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Why Do some Labour Alliances Succeed in Politicizing Europe across Borders? A Comparison of the Right2Water and Fair Transport European Citizens' Initiatives

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Abstract

Under what conditions can organized labour successfully politicize the European integration process across borders? To answer this question, we compare the European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs) of two European trade union federations: EPSU's successful Right2Water ECI and ETF's unsuccessful Fair Transport ECI. Our comparison reveals that actor-centred factors matter – namely, unions' ability to create broad coalitions. Successful transnational labour campaigns, however, also depend on structural conditions, namely, the prevailing mode of EU integration pressures faced by unions at a given time. Whereas the Right2Water ECI pre-emptively countered commodification attempts by the European Commission in water services, the Fair Transport ECI attempted to ensure fair working conditions *after* most of the transport sector had been liberalized. *Vertical* EU integration attempts that commodify public services are thus more likely to generate successful *transnational* counter-movements than the *horizontal* integration pressures on wages and working conditions that followed earlier successful EU liberalization drives.

Keywords: European integration; governance; public services; trade unions; social movements; direct democracy

Introduction

We know that EU integration has become more politicized and that politicization patterns differ across countries (Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). We also know that different actors politicize EU integration in different ways. Whereas centre- and far-right political parties justified their Yes and No vote, respectively, in past EU referendum debates in culturalist terms, socio-economic frames continue to dominate EU politicization attempts by left-wing parties and trade unions (Béthoux *et al.*, 2018; Hoeglenger, 2016; Statham and Trenz, 2013). What has not yet been explained is the unequal success of transnational EU politicization campaigns by similar actors.

This article assesses the drivers of successful transnational action, based on a comparison of two similar transnational EU politicization attempts, namely, the European citizens' initiatives (ECIs) of the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) and of the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF). Their uneven success is striking, as these two sectorial European trade union federations (ETUFs) share similar histories. They also face very similar challenges in relation to the need to overcome different 'worlds of contestation' across different regions of Europe (Kriesi *et al.*, 2020; Rone, 2020; Bieler and Erne, 2014); this means that national differences cannot explain the unequal success of the two ECIs. Our study of these two *transnational* campaigns therefore goes beyond the methodological nationalism of EU politicization studies that employ traditional country-by-country research designs. Given its analytical focus on meso-level dynamics, our study also complements existing politicization studies based on micro-level survey research or macro-level media analysis (Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019).

We investigate the drivers that can lead to ETUFs' successful transnational counter-movements in response to EU integration pressures. EPSU coordinated the first successful ECI on the Right2Water in 2012–13. ETF followed suit in 2015 with its Fair Transport ECI but failed to collect the necessary signatures of 'one million citizens who are nationals from a significant number of member states' (Treaty on European Union, Art. 11.4). Both ECIs are examples of transnational mobilizations by similar actors, targeting EU policies. They differ, however, in their outcomes, and we show that two factors can explain the difference: the first relates to agency, the second is structural. In terms of agency, EPSU was acting as the centre of a social movement coalition built around the defence of public services (Della Porta, 2015; Parks, 2015; Della Porta and Caiani, 2009). Structurally, the sectors in which the two ETUFs are active face different—vertical or horizontal—European integration pressures (Erne, 2019). After the earlier *vertical* EU laws liberalizing one transport modality after another (Héritier, 1997), *horizontal* market integration pressures now dominate the transport sector. This hinders transnational action, as horizontal integration puts workers and unions in competition with each other. By contrast, the Commission's more recent *vertical* liberalization attempts in the water sector provided crystallization points for successful transnational collective action. The proximity of the two cases allows us to rule out alternative explanations provided by the existing literature, as outlined below.

In the next section, we show that EU politicization studies can benefit from an approach that places more emphasis on meso-level aspects of politicization. Then, we describe our comparative research design in more detail. We proceed to discuss the actor-centred factors that can explain the different outcomes in the two cases, as opposed to those factors that we can rule out. We repeat the procedure for structural factors. We conclude by summarizing the implications of our findings.

Bringing Transnational Collective Action Back into EU Politicization Studies

The concept of the nationalist backlash dominates the recent history of European integration. In this frame of reference, the main conflict line runs between EU institutions as supranational actors and nationalist political entrepreneurs that mobilize citizens' grievances against the EU (Hutter *et al.*, 2016). Correspondingly, studies on EU politicization tend to follow a procedure that relies on data collection about individual attitudes or protest events reported in national media and then interprets them in the context of specific member states. This approach, while yielding large

datasets and valid cross-country comparisons, leaves us with an insufficient understanding of EU politicization because it systematically underplays the importance of interest groups and social movements in *transnational* EU politicization processes (Erne, 2019; Zürn, 2016).

Like politicization along national or culturalist divides, transnational politicization depends partly on individual, micro-level attitudes. Organizations that operate at the meso level, however, are equally important in structuring the political space. To give a historical example, the emergence of democratic mass politics along societal cleavages within the nation-state was facilitated by ‘organisational networks’ (Bartolini, 2000, p. 26). The meso level, however, is the weak link in EU politicization studies (Zürn, 2016). The bias in the literature towards the study of nationalist backlashes and the relative neglect of the meso level are mutually reinforcing in our view.

