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### Structural determinants of transnational solidarity Explaining the rise in socioeconomic protests across European borders since 1997

Roland Erne<sup>1</sup>, Jörg Nowak<sup>1, 2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> School of Business, University College Dublin

Corresponding author: [Roland.Erne@ucd.ie](mailto:Roland.Erne@ucd.ie)

<sup>2</sup> University of Brasilia

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## Structural determinants of transnational solidarity

### Explaining the rise in socioeconomic protests across European borders since 1997

Roland Erne<sup>a</sup> and Jörg Nowak<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University College Dublin. <sup>b</sup>University of Brasilia

Corresponding author: [Roland.Erne@ucd.ie](mailto:Roland.Erne@ucd.ie)

**Abstract:** This paper is based on a new database of 355 transnational socioeconomic protest events in Europe reported by labor-related newsletters, websites, and specialized media outlets from 1997 to 2020. Although the strength of European unions has been declining during this period, the number of transnational socioeconomic protests increased from 62 (1997-2002) to 121 (2015-2020). Our database enables us to test two structural hypotheses for this rise, namely an economic and a political one. Our findings confirm that the exposure to horizontal, competitive economic pressures within an ever more integrated European marketplace cannot explain the rise of transnational socioeconomic protest since 1997. Instead, our figures suggest that increased vertical political integration pressures by supranational EU authorities and corporate headquarters of multinational firms are driving the increasing salience of transnational socioeconomic protest.

## **Structural determinants of transnational solidarity**

### **Explaining the rise in socioeconomic protests across European borders since 1997**

There are excellent case studies of transnational collective actions of labor movements (Golden and Erne 2022; Geary 2021; Szabó *et al.* 2022; Brookes 2019; Bieler *et al.* 2015; McCallum 2013; Kay 2011; Bronfenbrenner 2011; Gajewska 2008; Turnbull 2006). As these are based on interviews and participant observations, it is hardly surprising that actor-centered explanations for their success or failure prevail in them. From Turnbull's (2006) pioneering study of European dockworkers' struggles against a liberalizing European Union (EU) law to Brookes' (2019) qualitative comparative analysis of several transnational union campaigns, authors have regularly emphasized labor's action repertoires, namely, the articulation between the workplace, national and international levels of union organization: 'intra-union coordination', and the activities of transnational labor networks: 'inter-union coordination' (*ibid.* 2019). Structural factors also play a role in these studies, but not as drivers of transnational action. Instead, they are treated as a context for actor-centered explanations: e.g., labor activists' use of 'context-appropriate' power resources (*ibid.*).

These actor-centered factors are important, especially for labor activists who want to learn from others' experience why some transnational labor alliances succeed but others fail (Szabó *et al.* 2022). Actor-centered factors, however, cannot explain the surprising rise in transnational labor protest events in Europe since 1997. Although the strength of European trade unions has been declining (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013), as shown, for example, by declining aggregate collective bargaining coverage rates from 76 percent (1997-2002) to 65 percent (2015-2020), the number of transnational socioeconomic protests across Europe reported by labor-related newsletters, websites and specialized media outlets increased from 62 to 121 in the same period (See Figure 1 below).

[Figure 1 about here]

The increasing salience of transnational socioeconomic protests across Europe that our novel database captures is surprising. Whereas studies of successful cases of transnational action may provide "some specks of hope that the unions may indeed regenerate themselves",

many scholars until recently believed that “at the end of the day, when the numbers are counted” cases of transnational action would not show up in “the aggregate figures”, as unions would be in “crisis everywhere” (Baccaro cited in Phelan *et al.* 2009: 209). Given the falling collective bargaining density rates in Europe, the rising number of transnational actions cannot be explained by a strengthening of European labor movements’ national power resources (Golden and Erne 2022). If one considers the muted development of transnational labor education in Europe (Föhler *et al.* 2021; Föhler and Erne 2017) or the weakening of transnational social movements since the heyday of the European social forums in the early 2000s (della Porta 2019), it is also not plausible that improved intra- and inter-union coalition skills (Brookes 2019) have driven the rise in transnational socioeconomic protests since 1997. In this article, we therefore examine the explanatory power of alternative structural explanations—one economic and one political—for their increasing salience across Europe. Concretely, we are asking whether increasing horizontal (economic) competition or vertical (political) integration pressures are driving them. Whereas the latter relate to direct interventions by a ‘supranational political, legal or corporate authority’ (Erne 2019: 346), horizontal economic pressures result from an increased interconnectedness of markets across borders in Europe.

Horizontal market integration put local or national labour movements under pressure. However, competitive market pressures do not question the formal autonomy of domestic labor institutions, which explains why different national labor movements were able to pursue a variety of *adjustment* paths in response to increased transnational market integration pressures in the 1990s (Thelen 2001). Horizontal market integration pressures also provide no *tangible* targets for transnational countermobilizations given the difficulty to politicize abstract market relations, which appear as being natural. By contrast, the vertical prescriptions of supranational corporate or political authorities undermine the autonomy of domestic labor institutions and provide labour movements with tangible opponents. Considering both European unions’ failed wage coordination policies in the early 2000s and a successful case of transnational labor action in a European company merger case, Erne expected that any Europeanization of labor protests would be driven by a centralization of corporate *and* political decision making at a supranational level rather than increased horizontal market integration pressures (2008: 194). Whereas a recent qualitative comparative analysis of two parallel labor campaigns in the EU seems to confirm this hypothesis (Szabó *et al.* 2022), the necessary data that would have allowed a quantitative assessment of it has so far been missing. We have therefore compiled a comprehensive

database of transnational socioeconomic protest events, which allows us to assess the two competing—economic and political—structural hypotheses for the increasing salience of them across Europe. Before presenting the design of our database, which differs from preceding European protest event databases, and our result, we outline the competing economic and political hypotheses for the increased salience of socioeconomic, transnational collective action in more detail.

### **Theoretical Background and Research Design**

#### **Horizontal Competitive Pressures. An Economic Driver of Transnational Action?**

The economic hypothesis for the rise of transnational socioeconomic protests across Europe since 1997 is inspired by Anner *et al.*'s (2006) study on the industrial determinants of transnational solidarity. As competitive market pressures between producers differ across industries, so do also labor's prospects of overcoming them through transnational collective action (Anner *et al.* 2006). What matters, however, are neither the usual sectoral classifications of industries, like the distinction between the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, nor the more refined classification provided by the North American Industry Classification System. More important is the nature of the international competitive pressures within an industry, which can vary even within the overarching manufacturing sector. Anner *et al.* (2006) show that in their study by highlighting the different competitive pressures at work in the motor and the apparel industry.<sup>1</sup> The same is true in the services sector, which includes producers that are more or less exposed to different transnational market pressures. Distinctions of transnational union cooperation based on the traditional sectoral distinction between the manufacturing and services sectors are therefore not very helpful. In addition, any sectoral classification should distinguish between private and public services, given their unequal exposure to transnational market pressures. With all due respects to Vulkan and Larsson (2019),<sup>2</sup> we therefore propose an alternative typology that distinguishes private

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<sup>1</sup> If Anner *et al.* (2006) had included the cement industry in their study, their findings about the effects of different competitive pressures on transnational labor solidarity in manufacturing would have been even starker. Given cement's weight, its producers must manufacture it in proximity to their end-users to be competitive. The workers in the subsidiaries of cement multinationals, like the Irish CRH or the French-Swiss Holcim Group, for example, are therefore not exposed to the same whipsawing games that thrive in the motor industry, for instance (Greer and Hauptmeier 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Vulkan and Larsson (2019) count instances of transnational union cooperation and map them using traditional sectoral distinctions, without distinguishing between private and public services. Unsurprisingly, they found that unions in services sectors would be least, and unions in manufacturing unions most involved in transnational union cooperation (2019: 154). It should also be noted that they base their study on an opinion survey of 202 union officials from different European trade unions and not on concrete instances of transnational labor actions, as is the case with our study.

sectors *with* integrated transnational production networks and private sectors *without* integrated transnational production networks, in addition to comparing public and private sectors (see Table 1 below).

