

Strategic Autonomy for a Social and Sovereign Europe

Report on the hybrid workshop on 19 October 2021



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The debate about strategic autonomy for a social and sovereign Europe affects various political fields of action, not only in foreign and security policy, but also in trade and industrial policy, in health and social policy and others. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed Europe's dependence on international supply chains, the global interconnectedness of the economy and the limited autonomy of the member states. The economies of all countries are integrated into global value chains and supply networks that make autonomous production, e.g. of medicines, difficult. Oligopolistic digital infrastructure services and platforms take on a systemic role instead of democratically legitimized governments. Cross-border trade is faced with only weak or no global regulatory mechanisms. This must be countered by a new European sovereignty model that protects strategic infrastructure and, in particular, industrial relations and the European social model. This is the biggest challenge for trade unions.

In order to bring together the various strands of discussion within the European trade union movement and to work towards a common understanding and common political demands, the DGB and FES invited trade unionists and experts from all EU member states to a workshop in Berlin. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, not all participants could come and the workshop was hybrid, i.e. carried out both with presence in the conference room of the FES and with digital participation. It was the fourth forum in the annual series "Social Europe" organized by DGB and FES.

In his introduction, **Andreas Botsch** from the DGB emphasized the centrality of the topic, which is not only one for the DGB, but also for all of



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Germany, Europe and all trade unions. According to Botsch, European unification is a social issue, and the challenges of our time, such as climate change, the design of a social EU or the rivalries of economic powers, can only be mastered through joint action in economic, social and cultural areas.

Sovereignty: understanding of the term in the EU member states

To start the debate, Ralf Hexel, head of the FES project "Sovereign Europe", presented the results of a survey on the understanding and perception of European sovereignty in eight EU member states. In



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the study, 8,000 Europeans were asked about European sovereignty. The most important result is that Europeans support a strengthening of European sovereignty and that European and national sovereignty are not contradictory but go hand in hand. In addition, the poll revealed that Europe's sovereignty is limited. Further findings were that the concepts of national sovereignty, European sovereignty and strategic autonomy are understood differently in the countries and that the concept of sovereignty is defined and evaluated differently. The term cannot be assigned to a specific political orientation.

Economy, security and health were the three most important factors for European sovereignty for those surveyed. They also saw the most important reasons for strengthening European sovereignty in the areas of terrorism, climate and health. As a final insight, the obstacles to more European sovereignty were presented: nationalism, foreign countries that have no interest in a strong Europe, and weak EU institutions.

Ralf Hexel went into individual conclusions as an example: With regard to the relationship between national and European sovereignty, a **"more Europe" mentality is not the solution**. Rather, what is needed is a redefinition between the EU and its institutions and the national democracies. This requires a reform of the EU's system of competences. The principle should apply: **national sovereignty where it is possible to guarantee proximity to the people, and European sovereignty where national action is not enough**, such as in the area of terrorism.

France

The perspectives of three member states were then presented. **Yvan Ricordeau** from the French trade union confederation **CFTD** joined in via zoom. In his view, the **strategic autonomy of the EU** is also an important issue in France, which is why strengthening it will be a **priority of the French Council Presidency** in the coming year. Using the example of the delayed supply of masks at the beginning of the pandemic, he showed the dependence of the EU and the member states on the global economy. Neither the member states alone nor the EU were able to solve the problem in the short term. According to Yvan Ricordeau, this shows how vulnerable we are on an economic, social and health level. Regarding the strategic paths of the CFTD, he emphasized that it is not so much a



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question of terms, but rather of strategic decisions. The EU should use its economic and trade policy as a lever to advance its strategic autonomy.

Netherlands

Petra Bolster-Damen from the Dutch trade union federation **FNV** emphasized that the corona pandemic has made the mutual dependencies within the EU clear, which is why the development of the EU's strategic autonomy should be seen as an opportunity to promote European industry in order to attract European companies to help be competitive. Following this, she presented various policy



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areas that need to be further developed in order to strengthen the interests of workers and ensure sustainable growth. For example, a **fair internal market** is needed. In order for everyone to be able to benefit from the internal market, clear rules are needed. In addition, the EU's dependence on raw materials and energy must be reduced. In the area of sustainable trade policy, the focus should also be on high-quality jobs, equal competitive conditions and compliance with due diligence obligations. She also stressed the importance of digital and economic autonomy for a resilient Europe.

Poland and Hungary

Instead of Josef Stredula from the Czech trade union federation CMKOS, **Susanne Wixforth** from the **DGB** presented the Polish and Hungarian perspective on the subject. She referred to the different understandings of European sovereignty within the national populations and made it clear that a separation between country and city as well as between young and old can be observed here. Using Poland as an example, she outlined that young people in Poland in particular are pro-European. According to Wixforth, it is important that Poland and Hungary continue to receive support from outside, i. H. from the EU and its member states, since the political developments in these countries, such as the recent EU-critical constitutional judgment in Poland, do not reflect the opinions of the entire population. Polish and Hungarian civil society advocates increased cross-border cooperation with other organizations and for the consistent linking of EU rule of law criteria with the payment of EU funds. Like Ralf Hexel, she also emphasized that the EU must be developed primarily from within due to increasing nationalist movements in some of its member states, since the greatest threats to the cohesion of the Union lie within Europe itself.