Apart from political parties, the organizations that did most to structure political conflict in emerging nation-states were unions (Bartolini, 2000). Despite falling membership numbers, unions are still among the largest political organizations on the continent. What is their role in the *transnational* politicization of the EU? Most contributions to the EU politicization literature give few clues. This tendency to downplay the importance of transnational action is matched by comparative industrial relations scholars’ equally strong analytical bias towards the national level (Almond and Connolly, 2020). Organized labour’s politicization of EU integration is often seen as a one-way street: EU-related pressures come from the outside, and unions react to these, by exploiting the ‘heterogeneity of institutional “power resources”’ that still exist across nation-states (Doellgast *et al.*, 2018, p. 30). Labour mobilizations that escape national silos and aim to build solidarity across borders therefore often fall outside the analytical focus of comparativists in the field.

There are of course exceptions that deal with labour politics from a transnational perspective (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2020; Fox-Hodess, 2017; Erne *et al.*, 2015; Harvey and Turnbull, 2015; Erne, 2008; Anner *et al.*, 2006). Our article advances this line of inquiry by tracing how actor-centred and structural factors interact to shape transnational union campaigns that politicize EU integration. Regarding actor-centred factors, we assess whether unions that pursue broadly defined public interests in alliances with social movements succeed better in building transnational campaigns. Or is it more effective for them to focus on their core interests: advancing their members’ wages and working conditions? For many labour and EU governance scholars, the answer is clear: campaigns that pursue members’ core interests are more likely to succeed (Brookes, 2019; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013).

Regarding structural factors, the novelty of our approach lies in exploring how different modes of European integration affect organized labour’s transnational politicization processes. We distinguish between vertical and horizontal modes of integration and argue that they have different implications for transnational action. Vertical integration refers to direct interventions by a ‘supranational political, legal or corporate authority’ (Erne, 2019, p. 346); horizontal integration means increasing interconnectedness through transnational market pressures. In our view, horizontal integration reinforces the opacity of power relations within transnational capitalism and provides few direct targets for transnational mobilization. Furthermore, horizontal integration does not question social actors’ formal autonomy, but rather triggers competitive tensions between them. By contrast, vertical integration provides tangible opponents and formally aims to ‘undermine social actors’ and local and national institutions’ autonomy’ (Erne, 2019, p. 347). Vertical interventions are easier to politicize, albeit within a limited timeframe, as the impact of vertical intervention (for instance in the case of liberalizing EU legislation) increases horizontal competition in the medium and long term. In short, we argue that horizontal integration constrains transnational labour mobilization, whereas vertical integration acts more as a catalyst for it.

Two Similar Cases of Trade Union-Led European Citizens' Initiatives

A decade after a citizens' movement proposed direct democratic instruments at EU level (Erne *et al.*, 1995), the EU's constitutional convention introduced the ECI into the EU Constitution (Papadopoulos, 2005). After the Constitution's failure, the ECI made its way into the Lisbon Treaty. The ECI provides the possibility for civil society to call upon the Commission to propose legislation. To be successful, an ECI proposal must be endorsed within one year by at least one million EU citizens and must reach a population-specific threshold of signatures in at least seven member states. The ECI Regulation became EU law in April 2012, and over 75 ECIs were registered by the Commission by December 2020. Of those 75, only six initiatives satisfied the EU's requirements and can therefore be considered successful.

Along with environmental organizations, unions became crucial players in ECIs (Weisskircher, 2020).¹ EPSU coordinated the first successful ECI, collecting almost double the required number of signatures and reaching the population-specific threshold in 13 countries. Table 1 compares EPSU's Right2Water campaign with ETF's Fair Transport initiative, which was launched two years later but failed to pass the threshold. The two ECIs also had opposite outcomes in terms of the direction of subsequent EU legislation. In response to the Right2Water ECI, the Commission excluded water services from the scope of the commodifying Concessions Directive. By contrast, ETF failed in its attempt to explicitly include transport workers in the decommodifying revision of the Posted Workers Directive (Riesco-Sanz *et al.*, 2020).

Table 1: Main Features of the Two European Citizens Initiatives.

Main coordinator	EPSU	ETF
Title of the initiative	'Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity'	'Fair Transport Europe – equal treatment for all transport workers'
Time frame (start–closing of collection)	1 Nov 2012–1 Nov 2013	14 Sept 2015–14 Sept 2016
Number of collected signatures	1,839,484	≈200,000
Countries surpassing threshold	Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain	Belgium, Denmark, Sweden

Source: Own compilation based on https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/home_en; Berge *et al.*, 2018; and internal union documents

¹ In 2006, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) launched an informal, pilot ECI on public services (Bouza Garcia and Greenwood, 2014). Union support was also crucial in the Stop TTIP ECI campaign (Greenwood, 2019). The ETUC's section for elderly people (FERPA) also tried to launch an ECI on Lifelong Care, which the Commission refused to register, as in the Stop TTIP case (Conrad and Oleart, 2020). In 2017 however, the General Court of Justice found that the reasons for not registering the Stop TTIP were invalid (Erne and Blaser, 2018).

