



‘Contribution of Trade Union Organisations to the Evaluation of the Actions Conducted and their Impact in Terms of the European Employment Strategy’¹

First report on the contribution of trade union organisations in:

- Latvia
- Estonia
- Lithuania
- Ireland
- Belgium
- Sweden
- Denmark
- Finland
- Italy

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1. On the reformed European Strategy

In view of the history of the construction of Europe since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, it would seem legitimate to stress that social and employment questions are considered by the European institutions as ‘derivatives’ of the dominant economic focus which is supposed to deliver direct social benefits, thus making it possible to avoid inequalities in development and distortions in competition between countries. In fact employment has been occupying a less marginal role in the priorities for actions defined within the European Union only for a few years. Even if employment, by its nature, remains a competence in which the Member States retain wide sovereignty, the context of weak growth coupled with a major rise in unemployment experienced by Europe in the early 1990s is leading the Member States, who have been resolutely shunted in that direction by the trade union organisations, to pledge to get employment policies more embedded among the priorities of the EU. The launch of the European Employment Strategy in 1997 is thus considered to be an instrument to establish a fresh balance vis-à-vis the growing predominance of monetary and economic policies on the path of economic and monetary union.

In their analysis of the reformed European Employment Strategy, the 2003 reform which they positively welcomed, the trade union organisations concentrate on three principal dimensions:

1) The reformed strategy is considered by the Irish trade union organisations to better reflect the strategic objectives and priority concerns of the social partners with regard to Ireland’s social and economic development. The reformed EES complements the recent national agreement between the Irish social partners entitled ‘Sustaining Progress’. The ability to establish a relevant strategy for the Member States must not, however, eclipse the scale of the challenge posed by its interpretation and its implementation.

2) The Danish trade union organisations respond positively and support the desire to refocus the strategy on the basic structural questions concerning the European labour markets. They support the concrete objectives and the medium-term prospects proposed by the revised

strategy with a particular focus on the implementation and impact.

3) In the case of Belgium, there is an emphasis on the fact that because the reformed employment strategy moves to a three-year cycle, it makes it easier to match the cycle of intersectoral negotiations conducted in that country.

One of the strengths of the EES is that it encourages the co-ordination of the different policies with an impact on employment, even though the exercise sometimes seems too formal.

Among the positive aspects emerging in a certain number of countries, we must stress the co-operation between the social partners and the government that is stimulated by and through the process. The fact of laying down precise, detailed objectives to be achieved in the field of research and development as well as training, unquestionably constitutes an added value as the link between economic and social policy when it is established. One of the positive advances permitted by the EES is to promote the tripartite dialogue in Estonia. At the social level, some advances were secured in 2003 in terms of the payment of unemployment benefits. Conversely, the government is in the process of substantially reducing its investment in human resources.

This positive evaluation is, however, accompanied by greater vigilance, notably on the part of the Italian trade union organisations, who are concerned at the ambiguity which might survive behind certain concepts because of the different interpretations that they generate among the players. Thus the idea of an inclusive labour market may be perceived differently by the employers, the public institutions and the unions. Moreover, the idea of the quality of labour suffers from a lack of clarification on what it really means for each of the partners.

Criticisms are also levelled with regard to the utilitarian and overly formal character imparted by the governments, who play a dominant role in every country at the level of the process linked to the European strategy. In the case of the Baltic States, the formal character may be explained by the new dimension represented by the process which is being conducted within tripartite bodies which are just as recent. This formal character with its basis of positive rhetoric is something that a founding country in Europe such as Belgium cannot escape either. This unquestionably disheartens the EES vis-à-vis the strength and potential

that it represented when it was launched. What is more serious is the fact of its being used by the Italian government to reduce workers' rights in the sense of greater flexibility and the generalised privatisation of the economy.

Involvement of the trade union organisations in the definition and follow-up of the EES

The degree of participation by the social partners in the process emerging from the European Employment Strategy at the national level varies in the countries covered by this report.

This participation, which is principally effective at the level of the definition of the main objectives of the strategy and can be described as a real involvement, is strong in Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. It is likewise considered as significant in Ireland, while in Italy, despite a tradition profoundly rooted in the contemporary history of the country, it appears more problematic because of the political context in the peninsula at present. The Baltic States bluntly consider it to be too formal, even if in that case, the construction of the process is in full flow.