[Table 1 about here]

This new typology enables us to assess whether the increase in transnational socioeconomic protests since 1997 has been driven by union responses to increasing transnational competitive market pressures in private sectors *with* integrated transnational production networks, following the deepening of European market and monetary integration. If these market integration processes have been driving the rise in transnational socioeconomic protests since 1997, we should see this reflected in terms of the sectoral location *of the protest*. In that case, the rise in European socioeconomic protest events should be driven primarily by workers and unions active in private sectors with integrated transnational production networks.

Our database therefore distinguishes transnational protest events based on the sector in which they took place, which is important to assess our economic hypothesis. Given the difficulties in delimitating meaningful formal sectoral boundaries,<sup>3</sup> we distinguish protest events based on a sectoral categorization that is directly linked to the different horizontal economic pressures that unions are facing in the particular case. We have therefore created five categories, two for the private sector, two for the public sector, and one for cross-sectoral protest. The first category refers to private sectors that are transnationally integrated in terms of both production and commerce. The second category includes private sectors whose networks of production and commerce are not integrated across borders. The first category contains companies that are transnationally integrated, e.g., the car manufacturing sector,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Larsson's survey (2014), unions in the transport and the manufacturing sector participate more in transnational action by comparison to their counterparts in the service sector. Larsson separated transport from other categories in the service sector, as the transport sector would be much more exposed to international competition. Whereas that is true for seafarers, pilots or dockers, local bus or tram drivers hardly experience significant, transnational competitive pressures. In a subsequent survey sent to 602 unions in 35 countries, Vulkan and Larsson found that "sectoral differences explain more of the variation in levels of transnational cooperation" (2018: 1) than national ones. This time, Vulkan and Larsson distinguished transnational activities of unions from five sectors: metals and mining, construction, transport, healthcare, and banking and finance. Unions in the metals and mining and in the transport sector displayed again the highest numbers of transnational cooperation, whereas services sector unions were involved in fewer cases of transnational cooperation than those in any other sector. This conclusion, however, may be misleading, as their service sector category only included healthcare, banking and finance unions, even if the respondents from public sector unions "reported the highest degrees of [transnational] cooperation on public service cuts and austerity measures" (Vulkan and Larsson 2018: 11).

road transport or the airline industry. The second category contains firms that are not integrated transnationally, like cement producers, or local private services providers such as restaurants, delivery and taxi services, and cleaning and hospitality services. The public sector – which is exposed to low transnational competition – is furthermore divided into two sub-groups: public administrations that have been organized at a European-level from the beginning (e.g., the EU-level civil service) and national and local public sectors that have been affected by EU laws or the EU's governance prescriptions at a later stage. The fifth category refers to cross-sectoral or non-sector-specific transnational protests.

As competitive pressures between workers and unions across borders both motivate and frustrate collective action (Anner *et al.* 2006), however, we cannot just look at the sectoral location of the protest events. We must also consider the *levels and target of the protests*. If increasing European competitive integration pressures were driving the increase in transnational socioeconomic protests, they should be driven by actions that aim at curbing horizontal market pressures by taking wages and working conditions out of competition. This happened in the global maritime transport sector in the International Transport Workers' Federation's campaign for a global wage floor for seafarers (Lillie 2004; Anner *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, at the dawn of the EU's Economic and Monetary Union, several European federations of unions in other industries, such as the European Metalworkers' Federation, also attempted, albeit without much success, to set a European wage floor to take wages and working conditions out of competition (Schulten 2002; Erne 2008). As we show in the discussion of our findings, socioeconomic protest actions that aim at taking wages and working conditions out of competition did not increase significantly over time. This suggests that transnational competition cannot explain the increasing salience of transnational socioeconomic protests across Europe since 1997. Hence, we turn to our second, political explanation.

### **Vertical Supranational Interventions. A Political Driver of Transnational Action?**

Political factors have always played an important role in comparative industrial relations research (Crouch 1993). Most students of transnational labor action in Europe, however, still conceive of politics as a national factor. If transnational solidarity occurs, it must therefore be triggered by transnational market integration pressures (Vulkan and Larsson 2019; Bechter *et*

*al.* 2012) or repressive national labor control regimes (Anner 2015)<sup>4</sup> rather than supranational political integration pressures. Others – following the entrenched paths of methodological nationalism in the field (Caprile *et al.* 2018) – study how different national trade union and industrial relations systems shape international union solidarity (Vulkan and Larsson 2019; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). The words of caution of those who emphasize trade unions’ difficulties in developing joint actions across borders are certainly warranted (Seeliger 2019; Prosser 2018). At the same time, however, national differences did not prevent the doubling of socioeconomic protests across borders since 1997. We thus relate our political hypothesis for the rise in transnational socioeconomic protests to the increasing significance of vertical political interventions of supranational authorities, namely supranational EU institutions or headquarters of multinational corporations.

After the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty that created the European Union in 1993 and led to the establishment of the European Central Bank in 1998, EU-level executive authorities acquired more power; both as policymakers and employers of EU-level public servants (Bauer and Becker 2014). If one considers the privileges that the EU, and international organizations in general, grant their employees,<sup>5</sup> though, it would be surprising to see European public servants driving the increase in transnational socioeconomic protests. Even so, our data show an increasing number of transnational protests by European public servants. More important, however, were the transnational socioeconomic protests triggered by vertical political interventions of EU institutions, which urged member states to commodify national public services and employment relations systems, as it happened, for example, in the case of Commissioner Bolkestein’s draft EU Service Directive in 2004 (Béthoux *et al.* 2018; Leiren and Parks 2014; Crespy 2012; della Porta and Caiani 2011). In addition, there has been a remarkable increase in company-level labor protest directed against the vertical interventions of supranational headquarters of multinational corporations into the affairs of their subsidiaries. As far back as 2008, Erne therefore argued that the Europeanization of labor strategies that he observed in two parallel company merger cases are “a result of the centralization of corporate decision making at a supranational level” and “the dominant role of the European Commission in the area of competition policy” (Erne

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<sup>4</sup> Labor suppression can also trigger effective international counter movements, as shown, for example, by the response to the 2009 putsch against Manuel Zelaya, the pro-labor president of Honduras (Anner 2015). These classical internationalist campaigns, however, target national rather than supranational administrations and supranational corporate hierarchies that take advantage of repressive labor control regimes (see also footnote 6).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the only article in the EU treaties that explicitly mentions wages: “Officials and other servants of the Union ... shall be exempt from national taxes on salaries, wages and emoluments paid by the Union” (Article 12. Protocol No 7, Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union).



