represent SSE, but the increase of this category of workers as well as the presence of other collective actors that were starting to represent them made the gap in their representation more visible. In 2009, the main trade union confederation supported the creation of a forum which facilitated a communication with existing SSE associations. Although the interactions between actors alternated from cooperative to rather antagonistic attitudes, they allowed a shift in relationships from individual connections to a more regular inter-organisational dialogue, which stimulated the emergence of SSE as a specific segment of the workforce to be represented, and the adjustment of organisational models and

specific organisational practices to address these workers. The cooperation resulted in the enactment of a law on self-employment in 2017, which did not fully satisfy anyone, but was at least the result of a debate between all the actors involved. Hence, although SSE representation did not have an institutionalised governance mechanism as in the Netherlands, the subfield of SSE representation was developing during the fieldwork, as can be seen in the joint campaigns of traditional and new collective actors.

In Slovakia, the associations of sole-traders failed to transform their ad hoc interactions with traditional actors into continuous and more stable relations, and this prevented the emergence of a subfield of SSE representation. In this context, the trade union confederation was not able to integrate individual initiatives into organisational adaptation, and the main employer organisations did not take SSE representation as a new opportunity, focusing only on their traditional targets. However, the research identified what could be defined as a ‘potential subfield’ of SSE representation. Indeed, the topic of SSE representation was present at individual level but, differently from the Netherlands and Italy, it was discussed among organisations only occasionally.

In sum, the analysis pointed out the interdependence of traditional and new actors in the development of SSE collective representation, and more specifically, that their strengthening relations stimulated its emergence, although to a different extent, in all three national contexts, from more centralised and consolidated industrial relations systems (the Netherlands) to more fragmented (Italy) and decentralised ones (Slovakia). The development was characterised by differentiation rather than direct challenge to existing logics (and associated discourses and practices) of existing industrial relations, therefore it occurred as the emergence of a subfield of its parent field of classical forms of employee and employer representation. At the same time, the development and diversification of this subfield also put pressure on the existing industrial relations infrastructure and required its change. In the Netherlands, it facilitated the consolidation of inter-organisational relations, but in a dynamic way that could not be taken for

granted, as illustrated by the ongoing activity to integrate a ‘third actor’ in between ‘pro-employee’ and ‘pro-employer’ representatives in the Economic and Social Council. In Italy, in the absence of consolidated institutions of industrial relations with respect to SSE representation, the stabilisation of relations required a greater effort from both traditional and new actors, who were however able to create new relational channels, which in turn stimulated the development of the subfield of SSE representation. In Slovakia, the lack of stable relations between traditional and other collective actors precluded the formation of a real subfield, but during the fieldwork the formation of a ‘potential subfield’ of SSE representation, albeit still based on individual connections, was nevertheless observed.

## **Conclusions**

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, by conceptualising industrial relations systems as always-in-process and consisting of relations not only between traditional incumbent actors but also with collective actors outside of the institutional infrastructure of industrial relations systems, it contributes to the debate on how the representation of under-represented workers takes shape. The study does not overlook the level of individual actors, such as resources and internal politics (Kornelakis and Voskeritsian, 2018), or structural conditions, such as public discourse and the level of consolidation of industrial relations (Bondy, 2021; Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou, 2014) as relevant elements in this process. However, it shows that to understand how this representation is developing, conceptualising it as a subfield of traditional industrial relations fields, it is also necessary to consider the interactions between traditional and new collective actors beyond their strategies and beyond the level of consolidation of industrial relations systems. Such a perspective also allows for an analysis of stable and consolidated industrial relations systems in a processual way and an understanding of how they function in practice and their potential transformation.

Second, and related to the previous point, by considering inter-organisational relations as a central element of field-level change, the study also contributes to the theory of fields. In particular, it empirically shows that the process of field partitioning constitutes an important pathway for field-level change that goes beyond an evolutionary understanding of field development and related understanding of change mainly as a disruption (Zietsma et al., 2017; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2021). Comparative organisational ethnography is particularly suitable to examine change as it occurs within and between organisations, in real-time and over an extended time. Such an approach allows the capture of interactions and relations with their ambivalences while more institutionalist perspectives would rather frame them as based either on a conflict or cooperation. This is especially relevant to understand the interactions between traditional and new collective actors in transforming industrial relations systems. As pointed out, the process that results in a subfield does not necessarily open a conflict with the parent field, and first-hand ethnographic observations of formal – and especially informal – interactions between different collective actors are a privileged research tool for capturing the different and more nuanced dimensions of field-level change and how it happens in its making.

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