In Belgium, the trade union organisations are systematically consulted on employment questions, notably via the 'Conseil national du travail'. This is likewise the case in Finland and Denmark, where the participation of the social partners in the process is deemed satisfactory by the trade union organisations. They take a significant part in the drafting of the NAP which we shall return to later. In those two countries, we see a desire to get involved through the process as a whole. A report is thus drawn up on the measures which are implemented.

A classic example

The case of Denmark is a particularly classic example of the governance of employment relying notably on the active and committed participation of the social partners. The general perception of the players in that country is that they go a step further vis-à-vis the EES (recognised as such by the Commission and certain countries such as France) and the other Member States with regard to employment policy. For the Danish social partners, the role of the national governments is to define clear objectives and policies at the national level which translate at the European level. *'In the view of social partners, involvement of the social partners in the reform process will produce sustainable results. It's vital for the realisation of the objectives in the employment strategy and the Lisbon process to put focus on the obtained results and increase the focus on the member states, which have actually carried out the reforms necessary to obtain the laid down objectives for full employment, quality at work, increased productivity and making it possible for everyone to find a job'.*

For the Danish social partners, the influence of the EES on national employment policy at both the regional and local levels is not obvious. The most recent scientific research even tends to indicate that it would be very limited². Danish policy on employment, and notably the activation measures, were framed before the Luxembourg process was embarked upon. Conversely, it is clearly established today that the Swedish and Danish model (to a lesser extent) have been used as a model by the European Commission in the drafting of the EES³. Some adjustments to Danish policy on employment in connection with the development and under the influence of the EES are also identifiable through the process of the framing of the NAPs and the recommendations formulated by the European Commission.

The Danish trade union organisations consider the commitment of the ETUC in the process at the European level to be important. The ETUC needs to play a central role to guarantee the maintenance of the social dimension and an approach based on flexicurity in European policy in terms of the labour market.

² M. Mailand, The European Employment Strategy - local and regional impact in Denmark, Paper for the Etui/Universidad Complutense de Madrid-seminar: The regional and local dimension of the EES, Cordoba, 17 October 2003.

³ A. Larson, What can we learn from Denmark? in Schmid, G & K.Schömann (eds), *Learning from Denmark*. WZB Discussion paper. Berlin, 1999.

In the case of Finland, the trade union organisations emphasise certain weaknesses in the participation because of the fact that the workers are not sufficiently familiar with the EES and their government is not resolutely committed to the process. The Danish model seems to attract more attention from the latter, rather than the EES and the OMC. Clearly, therefore, there is a need to raise awareness and to train the players in national employment policy on the linkage between the national and European levels in such a way that the EES genuinely becomes part of the dynamic of employment at the national level. The current situation seems rather to indicate a slippage between the EES and the real policy being pursued in most of the 'old Member States'.

Certain analyses developed just ahead of the reform of the EES indicated that the involvement of the unions of employees or employers in the creation and implementation of employment policy in the majority of the future Member States, with the exception of Slovenia, proved inadequate, and from certain points of view, formal. However, it was to be anticipated, the report warned, that the rapprochement with the European unions following accession would make it possible to reinforce the role of the social partners and their influence on the process of the creation of social policy in their countries.⁴ Thus, to allow the CCEE to get the best out of this process, it would be necessary to envisage arranging the guidelines to respond better to their current situation. It would also be a good idea to introduce some additional priorities and plan for the setting in place of resources suited to the achievement of these objectives.

The analysis made by the trade union organisations in the Baltic States shows that the EES does not totally meet the needs of these new Member States. In the absence of a culture and a practice of social partnership as the legacy of the Communist period, the achievement and implementation of the EES is not accompanied by a genuine involvement of the social partners in the process. On the other hand, and this is a positive point, the realisation of the NAPs may, in certain cases, contribute to the development of a national employment policy which the governments seem to be unable to provide, or not interested in providing.