2008: 194). In 2012, Erne predicted a further increase in transnational labor protests when EU leaders adopted a new economic governance regime that allowed EU interventions in labor policy areas that had hitherto been an exclusive domain of national institutions: “The more socio-economic decisions are taken by tangible political and corporate elites rather than abstract market forces ... the easier it will be for social movements and trade unions to mobilise discontent” (Erne 2012: 124). If this hypothesis is correct, the increase in transnational socioeconomic protests should be driven by protests that target EU governance interventions or organizational decisions of multinational corporations. By contrast, classical *internationalist* labor mobilizations, which target decisions of another national government,<sup>6</sup> are not affected by the increased supranationalization of political hierarchies, which occurred in Europe since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. Their number should therefore not have increased over time. Indeed, our data neatly demonstrate this (see below).

Given this, our article advances the following larger theoretical argument. If one wants to explain the rise in transnational socioeconomic protests, one must consider structural factors, namely, the increasing centralization of both corporate and political decision making at a supranational level within Europe. Hence, transnational social movement and union research, which focuses on internal mechanisms, such as the relations between unions coming from different national traditions of social mobilizations (Borbáth and Gessler 2020; Rone 2020; Furåker and Larsson 2020; Prosser 2018; Gobin and Erne 2017) or forms of coalition making (Brookes 2019), should be complemented by studies that emphasize the structural changes of governance structures that affect all countries in Europe. Certainly, internal forms of organization and communication do matter, but any studies of the drivers of transnational action must take stock of the transnationalization of corporate and political governance in the form of vertical integration (Erne *et al.* 2015; Pernicka and Lahusen 2018; Erne 2008).

To locate these socioeconomic mobilizations in a broader analytical framework, we propose a new typology that distinguishes between four types of protests depending on their levels, which are in turn related to different targets. We focus on the levels and targets of socioeconomic protests, as transnational collective socioeconomic action is hardly based on any abstract, internationalist working-class identity (Hyman 2002). By contrast, collective socioeconomic solidarities have historically been forged by concrete instances of collective action (Touraine 1966; Thompson 1963) that have been “conditioned by perceptions of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the European protests by the far-right against the suppression of labor movements, authoritarian governments in Portugal, Spain and Greece until the 1970s, or the suppression of the Solidarity union in Poland after the imposition of the martial law by General Jaruzelski in 1981.

antagonism to an external threat” (Hyman 2002: 3). Unions succeeded in uniting workers across different constituencies when they targeted vertical interventions by their employer or by the political system that would affect them all. At times, unions also targeted horizontal competitive market pressures that put companies (and their workers) in competition with each other, namely, when they engage in collective action at a sectoral level with the goal of taking wages and working conditions out of competition (Lillie 2004). Finally, when labor movements attained a totalizing understanding of the systemic antagonism that they were facing, they also joined *anti-systemic movements* (Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 2012) and fought for a different economy and society. To assess the importance of these different targets as drivers of transnational socioeconomic protests in Europe since 1997, we measure their salience at different levels: 1) company level: mobilizations that target decisions of corporate hierarchies; 2) sectoral level: mobilizations that aim to take labor (i.e., wages and working conditions) out of competition; 3) political (governmental) level: mobilizations that target decisions of supranational or national administrations; 4) systemic level: mobilizations that target the capitalist economic and social order as a whole (see Table 2 below).

[Table 2 about here]

The empty fields in Table 2 above indicate that there is a close relationship between levels and targets of protest actions. As much as protests at the level of a single company do not take wages and working conditions out of competition, sectoral level protests do not target decisions of a particular corporation. Protests at the political (governmental) level primarily target vertical decisions of public administrations rather than the horizontal market competition between corporations. By contrast, anti-systemic protests that challenge the capitalist order do target both horizontal market and vertical political pressures.

### **Analyzing European Protest Events**

Our dataset is not the first one that aims to capture the trajectories of protest events across Europe. The most comprehensive database of European protest events to date is based on an analysis of 29,588 protest events across 30 European countries, which a computer program extracted out of 5 million English-language newswire reports (Kriesi *et al.* 2020). This database confirms the dominant role of economic claims as a trigger of protests in Europe. Between 2000 and 2015, 38.1 percent of all protests in Europe were motivated by socioeconomic claims towards public institutions or private firms/employers (Gessler and

Schulte-Cloos 2020; Table 6.1). By contrast, only 22 percent of all protests were motivated by environmental, peace, feminist, LGTB, squatter, migrant or anti-racist concerns, which highlights the salience of economic protests in times of crisis. Contrary to the resurgence of class conflicts during the 1970s (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978), most socioeconomic protests targeted “the economic crisis management of governments” rather than “business corporations” (Kriesi and Wüst 2020: 280). Unfortunately, however, the database of Kriesi and colleagues does not distinguish between transnational and national protests. They neither single out the coordinated, transnational protests that were happening in different locations in parallel across borders at the same time, nor those that were targeting supranational institutions rather than national governments (Lorenzini *et al.* 2020). Instead, their database simply shows that there were more protest events in Southern Europe by comparison to North-Western or Central and Eastern Europe. This is hardly surprising given the country-specific nature of the socioeconomic governance prescriptions that the supranational EU authorities began issuing after the crisis of 2008 (Erne 2015). Whereas the Europeanization of *national* protest waves is therefore still “a promise for the future” (Kriesi and Wüst 2020: 280), we cannot use their database to explain the doubling of *transnational* socioeconomic protest events since 1997.

As we want to test the salience of our economic and political hypotheses for the remarkable rise of transnational socioeconomic protests since 1997, we must go beyond methodological nationalism that is still informing comparative research in the field (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).<sup>7</sup> Instead of focussing on different national patterns of labor relations and protest politics, which would mirror different varieties of capitalisms, welfare regimes, or trade unionism (Hall and Soskice 2001; Esping-Andersen 1990; Hyman 2001), we created a novel database that captures the transnational socioeconomic protests which transcend national boundaries.

### **Our Transnational Socioeconomic Protest Events Database**

This paper is based on a new database of 355 transnational socioeconomic protest events reported by labor-related newsletters, websites and specialized media outlets, namely demonstrations, strikes, strikes and demonstrations, boycotts, and European Citizens’

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<sup>7</sup> Wimmer/Glick Schiller who coined the term in the context of migration research define methodological nationalism as “the assumption that the nation state society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (2002, 217). This assumption would lead to research that focuses on national states as the units of meaningful action and tend to omit transnational and supranational levels of action.

Initiatives (Erne and Nowak 2022). The geographical scope of the database includes all European countries, excluding Turkey, Belarus, and Russia. The number of countries covered by the database thus remains constant over the period of 1997 to 2020, irrespective of EU membership.