Research Design

Our research is the result of engagement with the involved actors over many years. This included numerous conversations with unionists and social movement activists, participant observations of their events, and 22 interviews with union officials, employers, and social movement activists. We also use documentary evidence from the two campaigns in the form of press releases, reports, media coverage, internal documents, and academic sources. Our comparison of the two ECI campaigns allows us to assess the drivers of transnational EU politicization processes, which have hardly been captured by existing EU politicization studies. So far, most studies have followed an analytical strategy built on the separation of discrete protest events from long-term campaigning modalities (Hutter *et al.*, 2016). This separation, however, is not warranted here, as collective actions can be confrontational in their demands while still engaging with EU institutions (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009). In fact, direct democratic ECI procedures connect both insider and outsider strategies (Dür and Mateo, 2016). ECIs also require sustained mobilization. We therefore trace them over time at the meso level, instead of assessing single protest events, media articles, or voter opinions at the micro or macro level as typically happens in EU politicization studies (Béthoux *et al.*, 2018; Hoeglenger, 2016; Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Zürn, 2016; Statham and Trenz, 2013). Our research design thus complements existing analytical approaches in the field.

As we have two similar cases that exhibit different outcomes, we apply a comparative method based on the most similar systems design. We use Ragin's qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) approach (2014 [1987]), which moves beyond both the variable-centred quantitative approach and the qualitative case study approach. Quantitative studies assess the explanatory power of variables across many cases, at the cost of a significant reduction of analytical depth. Qualitative case studies enable the in-depth assessment of discrete cases, at the cost of a significant reduction of comparability. Our QCA stands between these two approaches. Like quantitative studies, QCA follows logical procedures that connect hypothetical propositions to empirical evidence. To get deeper insights, each explanatory factor is assessed in the context of the specific case, while the proximity of the cases still enables systematic comparisons.

We derive our explanatory factors from the literature on transnational collective action. To facilitate the analysis, we group them along two dimensions: actor-centred and structural factors. While acknowledging the role of political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1994) or long waves of economic growth and crisis (Kelly 2012 [1998]), most scholars in the field focus on actor-centred explanations. We therefore assess the power of actor-centred explanations, including the organizational history of the two ETUFs and their interactions with allies and the public (Diani and Bison, 2004). However, we must also assess the structural conditions that have influenced the two campaigns. Here, we focus especially on—vertical and horizontal (Erne, 2019)—EU integration pressures that workers were facing, given the unequal spread of the liberalization agenda in these two sectors (Golden *et al.*, 2021; Crespy, 2016; Leiren, 2015).

Subsequently, we list the similarities that cannot explain the different outcomes of the two campaigns and then focus on the differences that can explain them. As we found attributes that differed across the cases but paradoxically favoured the unsuccessful case, we modified the QCA framework to deal with this. Instead of using the terms differences and similarities, we henceforth talk about factors that can explain outcomes and factors that cannot. For example, ETF spent more money on the campaign. This is a difference, but not one that can explain the outcome, as the ETF's initiative eventually failed. The QCA truth table displayed in Table 2 summarises our findings. The differences that should favour the unsuccessful case (ETF) are italicized.

Table 2: Explaining the Different Outcomes of the Two Campaigns - QCA Truth Table

	EPSU Right2water SUCCESSFUL ECI	ETF Fair Transport UNSUCCESSFUL ECI
ACTOR-CENTRED EXPLANATORY FACTORS		
ETUF's organizational history		
Original function as liaison committees	Yes	Yes
Cold war divisions, recently overcome	Yes	Yes
ETUF's organizational features		
Small secretariat	Yes	Yes
High degree of heterogeneity	Yes	Yes
ETUF's track record of transnational activities		
EU lobbying	Yes	Yes
EU social dialogue	Yes	Yes
European industrial action	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
European political protests	Yes	Yes
ECI-specific factors		
Prior experience with ECI	No	No
Financial resources for ECI campaign	<i>€140,000</i>	<i>€322,000</i>
Mobilizing networks		
Inclusive campaigning organization	Yes	No
Broad union–social movement coalitions	Yes	No
Issue framing		
Against privatization & for human rights	Yes	No
Against unfair competition	No	Yes
STRUCTURAL EXPLANATORY FACTORS		
Economic and political structures		
Long waves of economic growth & crisis	N/A ^a	N/A ^a
Presence of political opportunity structures	Yes	Yes
High structural power of workers	Yes	Yes
European integration pressures		
Significant exposure to acute vertical EU integration pressures	Yes	No
Significant exposure to horizontal EU integration pressures	No	Yes

Source: Own compilation. The differences that favour the unsuccessful case are italicized. The factors with high explanatory power are in bold. ^a Not applicable, as both cases happened in the same period

We now proceed to discuss the power of these explanatory factors one by one.