⁴ K. Gwozdz, LA STRATEGIE EUROPEENNE POUR L'EMPLOI APPLIQUEE AUX PAYS CANDIDATS, PREMIER ESSAI D'EVALUATION, working document, June 2002 (<http://www.notre-europe.asso.fr/IMG/pdf/Katy.pdf>)

2. The national action plans

In certain of them, the NAP is rated positively albeit without being considered as a central plank in the national employment policy. The NAP thus appears as a document permitting the discussion and description of the national policy, but we are a long way from a genuine strategy. In the new Member States, on the other hand, the NAPs seem to constitute a greater value in the sense that they help the unions to develop an employment policy. They also represent an asset in the future Member States such as Romania, which has started getting into the process while it is still at the stage of acceding to the EU. Another observation is worth pointing out, which is the existence of a slippage between the broad thrusts of employment policy and the everyday realities experienced by workers and those with no job.

In Sweden, there has been a tradition, since 1998 and the first national action plans, of getting the social partners involved in their framing. The contribution of the partners is made in an autonomous way before being incorporated with minor modifications to make it compatible with the structure of the NAP. If we consider the most recent period, the social partners have participated jointly or specifically in the drafting of the 2004 NAP.

In Belgium, Finland and Denmark, the NAPs which are co-ordinated by the Employment Ministries are finalised after a preliminary phase involving the consultation of the social partners. However, this participation is ensured to differing degrees depending on the countries.

In Belgium, there is a great focus on brand image

In Belgium, the NAP, from the point of view of the trade union organisations, is an exercise in evaluating the government action which uses the process to draw up a rather positive catalogue. There is unquestionably a 'brand image' effect which is sought after and which corresponds to a fairly broad consensus among the players. There is a tendency in Belgium towards self-satisfaction, focusing only on the positive aspects, even in the report drawn up by the social partners. The trade union organisations admit that the current political context hardly allows them to contest this very consensual approach, which is in fact a characteristic of Belgian socio-economic policy over recent years.

The NAP, however, represents one of the positive elements in the EES in that it forces the social and government partners to start discussions on subjects which may be awkward, such as the question of the ends of people's careers.

The Belgian NAP which is the fruit of consultation between the federal power and the three regions of Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, which have major powers in terms of employment which they share with the federal power, includes an annex entitled '*The contribution of the federal social partners*'. It has a chapter entitled '*Good governance and partnership for the sake of the implementation of the guidelines for employment*'. This annex puts into perspective the 2003 intersectoral agreement vis-à-vis the EES.

The full contribution of the social partners is annexed to the 2004 NAP. The contributions of the social partners, combined into a single text, are thus taken into account in the process for the framing of the NAP. Some passages in this common contribution have been incorporated into the 2004 NAP. This contribution by the social partners which also incorporates the position of the regional social partners is sent to the European institutions.

Among the stages in the process, we must point out that the 'Conseil national du travail' (CNT), which has been in existence since 1952, issues an opinion on what has been done by the social partners in the framework of the NAP.

However, there is a notable lack of interest from the employers' organisations with regard to the process. The fundamental question arising for the trade union organisations is thus to establish whether it is necessary to continue presenting common opinions for the sake of 'saving face'.

In Denmark, the trade unions which are involved in the whole process, to great satisfaction so far, have contributed to a certain number of dimensions of the NAP which is clearly the responsibility of the government. Denmark has a '*Special EC committee concerning the labour market and social affairs*' within the international department of the Ministry of Employment which administers the process. The government thus has to assume responsibility for it in terms of the content and the social partners generally do not approve the plan. Thus, the trade union organisations have not failed to criticise the lack of ambition displayed in terms of the extension of active life for the elderly. And they always reserve the right, in the event of disagreement with the government, to pull out of the process.

The social partners make their contribution in a text which is annexed to the NAP. '*The social partners also contribute to setting targets in relation to the employment guidelines and the implementation of these. The involvement of the social partners is an integrated part of the Danish labour market model*'. The social partners have been particularly invited to contribute to the description of the activities in the NAP which have been realised with a view to implementing the guidelines. They have likewise had the opportunity to include the question of the partnership in connection with the implementation of the guidelines on employment. If we consult the introduction to this annex, it does not explain whether it is a common opinion by the social partners or whether the employers and the unions are each expressing their point of view.