We have collected these events based on a wide range of EU-level and national labor websites, newsletters, and media outlets specialized in labor politics published in English, French, German, and Italian from 1997 to 2020. Whereas the selection of sources in these languages may expose us to the risk of missing some protests, e.g., in Scandinavia or Central and Eastern Europe, we are confident that most protest events are captured by at least one of our national and European sources.<sup>8</sup>

We have chosen to begin our database in 1997. This is no coincidence, as EU leaders adopted the EU's Stability and Growth Pack in that year, which strengthened the coordination of fiscal and economic policies in view of the Economic and Monetary Union. By contrast to studies that were interested in the role of the EU as a driver of contestation (della Porta and Caiani 2011; Dolezal *et al.* 2016; Béthoux *et al.* 2018), however, it did not matter if Europe or European integration or a particular EU-related incident was mentioned by the protesters. We included every socioeconomic protest event reported by our sources in our database if it took place in parallel in at least two countries *or* if it had at least 30 participants from at least two countries in case the event took place in one location only, as in the case of protests in front of EU institutions or headquarters of multinational companies.

We define socioeconomic protest in the sense of working-class politics in a rather restricted way, as protests on workplace issues, protests on labor and social public policy issues, and protests on economic globalization, Europeanization and transnationalization processes in general. We recognize that ecological, anti-racist and feminist demonstrations increasingly overlap with working-class politics, but to keep the data comparable over time, we did not include such protests in the database. Therefore, we exclude from our database anti-militarist, environmental, farmers', feminist, anti-racist, and anti-fascist protests, although trade unions were, at times, also participating in them.

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<sup>8</sup> EU-level sources: EBR-News, ETUI Collective Bargaining Newsletter, Eurofound EIRO database, Eurofound European Restructuring Monitor, European Commission ECI Register, newsletters of the ETUC's sectoral European trade union federations and their predecessors (EAEA, EUROCCOP, EFBWW, EFFAT, EFJ, IndustriAll, EPSU, ETF, ETUCE, UNI-EUROPA), IR share, planetlabor, Staff Union of the European Patent Office. German sources: Labournet Germany; French sources: Liaisons Sociales, Métis Europe, Clés du social; Italian sources: Rassegna; Central and East European Sources: LeftEast. We also added information on protest events based on academic publications as well as general news media if referenced in the above sources.

We have recorded not only descriptive data of each protest event (date of the action, its location(s), and its organizers), but also the factors outlined above that enable us to test our economic and political hypotheses for the continuous rise of transnational socioeconomic protests in Europe since 1997, namely their sector (Table 1) and their levels and targets (Table 2). In addition, we have recorded two control variables. The first one is distinguishing protest events based on the number of participants. This allows us to assess if our explanation for the rise in protest events still holds true, if assessed across different categories of protest participant numbers (30-999; 1k-9,999; 10k-99,999; 100k-999,999; and over 1m participants). The second control variable distinguishes different forms of protest events, i.e., demonstrations, demonstrations and strikes, strikes, boycotts, and European Citizens' Initiatives.<sup>9</sup> As the share of different protest forms remains largely constant over time (see Figure A in the Online Appendix), we can exclude shifting protest patterns as a driver for the rise in transnational socioeconomic protests since 1997.

## Findings

Our data confirm only one of our two structural hypotheses about the drivers of transnational socioeconomic protests. Whereas horizontal competitive economic pressures hardly explain the rise of transnational socioeconomic protests in Europe since 1997, most protests happened in response to vertical interventions by supranational EU or corporate authorities.

### **Transnational competition: not the main driver of transnational action**

As shown in Table 3, 232 of 355 protest events occurred within a particular sector. This allows us to test the significance of transnational competitive pressures as a driver of transnational action. Of those 232 events, 98 took place in private sectors with integrated transnational production networks. By contrast, 134 protest events took place in private (14) and public (120) sectors that were not exposed to transnational competition pressures.

[Table 3 about here]

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<sup>9</sup> Larsson (2014) also distinguished between different forms of transnational action, namely joint statements and petitions, demonstrations, and strikes. Given the inexhaustible number of 'joint statements and petitions' issued by European trade unions since 1997, we only included *European Citizens' Initiatives* (ECIs) into our database. The ECI is constitutional, direct democratic instrument of the EU, which enables 1 million EU citizens to urge the European Commission to initiate EU legislation or to take other EU-level actions (Szabó *et al.* 2022).

There have been more transnational protest events in sectors where workers and unions were exposed to *lower* transnational competitive pressures between them. This finding allows us to go beyond Anner *et al.*'s indecisive conclusion that “competition can frustrate cooperation, but it also motivates it” (2006: 24). Figure 2 below also shows that the share of transnational socioeconomic protest events in internationally integrated private sectors has not increased significantly over time, despite the increase of intra-European trade flows since 1997.

[Figure 2 about here]

Between 1997 and 2002, thirteen (21%) of all 62 sectoral and intersectoral transnational protests in this period occurred in private sectors with integrated transnational production networks. Subsequently, this share increased to 24% (2003–2008), to 27% (2009–2014), and to 34% (2015–2020). Hence, although the share of protests in private sectors with integrated transnational production networks increased over time, most sectoral transnational protests still occurred in sectors with a low exposure to transnational competition (private sectors without integrated transnational production networks; national/local and European public sectors). Until 2008, almost all transnational actions in these seemingly ‘sheltered’ sectors occurred at the level of national and local public services. After 2009, however, actions in the European public sector became much more important, notably given the increasing conflicts also within European administrations, e.g., the European Patent Office.

If one assesses transnational socioeconomic protest by sector and the number of protest participants over time, a very similar picture emerges. Whereas the rise in protest since 1997 has mainly been driven by an increase of smaller protests with 30-10,000 participants, Figure 3 below also shows that the share of protests in integrated private sectors in these smaller protest events did not continuously increase over time.

[Figure 3 about here]

These findings confirm that transnational competition cannot explain the increasing number of transnational socioeconomic protest in Europe since 1997.

### **Vertical pressures of supranational hierarchies: the key driver of transnational action**

Table 4 outlines the levels and targets of transnational protest events since 1997. Of all 355 events, 210 occurred primarily at the political (governmental) level and 88 at the company-level.<sup>10</sup> Hence, in 298 cases, transnational socioeconomic protest actions targeted decisions of corporate (88) *or* public (210) hierarchies. Of the latter, 209 transnational protests targeted EU-level governmental authorities, and only one protest targeted a national government.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, socioeconomic protests took place at a sectoral level in only 16 cases. This is a very small number, including by comparison to the 41 anti-systemic transnational protest events in Europe, which took place at the systemic level since 1997.

[Table 4 about here]

Figure 4 shows that the share of protest events at company level increased over time. From 1997 to 2002, only 13% of transnational socioeconomic protest events occurred at company level. This value grew to 23% (2003–2009), 28% (2009–2014) and 30% (2015–2020).