Actor-Centred Factors That Cannot Explain the Unequal Success of the ECIs

Organizational history: Both ETUFs share a similar history. Their predecessors, the Comité syndical des transports de la Communauté européenne (CSTCE) established in 1958 and the European Public Service Committee (EPSC) established in 1978, were set up as mere liaison committees to facilitate the lobbying of EU policymakers (Fischbach-Pyttel, 2017; Crochemore, 2014). The coordination of transnational action thus remained in the hands of national union leaders and global union secretariats,² also as the latter ‘feared losing control to a Brussels office’ (Fischbach-Pyttel, 2017, p. 20). Initially, the EPSC therefore did not have an office but just a letterbox within the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) building. Profound cold war

² That is, the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), the Public Services International (PSI), and communist and Christian trade union internationals.

divisions between unions also weighed on their capacity to act collectively across borders (Gentile, 2016). Unions overcame them only in the late 1990s after the French confederation CGT and its affiliates were eventually admitted to ETUC and its ETUFs (Fischbach-Pyttel, 2017; Crochemore, 2014). The more unions realized the ‘fundamental character of the changes inherent in the Internal Market’ project (Fischbach-Pyttel, 2017, p. 19), the more they also began to see the need to strengthen their ETUFs. This led to their re-launch as EPSU and ETF in 1996 and 1999, respectively (Fischbach-Pyttel, 2017; Crochemore, 2014).

Organizational features: Both ETUFs are associations of associations (Müller and Platzer, 2018), i.e., meta-organizations (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2020) that have national unions as members. This means that neither ETUF has the authority or the ability to reach out directly to the individual members of their affiliates. They also both have affiliates from across Europe; not only from old and new EU member states, but also from states that are not EU members. Nonetheless, they have very small secretariats whose power over the large number of affiliated unions is weak. Between 2008 and 2018, EPSU’s and ETF’s staffing barely increased from 16 to 19 and from 14 to 16 persons, respectively (Müller and Platzer, 2018). This means that their campaigns cannot be conducted top-down by their secretariats (Gajewska, 2009). Their ECI signature collection had to rely on grassroots activity.

Track record of transnational activities: To influence EU policymaking, both ETUFs have deployed insider and outsider strategies (Dür and Mateo, 2016). They lobby EU policymakers directly and conclude sectorial European Social Dialogue agreements with EU-level employer associations. They also organize demonstrations and other forms of contentious action. Both ETUFs, for example, joined the European Social Forums of the global justice movement, unlike ETUC (Upchurch *et al.*, 2009). Both fought against commodifying draft EU laws in their sectors (Leiren and Parks, 2014). EPSU mobilized against Commissioner Bolkestein’s Services Directive that sought to open public services (including water) to transnational competition. EPSU was at the forefront of protests in Brussels and Strasbourg with unprecedented levels of participation. Despite attempts by Bolkestein to tarnish the opposition as xenophobic (Béthoux *et al.*, 2018), EPSU, with support from ETUC, succeeded in having water services removed from the Directive (Crespy, 2016). ETF found itself leading the resistance to transport liberalization in the same period. ETF’s most successful campaign was against the Port Services Directive (PSD), which uniquely is the only EU Directive to be rejected twice following successful transnational mobilizations (Gentile, 2016; Turnbull, 2006). ETF also organized European action days and strikes against succeeding packages of commodifying EU laws, thereby delaying the liberalization of the European railway sector (Crochemore, 2014; Hilal, 2009).

These similarities aside, there is a difference that would suggest that ETF had the edge over EPSU in organizing its ECI. ETF’s repertoire of action against the commodification of transport services included transnational strikes and blockades, whereas EPSU relied on softer protest methods (Crespy, 2016). Given ETF’s experience with contentious actions that require a higher organizational capacity than collecting signatures, the failure of its ECI is remarkable.

ECI-specific factors: Neither organization had prior experience with ECIs. ETF, however, had an advantage in that it invited an EPSU organizer to an internal seminar to learn from its ECI campaign. Another important disparity relates to the budget allocated to the ECI. ETF had a budget of €322,000, which was over double EPSU’s €140,000 budget. The additional funds allowed the hiring of a public affairs agency and a full-time official working solely on the Fair Transport ECI (Interview 7). Notwithstanding contrary expectations (Kohler Koch, 2013) however, campaign finances do not seem to have been that crucial. To summarize, we have identified a list of similarities and differences in the history, constitution, and activities of the two ETUFs that cannot explain the unequal success of their ECIs. To explain this conundrum, we must look elsewhere.

Actor-Centred Factors That Can Explain the Unequal Success of the Two ECIs

Table 2 above indicates actor-centred factors that can explain the different outcomes. It shows that the ETUFs approached the task of mobilizing support for their ECIs very differently. We discuss these differences along two dimensions: mobilizing networks and issue framing.

Mobilizing networks. The way in which the decision was made to launch the campaign differed in the two cases, and this had a lasting impact on mobilizing networks and issue framing (Berge *et al.*, 2018). The Right2Water ECI idea came from within the EPSU secretariat in discussions with social movements active in the sector, whereas the Fair Transport ECI concept had a dual origin. On the one hand, ETF's railway section was concerned about liberalization and privatization in the sector. On the other, Scandinavian transport unions were worried about social dumping in the road haulage sector (Rönngren *et al.*, 2008). The ETF secretariat struggled to bring these separate goals into a single coherent campaign.

ETF did not define itself as a campaigning organization, and this was reflected in how it carried out the initiative (Interview 7 and 10). As noted above, ETF allocated more than twice as much money to its campaign as EPSU did, but EPSU integrated its resources much more effectively into the pre-existing organization. In contrast to ETF, EPSU's communications and campaigning officer coordinated all aspects of its ECI.