More globally, we must observe that the process of framing the NAP in Denmark has not, until now, constituted a prime priority for the players in employment policy and also for the social partners. Thus, in the first years of the EES, the *National Labour Market Authorities and the Multipartite National Employment Board* have played no part in relation to the NAP. More recently, the NAP has been on the agenda of the *National Labour Market Board*, which perhaps marks an evolution towards greater account being taken of the EES. The role of parliament is also limited, even if this reduced commitment seems now to be a thing of the past. This lack of commitment by the partners to the process is notably due to the

fact that the NAP is considered as a government plan, and not as a plan by the *nation* or society as such. During the first years of the implementation of the EES, it barely formed a source of conflict between the partners or the subject of particular media attention. Before the framing of the NAP, most of the measures had already been the subject of examination and consultation with the social partners, and been discussed with the government, the parliament and the civil society. This means that the most controversial elements had already been debated before the process for the drafting of the NAP actually got underway.

In Ireland, the trade union organisations make no secret of their dissatisfaction about the content of the NAP⁵. It does not represent a genuine strategy for change, to the great disappointment of the unions, who regret the overly mechanical character of the process which leads to undeniable weaknesses. Areas such as lifelong education, childcare, and inclusion on the labour market are not taken sufficiently into account. The procedure for the consultation of the partners is clearly identifiable, but it is weakened by its lack of dynamism. It is an annual reflection process which focuses only on the existing policies. It is not a relevant instrument with any influence or change.

The process for the preparation of the NAP in Ireland

- 1) A meeting between the social partners and the lead department at the beginning of the summer.
- 2) The contributions of the social partners are then submitted.
- 3) The department circulates a draft during the summer vacation with the possibility of making comments within ten days and a suitable discussion may be organised at the request of the social partners.
- 4) The department may decide to accept or not accept the amendments and concerns expressed. The social partners are invited to comment separately on the areas on which there is no consensus among them.
- 5) The text is sent to the European Union.

In Italy, the social partners have been involved in the discussions on the NAPs since the launch of the process at the end of the 90s. The social partners have inserted in the text a joint document, which is the first time that such a result has been achieved in the framework

of the NAP, setting out their points of view on the actions which they have conducted during the reference period, but also indicating the subjects on which they retain an autonomous approach with regard to the structural reforms announced by the Government. This common contribution by the social partners has the major merit of informing the other European players about the consultation and negotiation action conducted by the Italian social partners and the situation of industrial relations in Italy. However, the government has, in reality, limited the scope of this common contribution, reducing the process to a purely formal dimension. The document which is ultimately produced limits itself, in a great burst of optimism, to formulating actions which still remain to be realised.

In Lithuania, the social partners have not been involved in the framing of the 2004 NAP. They have been informed about it within the tripartite Lithuanian council. But for 2005, the Lithuanian trade union confederation has clearly displayed its desire to no longer be informed, but actually to be involved in the framing of the plan from the implementation of the process.

The paucity of the financial resources available to conduct genuine policies on employment at the national level and to organise a genuine social dialogue in the Baltic States is emphasised. The Latvian trade unions do not have the human resources or expertise required to have a bearing on the consultation system. Notably because of the low number of members in the Latvian trade unions, particularly in the banking sector, their participation in the tripartite national negotiations is quite formal. The other players do not demonstrate any extreme dynamism. The government is not particularly active on the subject of employment and there is a dire shortage of co-ordination in the national employment policy, which in fact owes its existence to the ES, which contributes to the creation of the conditions for social dumping. In sum, the situation in this country looks particularly worrying when we note the minimum monthly wage which stands at only 120 euros. Against that background, employment, ongoing training and lifelong education attract barely any investment by the public powers.

In Estonia, the trade union organisations are seeking a closer link with the regional employment programmes. The opinion of the trade union organisations does not appear to be

⁵ Irish Congress of Trade Unions, *Submission to the National Employment Action Plan 2004-2005*, Dublin, 26 July 2004.

taken sufficiently into account, and the social dialogue remains very formal at the company level.

According to the Estonian trade union organisations, the NAP should be financed by the ESF with greater involvement of the unions being crucial.

Follow-up to the recommendations

Across all the countries considered in this report, this chapter appears as the one presenting the greatest weakness in terms of significant advances. The non-binding character of the recommendations addressed by the Council to the Member States doubtless represents one plausible explanatory factor. But it is also the lack of a culture of evaluation of public policies in Europe that might be highlighted as an explanatory factor. At the national level, the many measures taken in the field of employment are often not systematically followed up and evaluated.