[Figure 4 about here]

Figure 4 also shows that most transnational socioeconomic protest actions happened at the political (governmental) level, although their share declined from 71% between 1997 and 2002, to 56% (2003–2008), and to 54% (2009–2014). During the last period, their share increased again to 60% (2015–2020). The latter rise does not, however, reflect an increasing number of socio-economic protests against EU policy interventions, but rather a growing level of industrial conflict in the European public services sector (see Table 2). From 2015 to 2020, for example, 28 protest actions took place at the European Patent Office. Of the 210 protest events at the political (governmental) level of administrations since 1997 (see Table 4), 165 targeted universal (draft) EU laws (see: Turnbull 2006; Leiren and Parks 2014) and just six targeted the country-specific economic governance prescriptions that the European Commission and Council started issuing after the financial crisis (Erne 2015), whereas 39 protests targeted employers of European public servants (31 in 2015-2020 and 8 in 2009-

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<sup>10</sup> If a protest occurred at both the company and the political level, we nevertheless coded the action only once, depending on the more prominent action level and target. Accordingly, we recorded the ABB Alstom Power demonstration of 10 April 2000 in Brussels as a *company level* action only, even if it also targeted the European Commission, which approved the ABB Alstom merger although the two companies breached EU law by not consulting their European Works Councils about their merger project (Erne 2008, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> That is, the European Federation of Journalists' rally on 14 June 2013 at the Greek embassy in Brussels against the Greek government's closure of the public service broadcaster ERT.

2014). Taking company and political (governmental) level protests together, one can see that the growing salience of transnational collective action primarily mirrors protests directed against supranational corporate or governmental hierarchies rather than against horizontal market pressures.

*Sector-level* collective bargaining and action is still regarded as the primary tool of European trade unions to take wages and working conditions out of competition. Even so, Figure 4 also reveals that there were even fewer transnational protest actions at the sectoral level by comparison to the radical protests at a *systemic level*. If one assesses transnational socioeconomic protest by levels and targets and by the number of protest participants over time, a very similar picture emerges. Figure 5 below shows that the increase in protests with fewer participants cannot be explained by a disproportional increase of sector-level protest actions that aim to take labor out of competition.

[Figure 5 about here]

These figures confirm that vertical political pressures of supranational corporate and political hierarchies, rather than horizontal market pressures, are driving the increasing number of transnational socioeconomic protest in Europe since 1997.

### **Conclusion**

After the relaunch of the European integration process by the European Single Market project and the Economic and Monetary Union, Martin and Ross argued that unions must “enlarge their strategic domain to keep workers from being played off against each other” (Martin and Ross 1999: 3012) within the larger, horizontally integrated European economy. Even so, Dølvik (2004: 306) predicted that collective bargaining and action would remain at the national level, regardless of attempts by some European trade unions to coordinate wage policies across borders. Yet, Dølvik also acknowledged that a “major crisis and conflicts” could lead to path-breaking institutional change (2004: 306). After the crisis of 2008, major changes in European labor policies did indeed occur, but they were not led by “the main unions in the Euro-zone” succeeding in “synchronizing their bargaining rhythms and demands, eventually causing industrial conflict to spread across borders” (*ibid.*).

Instead, EU leaders changed their strategy for uniting Europe when they realized that the Single Market and Monetary Union did not result in economic convergence but rather to severe macroeconomic imbalances (Erne 2015; Jabko 2019). They adopted a new economic



governance (NEG) regime that allowed country-specific EU prescriptions in areas that had hitherto been shielded from EU interventions, including wages policy (Jordan *et al.* 2021). In turn, European unions could either engage in competitive concession bargaining at national or local levels or challenge EU interventions *politically*, either at EU- or the national-level.

Most transnational socioeconomic protest actions in Europe still occur at a supranational, political (governmental) level, even if the introduction of the EU's new economic governance regime (NEG) after the financial crisis did not lead to a significant increase in their share. Firstly, even before 2008, most transnational socioeconomic protest events took place at a political level, namely in response to a proposal for EU laws that were seen to be undermining labor standards or public services. This happened, for example, in the cases of the various EU Part Directives or Commissioner Bolkesteins' Services Directive in 2004 (Turnbull 2006; Leiren and Parks 2014). Second, the country-specific nature of NEG prescriptions is "nationalizing social conflicts" (Erne 2015: 345), as it is difficult for national activists to uncover and politicize the overarching, commodifying EU policy script that is informing NEG (Jordan *et al.* 2021; Stan and Erne 2021). NEG mimics the whipsawing tactics of multinational corporations that control their subsidiaries with site-specific key performance indicators and ad-hoc interventions (Erne 2015). These new governance tactics frequently get in the way of transnational union collaboration (Greer and Hauptmeier 2016).

Overall, transnational socioeconomic protest action is driven primarily by tangible interventions of supranational political and corporate hierarchies rather than by horizontal market pressures, regardless of the attempts of both corporate and political leaders to justify their vertical interventions as necessary responses to horizontal market pressures. Given the greater integration of political and corporate hierarchies in the EU, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between vertical integration and transnational political action is more visible in Europe. And yet, transnational labor actions have also been triggered by political integration attempts elsewhere, for example, in response to the NAFTA agreement (Kay 2015) or George W. Bush's Free Trade Area of the Americas project (Dobrusin 2015). In future case studies of successful transnational union actions, we should therefore assess not only inter- and intra-union coordination or unions' power resources, but also activists' attempts to *politicize* the decisions of supranational HQs of multinational corporations or supranational decisions of EU-level political authorities. As European industrial relations scholars, we should hence not retreat ourselves into the depoliticized fields of social psychology, human resources management or microeconomics, but refocus our attention to corporate and political governance institutions, social power relations, and labor politics.

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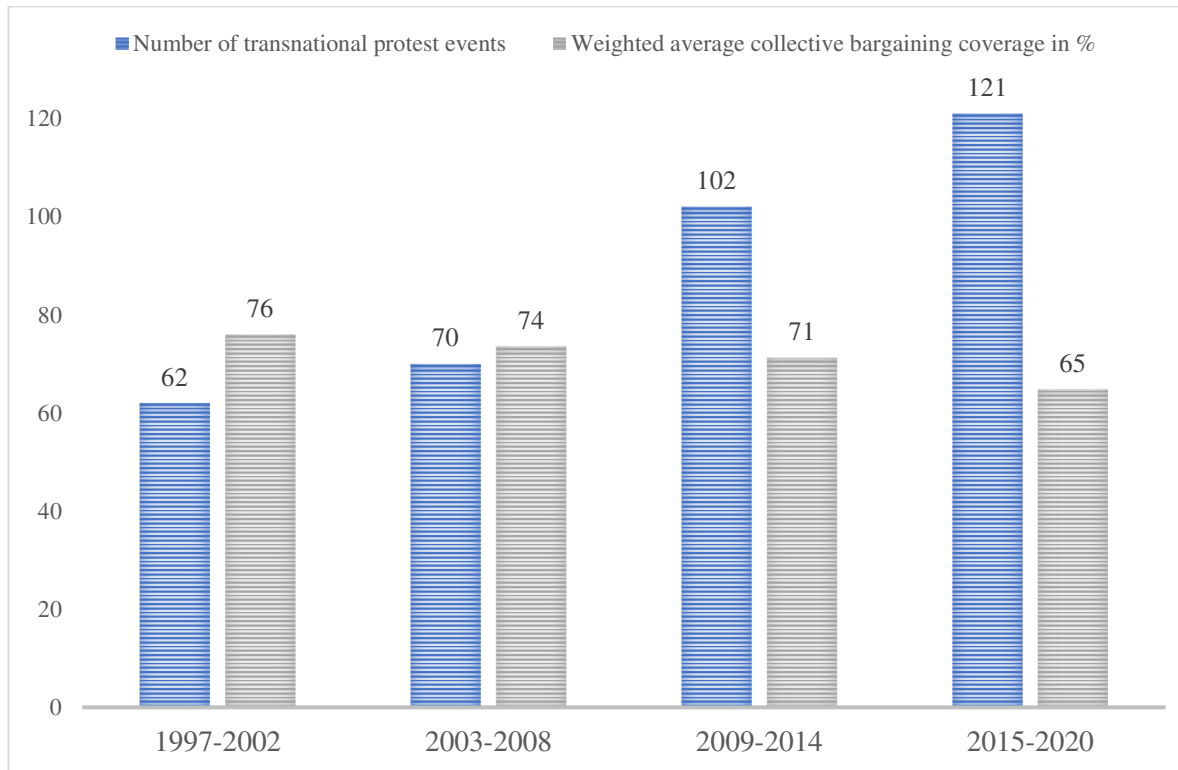
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## Figures and Tables for the Main Article / Table for the Online Appendix