To repeat, neither ETF nor EPSU had the power over affiliates to force the collection of signatures. The EPSU campaign, however, could gain momentum in several key countries thanks to local affiliates' links with the EPSU headquarters and the involvement of other social actors. In the Right2Water campaign, social movements and union mobilization networks were closely intertwined. The signature collection was aided by the commitment of grassroots activists who had pre-existing links to unions: 47 per cent of the organizations assisting the collection of signatures in the Right2Water campaign were unions, whereas 53 per cent belonged to the social movements scene, including the water movement, the global justice movement, and environmental movements (Berge *et al.*, 2018, p. 235).

EPSU has long-standing links with water-related social movements and played an active role in the European water movement's formative events in the 2000s, such as the European Social Forum and the Alternative World Water Forum (Moore, 2018; Parks, 2015). Water policies are simultaneously politicized at national, European, and global level (Zürn, 2019). The Right2Water campaign connected municipal initiatives defending water as a common good, country-level movements mobilizing for the inclusion of the right to water in national constitutions, and the global justice movement fighting against privatization across the world (Interviews 5, 9, 15, and 16; Moore, 2018).

The political affiliations of these supportive organizations were diverse. Several accounts mentioned the political versatility of the Right2Water campaign and its ability to move beyond left-right cleavages as an important factor contributing to its success (Bieler, 2021; Berge *et al.*, 2018; Moore, 2018). In contrast to the Fair Transport ECI case, employers were included in the Right2Water coalition. Aqua Publica Europea (APE), the European network of publicly owned water providers, joined the initiative as it identified with the campaign's anti-privatization goals (Interview 13). German public water providers (although not APE members) were also supportive of the campaign (Interviews 17 and 18), to the extent that AquaFed, the International Federation of Private Water Operators (most importantly Veolia and Suez), accused the Right2Water initiative of being an outlet for German public service lobbies.

Finally, the ECI enlisted the support of a group of well-known public figures in their respective member states (Berge *et al.*, 2018). Street-level signature collection campaigns also increased the campaign's visibility in the public sphere. As a result, Frank-Markus Barwasser, the co-host of a satirical political TV show, became aware of the ECI and asked viewers to sign it (Interview 2), mentioning the threat of the looming Concession Directive. Subsequently, the signature collection skyrocketed in both Germany and Austria (Parks, 2015).

To summarize, the Right2Water campaign relied on a dense and diverse web of alliances of union and non-union actors where EPSU served as the hub connecting diverse organizations across different geographical levels and scales. By contrast, the Fair Transport campaign had a much lower density of links outside its ranks. The campaign website provides a list of supporters but mentions only members of the European Parliament who belong to the groups of the Socialists and Democrats, the European Left, or the Greens. All of them come from old member states, which is, as we shall see, quite telling.

Issue framing: The two ECIs also adopted different narrative frames. As stated in the title of the initiative, EPSU's ECI combined the message of anti-privatization with human rights. Such a framing strategy proved successful because it was both specific enough to preserve the momentum after the successful anti-Bolkestein campaign and broad enough to unite actors with diverging ideas on the details of water sector management (Participant observation, EPSU congress, June 2019). By focusing its struggle against privatization, EPSU identified concrete targets against which discontent could be mobilized: the Commission's pro-market agenda and Veolia and Suez, which had benefited most from water services privatization in the past (Hall and Lobina, 2007).

EPSU also developed the details of the other leg of the Right2Water campaign framing, i.e., fighting for water to become a human right. The human right to water has five dimensions: availability, accessibility, acceptability, affordability, and quality (European Parliament, 2015). These dimensions each had concrete relevance for groups of EU citizens. For example, physical accessibility to good quality drinking water and modernized wastewater facilities was an issue in several countries on the EU's southern and eastern periphery. This factor contributed to the balanced popularity of the initiative across member states, with East and West, South and North relatively equally represented.

By contrast, the main objective of the Fair Transport initiative was to fight for fairness and equal treatment for all transport workers. These are vague and ambiguous demands, side-lining the point that, no matter how fair competition is, it still creates inequalities and tensions in the labour market. ETF's decision to build its campaign around the fairness of competition suggests that it implicitly accepted competition as the guiding principle in the European transport sector. This framing alienated the ETF campaign from the radical French CGT unionists who were against competition *tout court* (Interview 7). ETF also framed its Fair Transport ECI exclusively in industrial relations terms. In hindsight, a railway sector ETF official acknowledged that this may have been an error, as the ETF campaign should also have mentioned that the EU's recurrent liberalization drives would go against public interests not only in the transport sector, but also in other sectors, such as health care (Interview 1). The Fair Transport ECI's demands were also imprecise, which meant that they could be interpreted in a way to divide working class support. An initiative that concentrates on fair competition can divide workers rather than create solidarity between them (Bernaciak, 2015). Although Central and Eastern European (CEE) unions acknowledged that a stronger Posted Workers Directive and the fight against social dumping would be in their interest, CEE governments, employers, and media portrayed the focus on social dumping as an attack on CEE workers' right to free movement.

The Two Campaigns' Structural Conditions

So far, we have analysed the two campaigns from an actor-centred perspective. Now, we show that the two campaigns were conditioned by characteristics that were not of their initiators' own choosing. As above, we discuss first the factors that cannot explain the different outcomes.