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Europäischer Gewerkschaftsbund

Ester Lynch from the European Trade Union Confederation ETUC named key challenges for a social and sovereign Europe. She referred to the complicated decision-making process within the EU. For a functioning democracy, it is crucial that EU citizens are also included in the decision-making process. Another point of criticism she mentioned was the veto power of some member states. Since EU law requires unanimous decision-making on certain issues, some member states would use their indirect veto right to strategically block certain decisions in one EU policy area because they conflict with another EU policy be dissatisfied. She called for the creation of transparency at the meetings of the European Council and the Council working groups. Instead of relying on consulting agencies, the trade unions and social partners should be regularly involved in the legislative process of the EU Commission.



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Spain

Jesus Gallego from the trade union umbrella organization UGT provided a Spanish perspective on the subject. Referring to the survey on the perception of European sovereignty, he explained that historically, the concept of sovereignty tends to be assigned to the right-wing spectrum in Spain. Among other things, he cited the dictatorship under Franco and the idea of independence and nationalism in Catalonia as a reason. It would be different with the term "strategic autonomy". This is more with the left and more positive connotations. Regarding the future of the EU, Gallego said that the idea of a sovereign and strategically autonomous Europe needs a solidary approach and a vision for the European model to last.



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Denmark



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Peter Waldorff from the Danish Trade Union Confederation FH provided the Danish perspective. He pleaded for a Europe that should not only defend its own values within its own borders, but also do so around the world. EU principles such as the rule of law must be communicated externally. He also followed up on previous thoughts from other participants, namely that the goal within the EU should be to find common solutions to challenges such as climate change and digital development.

Theses to strengthen the European Union

After lunch, the discussion focused on strengthening the power of the state to benefit workers in specific sectors. **Ronja Kempin**, Europe expert at the **SWP** Science and Politics Foundation, presented three theses in her presentation. First: "If the EU is to be shaped socially and sovereignly, then it is the task of the EU to strengthen its institutions." Secondly: "If the EU is to be shaped socially and sovereignly, the institutional, political and material capacity to act must be respected and strengthened by the EU." Otherwise, the European Union would not be able to act independently. Thirdly: "If the EU is to be designed in a social and sovereign manner, then it is the task of the member states to show solidarity with one another and to see the EU as the legitimate representative of their interests." According to Kempin, the EU is not in a position to act together on the international stage. She tends to be slow and indecisive. She cited the different interests and intentions as well as the principle of consensus-based decision-making at EU level as reasons for this.



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In response to these theses, Kempin presented two solutions for EU foreign and security policy. The first idea would be to further develop the decision-making processes within the EU. Specifically, Kempin spoke of an **incremental approach**, which means that topic-specific decisions would only be made with a few member states. On the one hand, this would enable a more flexible and faster decision-making process. On the other hand, there would always be "only" ad hoc solutions and an unclear distribution of burdens and little predictability. The second solution is a **radical system restructuring** of the EU. As an example, Kempin used the proposals for a European Defense Union: There, consideration is given to supplementing the European Council with a European Security Council with permanent and non-permanent members. This would enable a differentiated decision-making power, but at the same time break with the fundamental principle of equality of the EU. She ended her presentation by appealing that the debate on the EU's strategic autonomy should not only focus on the internal market but also on foreign and security policy.

Claes-Mikael Ståhl from the **ETUC** entered the discussion with the poem "No man is an island" by the British poet John Donne. With this he wanted to show how dependent we are on each other. He emphasized that the pandemic has taught us that the dependence on others in crucial areas such as



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raw materials, battery cells and much more is too great for European society. He went on to say that in all cooperative structures, in this case the EU, it is necessary to give the counterpart, here the member states, the opportunity to pursue a certain self-interest. However, the trick is to define what sufficient scope for the pursuit of national or self-interest means. He believes that this **"concept of sufficient margin"** can be useful for the discussion of strategic autonomy.

With regard to a common trade policy, Stahl advocated a pooling of all interests, including those of workers and trade unions. He also advocated giving unions a seat at the negotiating table to support the current trade agenda. At the end of his speech, he emphasized that the work dimension is inextricably linked to the debate on Strategic Autonomy and that a clear understanding of the worker's perspective in this debate is needed.

Global dimension: Liability for supply chains

In the afternoon, the last topic-specific discussion followed on the question: "How can risks and dependencies in supply chains be reduced?". **Isabelle Schoemann** from the **ETUC** started with the question: what does the principle "work is not an economic good" mean? It means: good work, fair wages, training and further education opportunities for employees. But in economic reality, work is just an economic good. Work is part of supply chains, people are exploited and the social dimension is undermined. The reversal of the principle is possible because the supply chains are not regulated. It is therefore essential that there are laws that are not only sector-specific, but are designed as general regulations. The EU Commission will hopefully present a corresponding draft law this year, which was already planned for early summer. This legislative proposal should contain due diligence obligations to protect human rights and the environment in the supply chain. Companies must also be obliged to prepare a sustainability report. Last but not least, it is important that trade unions are involved in the implementation of the EU directive on due diligence in supply chains. Finally, she underlined that solidarity must be an important dimension of a sovereign Europe.



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Franz Zach from the **DGB** also spoke about the regulation of supply chains. He reiterated that the pandemic has shown us how difficult and interconnected our supply chains are. It is therefore important that human rights standards are integrated into the supply chain in the form of laws. Some of the member states already have corresponding laws, but there are still no binding regulations at EU level, emphasized Frank Zach, agreeing with Isabell Schömann, who also criticized the EU Commission's delay in drafting a law. Several panellists underlined that legally binding regulations are necessary as voluntary guidelines like those of OCED are not enough. In order to prevent such legislation from being watered down, strong pressure was needed from the trade unions.



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Finally, the moderator Susanne Wixforth thanked all participants and promised a publication on the thematic content of the workshop, which should be created with the support of the FES.