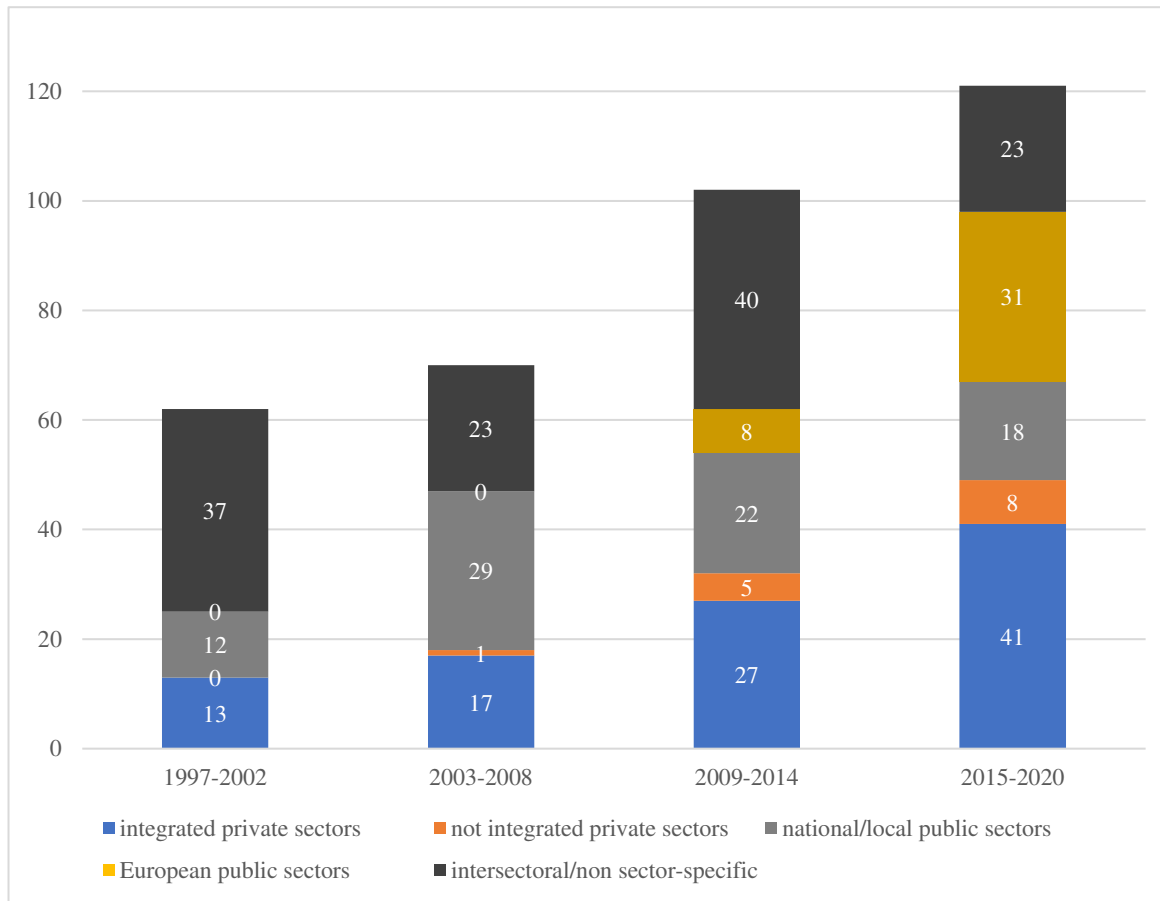
### 1) Figures for the Main Article

**Figure 1: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests and Collective Wage Bargaining Coverage**



Sources: Transnational socioeconomic protests: Erne and Nowak (2022); N= 355.  
Collective bargaining coverage for the EU 27: Eurofound, European Company Surveys, weighted EU level survey data for all 27 EU member states for 2009, 2013, and 2019.

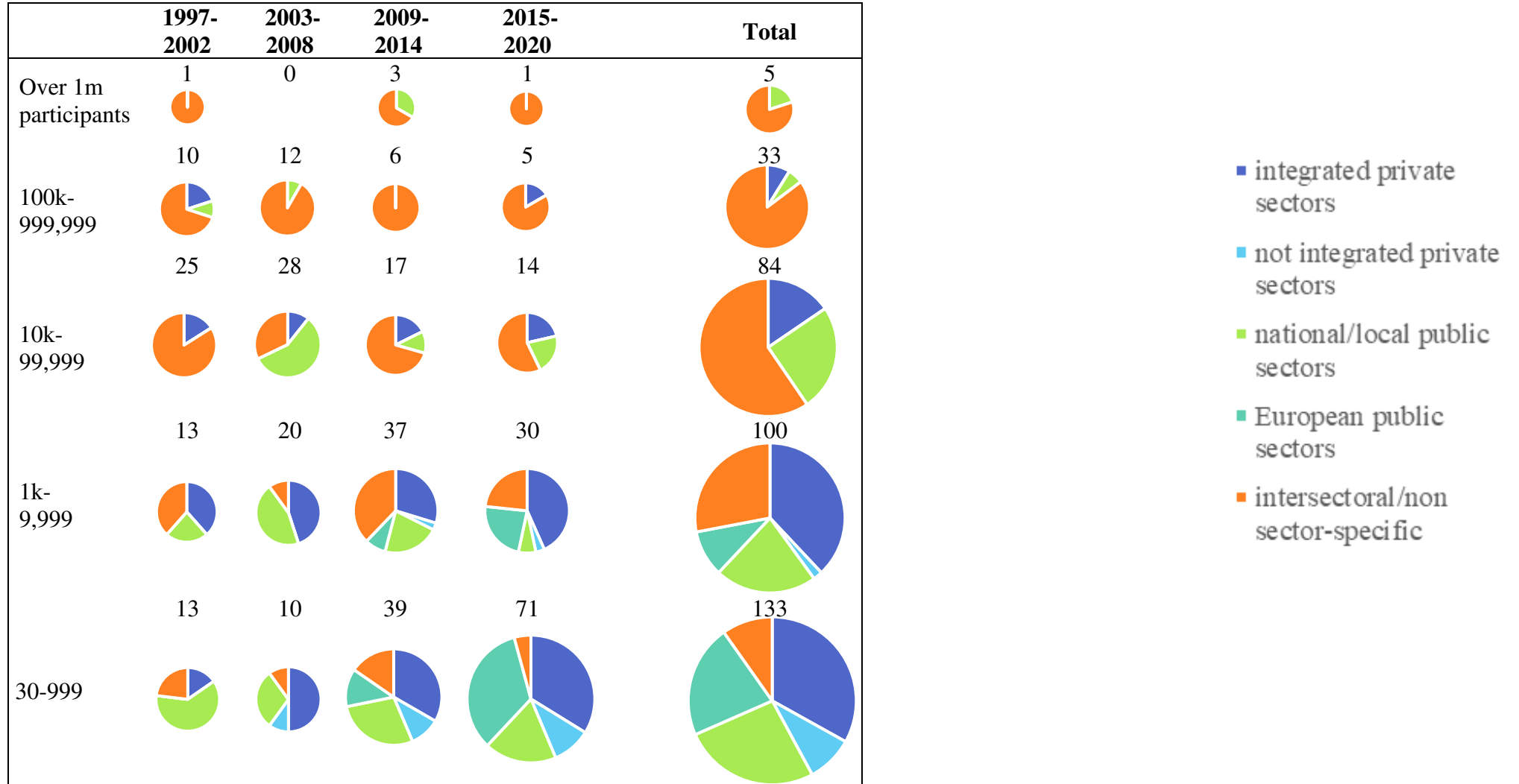
**Figure 2: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Sectors**



Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355.

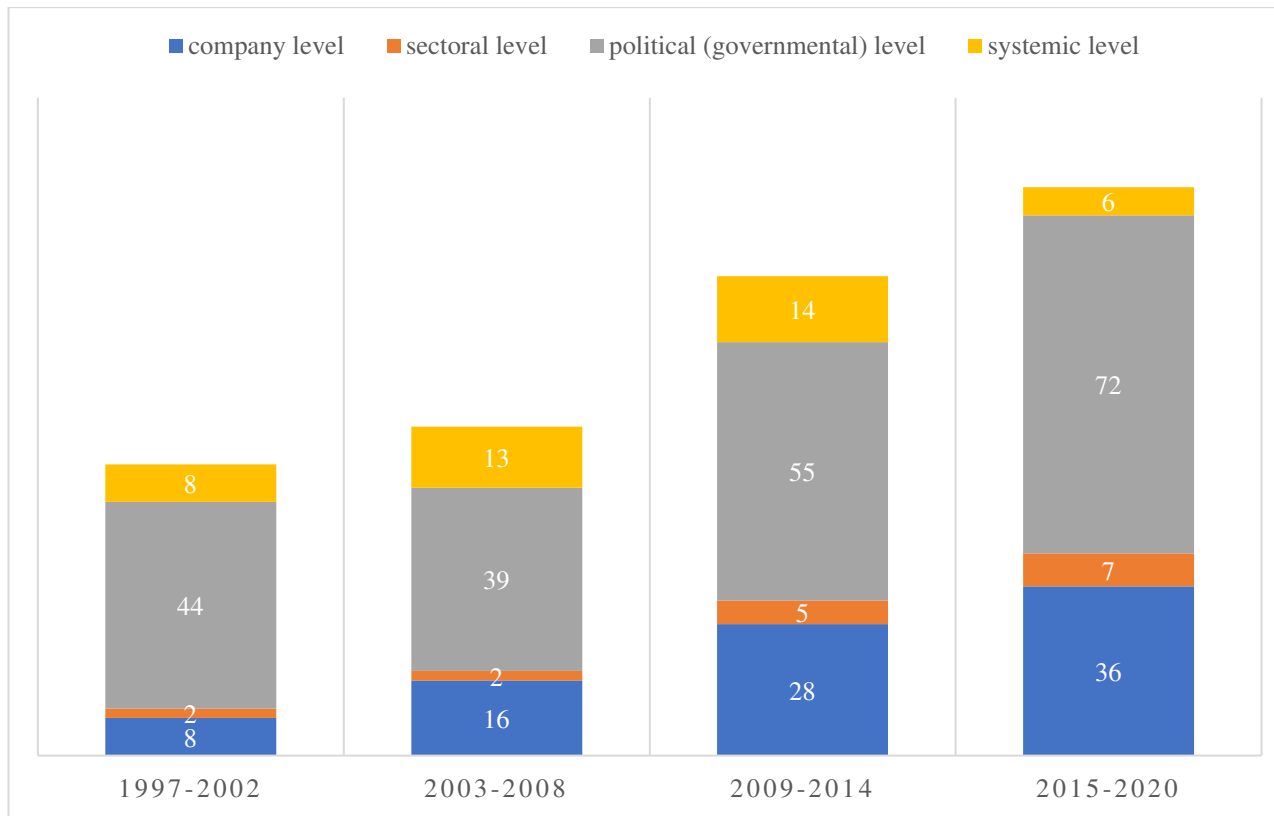


**Figure 3: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Sectors and Participation Intensity**



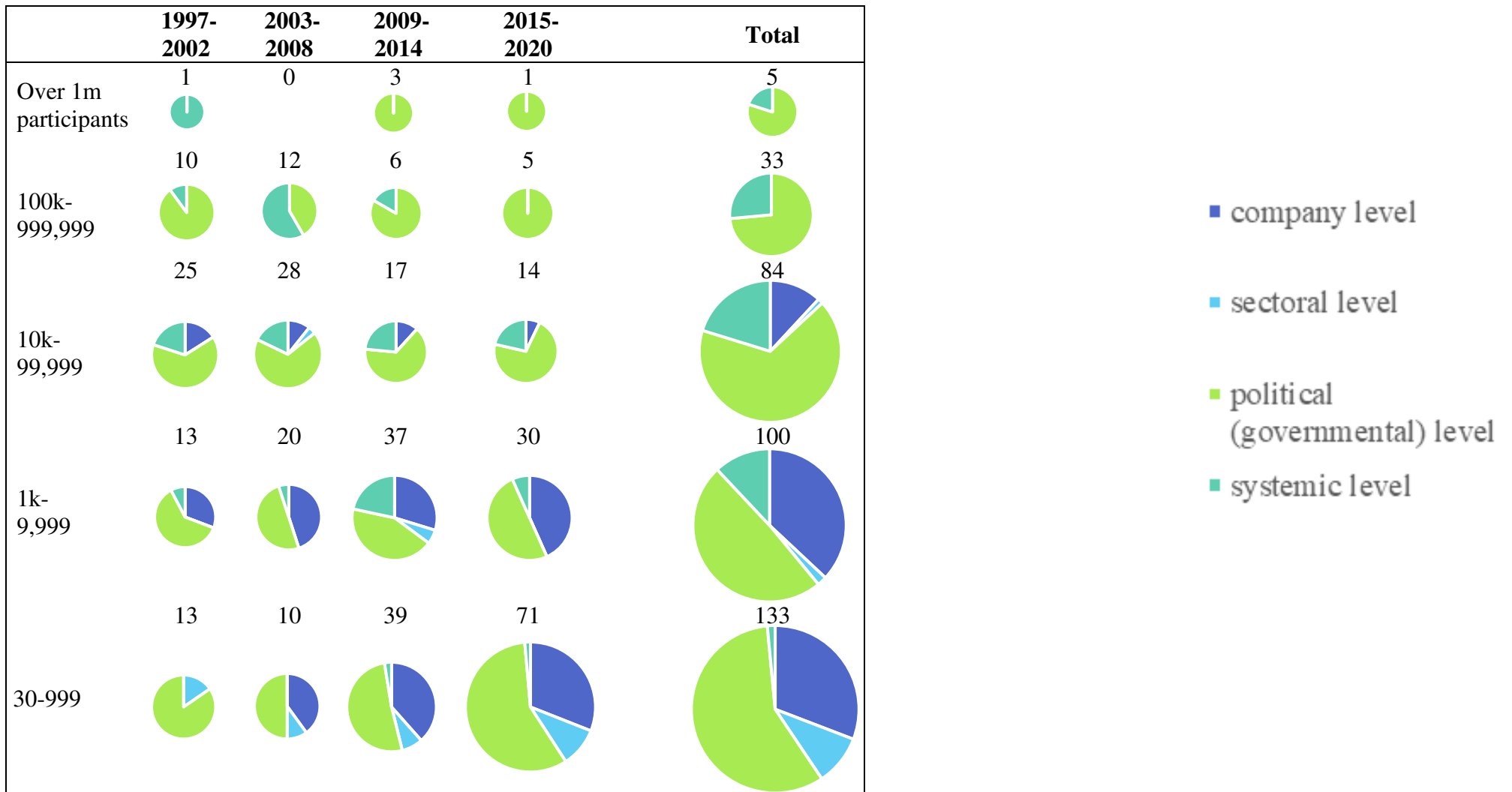
Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355