Economic and Political Structures: The economic and political structures that are usually used to explain collective action do not differ across our cases. Both campaigns were launched after the Great Recession. Hence, long waves of economic growth and crisis (Kelly 2012 [1998]) cannot explain the different outcomes. Both campaigns also used the same instrument to access EU policymakers, namely, the EU's new ECI procedure. This excludes different political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1994) as an explanatory factor. Finally, both water and transport services are

essential network industries that rely on a concentrated infrastructure. As a result, both water and transport workers can wield a high degree of structural power (Silver, 2003) compared to workers in other industries.³ If we want to capture structural factors that can explain the *different* outcomes of the ETF and EPSU campaigns, we must look elsewhere.

Vertical and Horizontal Integration Pressures as Drivers of Transnational Action: Vertical integration pressures from EU laws are present in both sectors and triggered politicization in both, as shown by the Bolkestein, the Port Services, and the rail liberalization Directives discussed above. Although both ETUFs had been subject to vertical EU integration pressures caused by commodifying EU laws, the vertical pressures in the water sector were more recent. EPSU was therefore able to maintain the momentum of the anti-Bolkestein mobilization throughout the Right2Water ECI campaign, whereas ETF was not able to do the same in the transport sector. Furthermore, ETF's efforts were stifled by the fact that horizontal market integration had advanced farther in that sector, especially in road transport.

Bolkestein's 2004 Services Directive was a prime example of a vertical intervention, as it questioned the autonomy and operating principles of public service providers. The experience of the struggles around it informed the Right2Water campaign, as it was with this Directive that the 'Commission first showed its true colours' (Interview 8). After the successful anti-Bolkestein mobilization, awareness was growing among EPSU officials and their allies in social movements that the Commission would renew its efforts to commodify the water sector. The ECI campaign therefore also grew out of the need to sustain the momentum of the anti-Bolkestein mobilizations (Interview 4). Attempts to commodify water continued in the EU's New Economic Governance regime after 2008 and in the proposal for the Concessions Directive in 2011, both being channels of vertical integration. The commodification of the water sector was also a condition in EU bailout programmes in the EU's southern and western periphery (Bieler, 2021; Golden *et al.*, 2021).

Country-specific EU prescriptions issued to member states in the framework of the European Semester called on the Italian government to open local public services, including water, to more competition and demanded that the German government should increase the value of contracts open to public procurement (Golden *et al.*, 2021). The peak of these EU interventions, in the years 2012–13, coincided with the collection of signatures for the ECI. The campaign's particular success in Germany can be explained by the fact that it was linked with the politicization of the proposed Concessions Directive. The German ECI organizers linked the ECI to the critique of the Concessions Directive proposal, which they saw as a direct threat to the in-house model of water provision built on the local autonomy of municipalities and the principle of subsidiarity (Interviews 17 and 20; Parks, 2015).

The draft Concessions Directive would have created a uniform procedure for concessions in water services across the EU. This model would have benefited Veolia and Suez, as this is the legal framework that contributed to their successful long-term operation in France. The spread of the concession model to other parts of Europe would have vested these companies with a competitive advantage over other service providers rooted in a different legal regime, such as the integrated municipal utility company (*Stadtwerke*) model in Germany (Interview 17). Following the success of the Right2Water ECI, the final text of the Directive excluded water from its scope.

This leads to the last component of EU integration in the water sector that facilitated the Right2Water campaign. Vertical integration attempts highlighted power imbalances between different players in the sector and that in turn helped campaigners to direct mobilization against a limited cluster of tangible opponents: the two transnational corporate giants Veolia and Suez that

³ In hindsight, an ITF official asked why ETF bothered collecting signatures when it could 'block the traffic on the big motorways' to get attention (Interview 10). However warranted this question may be, it does not help us explain the different outcomes across our two cases. Given the comparable structural power of water workers over the water infrastructure, they could have asked the same question. They did not do that, however, because they wanted neither to antagonize the public nor to increase tensions between unionized and non-unionized workers (Participant observation, fringe meeting, EPSU congress, June 2019).

operate in a sea of much smaller local and regional operators. Whenever the Commission intervenes vertically in the water sector, it is easy for counter-movements to link that to the interests of these two multinationals and build up a clear communication frame. In short, the recent history of EU integration in the water sector can be described as a series of vertical integration attempts triggering politicization. Partly thanks to the success of these politicization campaigns, horizontal market integration remains limited in the water sector, by comparison to the transport sector where different operators and modes of transport are now competing directly with one another.

The stronger horizontal market integration pressures in the transport sector are a result of a longer history of commodifying vertical EU interventions in that sector. Liberalizing transport is a longstanding preference of the Commission. Vertical integration began already in the 1990s with the liberalization of air and road transport and the partial liberalization of rail transport. As mentioned above, ETF strikes and protests had some success in moderating these commodifying EU pressures (Dyrhaug, 2013). Overall however, commodifying EU laws penetrated the sector gradually and mode by mode, thereby increasing horizontal market pressures. Even the less-liberalized modalities (e.g., railways) face increasing competition from the liberalized modalities (air and road). Both intra- and inter-modal competition have intensified in transport (Stevens, 2004).