In Denmark, the recommendations issued by the European Commission are sometimes the subject of a public debate. However, they are often so weakly formulated that they have barely any impact on government action. Yet the Danish Parliament seems to devote more attention to the EES and to the recommendations, a point which might be a portent of a change of course in the future.

In Ireland, the congress of trade unions has criticised the weakness of the follow-up to the recommendations by the European Council, to such an extent that some fundamental questions have been on the agenda for years with no sign of great progress. In fields such as childcare and lifelong education, the action of the different ministerial departments concerned overlaps with no great coherence. As to the social partners, they submit a report on their joint activities during the period when the NAP is being framed.

In Italy, while the social partners have genuinely participated in the realisation of the NAP and been able to express their point of view, the dimension of the evaluation of the measures proposed remains completely inadequate and purely formal. Often, much is made of the possible impact of measures, without any real examination being made as to their possible

implementation. A particularly classic example of this situation is the law on the reduction of undeclared work in 2001, which has delivered mediocre results.

3. On union actions and initiatives

In Latvia, what the employers want to get on to the agenda for the social dialogue is not the social aspects but the economic questions. In legislative terms, the liberal model seems to be the rule, with a minimum of responsibility in the matter for the State and major importance attaching to the method of collective bargaining through the social dialogue. A dialogue in which the employers can impose their view vis-à-vis the trade union organisations which are in the throes of reconstruction. Trade union organisations which are first and foremost demanding some precise rules and recommendations which are much more specific and precise. We can see changes that have been underway since Latvia joined the European Union. Tripartite discussions are taking shape and the government seems to attach more importance to them while often informing the players last of all, notably when the NAP is finalised. The recommendations formulated by the European Commission on employment policy unquestionably influence the Latvian political authorities.

In Estonia, the dialogue is all too often limited just to the national level, with participation by employers in discussions on employment being very low. The lack of a partnership culture as a result of the country's modern history is very apparent. The social dialogue is all the more difficult for the fact that the right-leaning, liberal government pays it barely any attention. The EAKL considers that the State is trying to limit its responsibility in terms of investment in human resources, by developing just the professional education institutions. No concrete measure seems to have been taken to finance lifelong education actions designed for the workforce. However, we must stress the positive impact of the EES on the dialogue between the social partners because of the new prospects for consultation and negotiation that it delivers.

In Finland, while no new policy has been adopted by virtue of the EES, the latter has not been without an influence on the national debate, reinforcing certain existing policies long defended by the trade union organisations, such as the promotion of ongoing worker training and the development of more efficient active employment policies which are at the heart of

the EES and its guidelines. For the trade union organisations, the qualitative dimension of training cannot be masked by the quantitative aspects alone.

In Ireland, the combination between the EES and the national plan 'Sustaining Progress' has provided opportunities for the social partners to co-operate on joint activities in the framework of a broad policy panel. However, the recurrent difficulty lies in moving beyond pilot projects making it possible to identify the obstacles and strategies for the future.

In Denmark, the trade union organisations have brought pressure to bear on the government regarding the extension of working life to make it take a certain number of initiatives in the matter. The Danish social partners have built their consultation and negotiations around the question of the extension of working life while putting pressure on the government in the matter. In contrast to Belgium (see below), Denmark shares the recommendations of the EU on early retirement. In that field, there are too many taxation or wage incentives to significantly drive down early retirement from work. The pressure is clearly being put on employers and the government, but an agreement has been enshrined to promote flexible access to early retirement.

In Belgium, the action programme of the social partners does not really run parallel with the guidelines, with the exception of guideline n° 3 on the work-life balance. The time credit system is currently under evaluation within the 'Conseil national du travail'.

Regarding lifelong education, the social dialogue predated the EES and is above all negotiated at the sectoral level. When it comes to the subject of permanent training for companies' workers, the social partners have their own competence which enables them to act autonomously on this dimension by pursuing a genuine policy of training tailored to the needs of companies and workers. For many years, the social partners have set up specific funds intended to ensure continuous professional training. Every two years, a standard for professional training is established, at both the intersectoral level and the other levels of the social dialogue. The agreements fall resolutely into the framework of the EES; however, it is important to stress that training is considered by employers as a cost against the company's financial results, rather than as an investment making it possible to anticipate the future needs of the company and of the market.