**Figure 4: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Levels and Primary Targets**



Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355

**Figure 5: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Levels and Participants**



Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355

## 2) Tables for the Main Article

**Table 1: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Sectors**

	Exposure to transnational competition	
	High	Low
Private Sectors	With integrated transnational production networks	Without integrated transnational production networks
Public Sectors <sup>a</sup>		National/Local public sectors European public sectors

Source: Erne and Nowak (2022).

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Our public sector category includes all services of general interest irrespective of their ownership (see Treaty on European Union: Protocol (No 26) on services of general interest).

**Table 2: Levels and Targets of Transnational Socioeconomic Protests**

		Targets	
		Horizontal Market Pressures	Vertical Pressures of Hierarchies
Levels	Company		Targeting decisions of transnational companies
	Sectoral	Targeting competition on wages and labor standards between companies of the same sector	
	Political (or governmental)		Targeting decisions of national and supranational administrations
	Systemic	Targeting the capitalist socioeconomic system	

Source: Erne and Nowak (2022).

**Table 3: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Sectors (Results)**

	Exposure to transnational competition	
	High	Low
<b>Intersectoral</b>	Categorisation not applicable. <b>123 protest events</b>	
<b>Private Sectors</b>	With integrated transnational production networks <b>98 protest events</b>	Without integrated transnational production networks <b>14 protest events</b>
<b>Public Sectors<sup>a</sup></b>		National/Local public sectors <b>81 protest events</b> European public sectors <b>39 protest events</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>134</b>

Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355

Note: <sup>a</sup>The public sector category includes all services of general interest irrespective of their ownership (see Treaty on European Union: Protocol (No 26) on services of general interest).

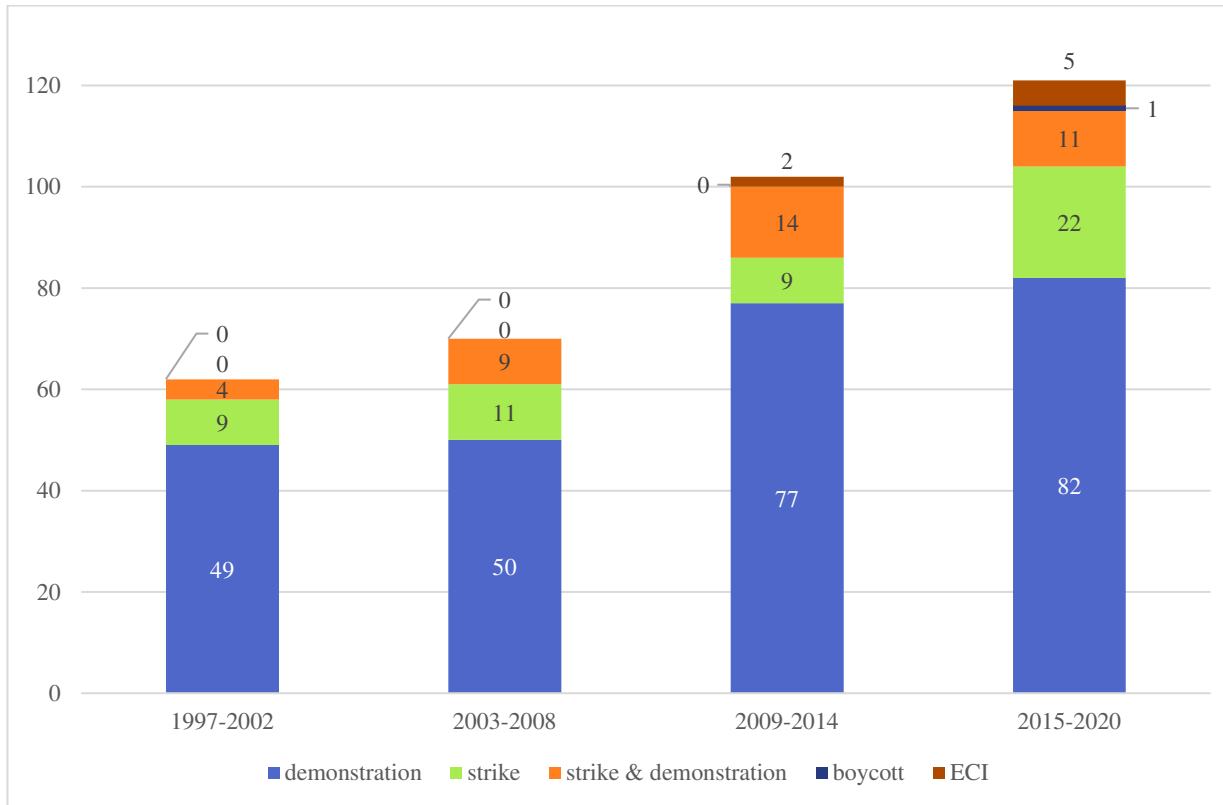
**Table 4: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Levels and Targets (Results)**

		Targets	
		Horizontal Market Pressures	Vertical Pressures of Hierarchies
<b>Levels</b>	<b>Company</b>		Transnational companies <b>88 protest events</b>
	<b>Sectoral</b>	Industrial mobilizations that aim to take labor out of competition <b>16 protest events</b>	
	<b>Political (or governmental)</b>		Supranational administrations <b>209 protest events</b> National administrations <b>1 protest event</b>
	<b>Systemic</b>	Capitalist socioeconomic system <b>41 protest events</b>	

Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355.

### 3) Table for the Online Appendix

**Figure A: Transnational Socioeconomic Protests by Protest Form**



Source: Erne and Nowak (2022). N= 355