Whereas market concentration prevails in air and rail, road haulage is characterized by a very fragmented market structure as well as a high degree of labour and capital mobility, exacerbated by the EU's eastern enlargements. Horizontal market integration in road haulage brought about a proliferation of CEE firms, but also social dumping through the establishment of letterbox companies and the posting of drivers. Horizontal market competition in these transport modalities has several implications that hinder transnational solidarity between workers and that also had an inhibiting effect on ETF's ECI campaign. ETF affiliates, from different countries and transport modalities, had different ideas about the meaning of fairness in the sector, depending on their positions in relation to horizontal market pressures. As mentioned previously, the Fair Transport ECI had a dual origin. On the one hand, ETF's railway section wanted to delay the full liberalization of a transport modality where state-owned enterprises still dominated. On the other hand, Scandinavian transport unions were less concerned about EU interventions in rail, as Scandinavian governments had been frontrunners in rail liberalization. Instead, their main concern was horizontal market pressures resulting from road haulage in an enlarged EU (Rönngren *et al.*, 2008). The ETF therefore drafted an ECI that addressed both the social dumping concerns of its Scandinavian affiliates and the public service liberalization concerns of its railway section (Interview 7 and 11). In the squaring of this circle, the ECI lost focus. Throughout its campaign, ETF had to deal with tensions between different modalities as well as between public and private sector members. The attempt to address social dumping was also characterized by divisions between old and new EU member states, which are also present within ETF (Czarzasty *et al.*, 2020).

Given the tensions arising from horizontal integration, it is not a coincidence that ETF's Fair Transport initiative managed to pass the required threshold of signatures only in Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden and gathered supporting statements only from MEPs from old member states. Finally, the decentralized, horizontal structure of the sector meant that there were too many 'bad guys' in the sector, and ETF was not able to provide to the public a clear image of a particular set of tangible opponents (such as Veolia, Suez, and the European Commission) against which the campaign was being fought.

The different EU integration pressures that the two ETUFs were facing also affected their ability to create broad social movement–union coalitions for their ECIs. As shown above, this actor-centred factor is crucial in explaining the success of the Right2Water ECI. The absence of such coalitions in the Fair Transport case, however, may have more to do with the structural context in which ETF operates than with the capacity of its officials. The more service providers in a sector are subject to horizontal market integration pressures, the more difficult it becomes to unite service providers and users. Whereas the looming threat of the commodification of water services by

vertical EU laws motivated unions, consumer groups, environmental NGOs, and even municipal water companies to support the Right2Water ECI, horizontal market pressures across different transport modalities go a long way towards explaining the absence of such alliances in the Fair Transport case. Had the ETF focused its ECI solely on public rail transport, it would have been easier to attract support from environmental and consumer groups, considering the negative experiences of all groups with rail privatization. As mentioned however, the idea to focus the ECI exclusively on rail did not prevail, given ETF's aim to represent the interests of all workers, including those from (competing) transport modalities that had already been fully commodified.

In sum, EU vertical integration attempts facilitated transnational collective action in the water sector by providing clear crystallization points around which a broad alliance could coalesce. These alliances were nurtured in anticipation of further commodification attempts by the Commission. Consequently, horizontal market integration remained limited in the water sector. In the transport sector, ETF was successful with its campaign against the Port Services Directive. Its protest actions also delayed the liberalization of rail services. Even so, it was unable to stop the piecemeal liberalization of transport modalities, which led to ever-increasing horizontal market pressures that hindered the successful conclusion of its Fair Transport ECI.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by providing a better understanding of the drivers of transnational collective action at the European level. Our QCA analysis of EPSU's Right2Water campaign and ETF's Fair Transport campaign allowed us to assess the importance of different actor-centred and structural factors in transnational political mobilization. To conclude, we first link our findings back to the actor-centred explanations that dominate the existing literature and highlight the presence of union–social movement coalitions as the most decisive actor-centred factor explaining the success of transnational campaigns (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013; Brookes, 2019). At the same time, we show that the options available to actors to build broad alliances are shaped by structural factors, namely, the vertical or horizontal nature of EU integration pressures that unions and social movements face at a particular time in a particular sector.

In terms of actor-centred explanations, both Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2013) and Brookes (2019) have stated that transnational civil society and union campaigns are the more successful the more they advance the specific interests of an organization's core constituency. By contrast, our comparison reveals that successful ECI campaigns by unions do not depend on 'their immediate outcomes for workers' (Brookes, 2019, p. 159). ETF's more narrowly defined interest-group strategy was less successful than EPSU's broader approach. EPSU was willing and able to serve as a hub for a broader, multilevel alliance of social actors. The success of the Right2Water ECI is largely attributable to the presence of social movement–union networks, and their absence proved to be a setback for the Fair Transport campaign, as suggested by the social movement literature (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009; Della Porta, 2015). EPSU's Right2Water campaign was also much broader in its goals than ETF's Fair Transport initiative was. The success of EPSU's campaign demonstrates that moving out of the zone of industrial relations issues and mobilizing around broad ideas of social solidarity and defending public services can be a successful cross-border union strategy. The Right2Water case suggests that, rather than being passive victims of the very limited democratic 'discursive sphere' at EU level (Kohler-Koch, 2013, p. 191), unions and social movements are capable of actively contributing to the emergence of such a field, e.g., by using the ECI instrument, which allows them to connect contentious politics with more institutional channels for citizens' participation.