On early retirements and the early pension system (guideline n° 5), the Belgian trade union organisations insist on the fact that these are often their only way to protect workers in the event of restructuring. If these options are removed, what will the alternatives and the equivalent solutions be that will enable them to offer any guarantees against the damage caused by restructuring? In any case there is an offensive on the part of the employers on the system designed to shift it to age 60 instead of the present 58, which dodges the real issues which the employer virtually ignores, such as health, security, training, and the wealth of experience of an older worker. A tripartite conference on career endings is scheduled for the next few months, with the aim of finding solutions acceptable for all the partners. The government, facing an unemployment rate among older people that is among the highest in the EU, is pushing the social partners to find a solution within the framework of their dialogue. But in reality, it is particularly difficult for a worker over the age of 50 to find a new job after a closure or restructuring (downsizing).

The policy of flexicurity implemented in countries such as Finland and Denmark is rated as positive by the trade union organisations, notably in terms of lifelong learning.

One guideline seems to particularly interest the political decision-makers, namely the increase of equal opportunities. It is rated very positively by the Latvian trade unions. The question of a balanced development between work and home life set out in the guidelines needs to be explored.

On the other hand, certain points raise a major problem, because certain contradictions are emerging through the objective seeking to increase full employment.

The pressure on retirement systems is clear across all the countries, to varying degrees depending on the agenda set out by the governments to achieve measures in the matter. The lack of action on the creation of employment, and the priority given almost universally to employability and the increased control of the availability of the unemployed is strongly contested by the trade union organisations. The notion of the quality of employment that has had such a high profile after Lisbon in 2000 is now diluted.

In the case of Ireland, the national social dialogue links into the EES in at least three areas:

- the work-life balance
- the fight against racial discrimination in the workplace
- the promotion of employment for disabled people in the private sector via the Workway initiative

Accordingly, the question of the work-life balance has been the subject of successive national agreements of which the developments have had implications for several of the EES guidelines. Two Equal projects and one Interact project conducted between social partners have made it possible to identify and explore methods and practices to implement and promote a work-life balance.

To round off this overview, we should mention the case of Italy, where the analysis by the trade union organisations tends to sound the alarm in the face of the instrumentalisation of the employment policy and the weakening of the EES in terms of effectiveness in the country. To be more precise, we will stress that the link between the Italian NAP and the joint work programme of the European social partners is not established and the process being conducted by the government seeks primarily to modify the system of consultation in a neoliberal direction.

Joint programme of the European social partners

For the Belgian trade union organisations, the link does not exist directly as such, or at least it is not perceived in that way, even though it should be, as a simultaneous activity at the other levels.

The agreement on teleworking at the European level signed on 16 July 2002 is realised on a voluntary basis. The national social discussion partners have pledged to apply it at the national level not via a Community legislative instrument, but in accordance with the national

procedures and practices specific to the social partners in the Member States⁶. The concept of a voluntary agreement is also interpreted differently between the trade union organisations and the employers in terms of whether or not the agreement is binding. The discussion on the transposition is still underway. The voluntary character emerges clearly as a backward step vis-à-vis the tradition of collective negotiation to the extent that the employers take this concept of voluntarism as an opportunity to align themselves on the lowest common denominator.

In Denmark, an internal debate with the member organisations has taken place around the joint programme of the European social partners. In the view of those same organisations, the reformed EES has had little impact on the national social dialogue in terms of the reinforcement thereof.

In Finland, the following initiatives have been the subject of an agreement with the employers for the period 2005-2007:

- 1° Promotion of adaptability, notably with regard to the restructuring of businesses via individual re-employment programmes for employees and workers who fall victim to dismissal for reasons associated with the operation of the business.
- 2° The fight against undeclared work.
- 3° Equal opportunities in the workplace and ongoing professional training.

The tripartite negotiations and the social dialogue fit within a strong tradition in Finland, to the extent that the EES has little impact on the process of national industrial relations.

