The proposed paper aims to answer the research question; how the representativeness of social partners is operationalized in the different EU member states. It will map the concepts of representativeness, the relevant rules and regulations, and compare these elements and trends.

Industrial relations as an academic discipline or field of study is multidisciplinary by nature. The analysis of different concepts and methods in which representativeness is operationalized at Member State level, may be based on approaches from sociology, political science, economics, labour law, history, and statistics, just to mention a few. The legitimacy of social partners stems from their representativeness, and is embedded in the wider governance of political democracy and the organization of civil society. Analysing the ways in which representativeness is operationalized in different industrial relations systems will help to map, analyse and assess the different concepts of representativeness. Drawing on this diversity of concepts and approaches will help the contractor in his/her comparative analysis.

In sociological terms, representativeness denotes the “(...), quality of an agent which entitles them to be identified with a group and justifies their fitness to express the group's aspirations accurately. The agent may, consequently, claim eligibility to undertake representation of the group. Representation and representativeness are, therefore, closely interrelated.”

In statistics, a sample is representative for a wider population if it reflects the same proportion in a number of relevant criteria. Representativeness is expressed as a proportion or a degree in which conclusions from analyzing the sample may be generalized to the entire population. This is the quantitative way of looking at representativeness.

According to the basic assets of political science, representative democracy differs from a direct democracy, by replacing channels of direct participation by indirect mechanisms of voice via representatives. The outcome of elections reflects the distribution of representation between the different political parties and candidates. The democratic aspect in the concept of representativeness relates to the fact that the majority of the voters will be in a position to voice and execute their interests through the parties in power, while the minority will still have a chance, at least, of expressing their interests, provide that certain thresholds are met. In short, representative democracy is “a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives: a system of parliamentary democracy.”

In industrial relations, it is not the entire population which needs to be reflected by representative actors, but only the specific interest of the two sides of industry. Interest representation is not only constituted and measured in terms of a proportion or a degree, but also...
in terms of a capacity. This capacity relates to the qualitative aspect of representativeness, like in the political system of a representative democracy. The national rules and regulations on the representativeness of social partners (e.g. determining threshold for representativeness) can be enacted by the social partners themselves or by the governments. At the moment when the representativeness of social partners is questioned, the stability of the industrial relations system as such is put into question.

As systems naturally tend to maintain in a certain status quo, reflections about representativeness will bear the risk of enticing opposition from the incumbent actors. The established actors entered the scene in an often unique historical and societal context. New actors may, however, appear, as societies transform. When such a new actor claims to be recognized a representative social partners, this challenges the existing actor of the industrial relations system. Clearly defined and generally accepted concept, rules and practices (e.g. thresholds calculated, election outcomes, membership figures) help to manage transitions smoothly. As Wilkinson and Wood note “within the employment relationship, it is desirable for managers and owners to at least have some legitimacy in the eyes of their workforce: outright coercion is inefficient and with uncertain outcomes.” Alternatively, decisions by labour courts may bring such recognition via court ruling.

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