The unequal success of the two ECIs, however, also highlights the significance of structural explanatory factors, enabling us to make a distinct contribution to the literature on the politicization of the European integration process (Hutter *et al.*, 2016). Social actors' capacity to increase the salience of a European issue through polarizing campaigns is directly related to the

nature of the integration pressures that they are facing and the timing of the onset of these pressures. Here, the distinction between vertical and horizontal integration is pivotal (Erne, 2019). The horizontal market integration pressures that now dominate the transport sector are very real and harmful for labour. Even so, they did not provide salient crystallization points for transnational action. This explains why the Fair Transport ECI struggled to find a platform that would unite workers and users across the diverse transport modalities.

By contrast, if a supranational authority, such as the Commission, intervenes top-down to further commodify labour and public services, transnational counter-movements are more likely to emerge; that is, when activists can attribute these interventions to tangible targets rather than to abstract market forces. In the water sector, the Commission's top-down liberalization attempts, and transnational corporate giants' corresponding activities increased the salience of EU water policies and contributed to the polarization of citizens' views on these policies. The polarization and the increase in salience happened at the *transnational* meso level, thereby contributing to the emergence of a *transnational* public sphere, and thus to the democratization of EU policymaking in this field (Erne, 2008).

The success of a purely public sector union federation (EPSU) as opposed to a mixed public–private federation (ETF) underscores these points. The density of horizontal links in production networks would create the expectation that transport would be a more fertile ground for building transnational alliances than the public water sector where union members have few direct day-to-day contacts with one another (Marginson and Sisson, 2004; Anner *et al.*, 2006). Our findings, however, question the view that public sector unions are less well suited to transnational action compared to private sector unions that are more exposed to transnational competition. The comparison of our two cases has revealed that unions in non-traded services can create effective transnational links not only with unions in other countries, but also with social movements. Emerging transnational solidarity around public service unions is even more important, as union membership is increasingly concentrated in the public sector (Szabó, 2018).

Finally, our cases also show that the timing of counter-movements against vertical interventions is equally important. Despite its protests against EU laws on port services and rail liberalization, ETF was not able to sustain its campaign and expand it to other transport modalities. The piecemeal liberalization of the transport sector eventually broke ETF's momentum and the coherence of the politicization of EU policies. By contrast, EPSU was able to retain the momentum after the anti-Bolkestein campaign and to channel the available energies into the ECI campaign.

Hence, to understand the unequal trajectories of EU politicization, we should pay more attention not only to the activities of meso-level actors (Zürn, 2016), but also to the–vertical or horizontal–nature of integration pressures that they are facing, as well as the timing and the sequence of the onset of these pressures.

List of Interviews:

1. ETF, railway section, official 1, 10.08.2017, telephone interview
2. EPSU, secretariat, official 1, 23.11.2017, Brussels
3. EPSU, secretariat, official 2, 13.09.2018, Brussels
4. EPSU, secretariat, official 1, 13.09.2018, Brussels
5. European water movement, activist 1, 13.09.2018, Brussels
6. Alter Summit, secretariat, official 1, 13.09.2018, Brussels
7. ETF, secretariat, official 2, 14.09.2018, Brussels
8. EPSU, secretariat, official 1, 18.12.2018, Brussels
9. European water movement, activist 1, 18.12.2018, Brussels
10. ITF, railway section official 1, 28.11.2018, Oslo
11. ITF, former Road Transport Workers' Section official 2, 3.12.2018, Oslo

12. ETF, secretariat, official 3, 17.12.2018, Brussels
13. Aqua Publica Europea, official 1, 18.12.2018, Brussels
14. ETF, secretariat, official 4, 21 December 2018, Brussels
15. Grüne Liga (Green League, Germany), activist 1, 19.09.2019, Berlin
16. Berliner Wassertisch (Berlin Water Platform, Germany), activist 1, 20.09.2019, Berlin
17. Allianz der öffentlichen Wasserwirtschaft (Alliance of Public Water Systems), former official, 16.10.2020, Berlin
18. Allianz der öffentlichen Wasserwirtschaft, official, 19.10.2020, online
19. ver.di (United Services Union, Germany), utilities section, official 1, 20.11.2020, online
20. ver.di, utilities section, official 2, 30.10.2020, online
21. ver.di, transport section official 1, 3.12.2020, online
22. EPSU, secretariat, official 3, 7.05.2021, online

Participant Observation:

1. ETUC/ETUI Conference. The World(s) of Work in Transition, 27-29.06.2018, Brussels
2. ETUC, 14th Congress, 21-24.05.2019, Vienna
3. EPSU, 10th Congress, 4-6.06.2019, Dublin
4. ver.di, Sanitas (Romanian healthcare trade union), and ERC Project 'European Unions'. Fringe meeting on Trade Union Perspectives on the EU's New Economic Governance in Healthcare and Water Services, 10th EPSU Congress, 5.6.2019, Dublin
5. Fridays for Future demonstration, Berlin, including Gemeingut in BürgerInnenhand (Public Goods in Citizens' Hands) Initiative, 20.09.2019
6. ver.di, 5th Congress, Leipzig, 22-29.09.2019
7. EPSU, SIPTU (Irish general union), Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, and ERC Project 'European Unions'; Book launch, *Wellsprings of Resistance*. Dublin, 12.11.2019

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