In Italy, finally, two points need to be mentioned with regard to the promotion of the joint programme of the social partners within the national employment policy:

- the voluntary agreement on teleworking,

⁶ Ch. Degryse, Dialogue social en 2003: transition ou stagnation? in *Bilan social de l'Union européenne 2003*, Brussels, 2004, p. 66.

- the joint document signed by the Italian social partners on the policy for development in the south of Italy.

4) Recommendations and conclusions

At the end of the debates held during this first decentralised seminar in Riga, it appears clearly that the involvement of the social partners and the trade union organisations in the European employment strategy needs to be reinforced. In the new Member States, the trade union organisations are often the only partner to defend an approach to the process that is voluntarist, rather than simply formal.

In terms of recommendations, certain organisations advocate, because of the positive evaluation made of the Kok report, that a direct link be established between the NAPs and the Lisbon strategy. In Finland, where the Kok report has made a big impression because of its supposed relevance, there is an insistence on the fact that the EES needs to be reinforced to become a credible chapter in the Lisbon strategy. It is important to back up the idea proposed by the Kok report to adopt national action programmes on the Lisbon strategy with the current NAPs which would occupy a significant part. We need to clearly open up the debate on the macro-economic policy, notably on the integration of the financial markets and the liberalisation of the services market, in the knowledge that the European model is truly specific and different from the Anglo-Saxon model.

The EES should also be used more as an instrument for debating and to reinforce the rights of workers in a context of restructuring and relocation. To promote employment, regional mobility should be further encouraged.

One central question remains: what is the impact of the EES? What are the results produced and induced by the strategy? Does it offer real added value, for example by allowing for a better balance between the economic and social policies? Its role seems to vary from one country to another.

When we talk about the impact of the EES, we also need to evaluate its democratic legitimacy, its capacity for the integration of wide circles into the debate and its ideological legitimacy in the sense that it would be the subject of a pluralist debate and not simply placed

under the exclusive domination of neoliberal policies. The Danish parliament seems to be more and more interested in the EES, which might indicate that it is gaining democratic legitimacy.

However, the absence of a binding framework within the EES which might sanction the lack of initiative by certain governments gives in a way the opportunity for the Member States to go beyond the EU recommendations. Once again, though, this does not explain why the recommendations are actually ignored and not firmly supported by all the partners.

The challenge remains that of the more effective implementation of the EES resting on a strong action at the national level. It is within this latter level, where the social partnership exists, and often has done for a long time, that the implementation needs a decisive boost. The problem of the reformed EES arises less in terms of the form or content of the strategy than in terms of the commitment of the Member States to its implementation. The EES is often used, as in Denmark, to give a positive image of the government action, whereas it should really be used as an instrument in favour of the creation and improvement of employment.

The action developed on employment is first and foremost national and perceived as such by the union base in Belgium for example. Europe, because of the lack of notable progress in social terms, has difficulty getting across to the workers, despite the efforts in terms of information and training carried out by the trade union leadership regarding what genuinely is the real contribution of the EES. Europe is often a factor for mobilisation only in the case of a general outcry or a barrage of fire such as in the case of the Bolkenstein directive. In the case of the EES, it is often associated with tricky national discussions such as the end of the career in Belgium and the control of the availability of unemployed people, and may be perceived, as in Denmark in terms of the training of young job-seekers, as an external element that skews the discussions.

Globally, the process initiated by the EES seems too disembodied, because of its complexity. The understanding of the specific features of the national situations is still incomplete on the part of the Commission, which sometimes neglects the importance of the context and the national institutional structure. The need for a bottom-up approach is clearly felt. In the case of the new Member States, such as the Baltic States, this attention to the local

realities still needs to be sustained in order to avoid a situation where a framework is applied that is totally unsuited to the specific situation being experienced by these countries.

It is necessary to do more to communicate and exchange between the European level and the national level on the details for its application, its results and its impacts, which are often relative but very real, to favour its reappropriation across all the players and to reinforce its legitimacy and the democratic character of the process. Should we not be developing an open method of co-ordination between the trade union organisations in Europe to reinforce the linkage between the social partners in the framework of multi-level employment governance?

This leads us to conclude on the legitimacy of the EES, which really needs to become an exercise shared by all the players and not just – as has often been the case so far – a process limited to technocratic circles.