

Institutional constraints to social dialogue in work integration of persons with disabilities: Slovakia and Norway compared

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Abstract

Purpose – Studies on the work integration of persons with disabilities (PwD) and the role of social dialogue therein are scarce. The study examines how the different systems of workers' representation and industrial relations in Slovakia and Norway facilitate PwD work integration. Taking a social ecosystem perspective, we acknowledge the role of various stakeholders and their interactions in supporting PwD work integration. The paper's conceptual contribution lies in including social dialogue actors in this ecosystem.

Design/methodology/approach – Evidence was collected via desk research, 35 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 51 respondents and stakeholder workshops in 2019–2020.

Findings – The findings from Norway confirm the expected coordination of unions and employers in PwD work integration. Evidence from Slovakia shows that in decentralised industrial relations systems, institutional constraints beyond the workplace determine employers' and worker representatives' approaches in PwD



integration. Most policy-level outcomes are contested, as integration occurs predominantly via sheltered workplaces without interest representation.

Social implications – This paper identifies the primary sources of variation in the work integration of PwD. It also highlights opportunities for social partners across both situations to exercise agency and engagement to improve PwD work integration.

Originality/value – By integrating two streams of literature – social policy and welfare state and industrial relations – this paper examines PwD work integration from a social ecosystem perspective. Empirically, it offers novel qualitative comparative evidence on trade unions' and employers' roles in Slovakia and Norway.

Keywords Work integration, Persons with disabilities, Trade unions, Industrial relations, Slovakia, Norway

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Health-related disability impairs people's access to high-quality employment (European Commission, 2022), and those with physical or mental impairment disproportionately suffer from unemployment, inactivity and poverty (Scharle and Csillag, 2016). Despite the growing number of persons with disabilities (PwD) in the working-age population (Priestly, 2003) and a dynamic policy response to PwDs in general, few studies have examined labour market policies that facilitate PwD work integration, from the perspective of the involved actors (Reinders Folmer *et al.*, 2020; Scharle and Csillag, 2016; Gould and Harris, 2012; Vila *et al.*, 2007). Work integration may occur through a number of routes, such as via direct employment in the open labour market, or through protected forms of labour market engagement, such as subsidised or sheltered employment. Sheltered employment includes jobs for PwDs in workshops or enterprises that are most often exempted from ordinary labour standards and productivity expectations and which employ PwDs separately from other workers. They might provide long-term or permanent work for people not expected to cope with ordinary working conditions, or more short-term employment to develop workers' skills and ability, to facilitate access to employment in the open labour market. However, little available literature explains how work integration processes occur, or the roles of key stakeholders, including work-related interest representatives (Akgüc, 2021; McKinney and Swartz, 2019).

To address this gap, the paper takes a social ecosystem approach (Shaw *et al.*, 2022) to reveal how work integration of PwDs is practised in Slovakia and Norway. We define social ecosystems as a set of actors, regulations, outcomes and norms which are mutually reinforcing, as well as setting the boundaries of a specific playing field – in our case, the area of PwDs' integration into the labour market. Within this conceptual framework, we focus on employers' and employee representatives' approaches to PwD integration. We build on and expand the work of Shaw *et al.* (2022), who highlighted the need to situate the understanding of PwD employment in a wider social ecosystem. To acknowledge the structural limitations of disability-inclusive employment, we interpret these issues from the perspective of under-researched actors: namely, employers' and workers' representatives.

Our study is based on two different countries, chosen to represent social-democratic and post-socialist welfare states, which in our framework exemplify two different social ecosystems. Slovakia is an embedded neoliberal economy in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), where PwD work integration takes place through sheltered employment or subsidised involvement. European Union statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) data for 2018 show that 22% of the Slovak population aged over 16 encountered long-standing limitations in usual activities due to health issues, compared to 17.3% of the EU-27 average. PwD integration in Slovakia occurs mainly via sheltered employment; however, the role of employers' and employees' organisations in shaping this policy is constrained by the advisory character of social dialogue and its politicisation (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Drahekoupil and Kahancová, 2019; Eurofound, 2018; Kahancová *et al.*, 2019). During Slovakia's transition from state socialism to a market economy, the state withdrew from the social sphere; and welfare state reforms in the early 2000s introduced workfare principles into provisions of social assistance.

Support for unemployed and disadvantaged groups, including PwDs, through active labour market policies remain low compared to other EU countries (Hidas *et al.*, 2016). In 2020, social spending reached 16.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) (Eurostat, 2023). PwDs are not represented by a dedicated trade union; and NGOs active in support of PwDs do not have formal access to disability-related policy making.

The Slovak situation contrasts with Norway, a country with a generous welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), where labour market integration of PwDs is a high priority. About 22.3% of GDP in 2020 was allocated to social protection benefits, and people at the margins of the labour market enjoy extensive public support (Eurostat, 2020, 2023; Halvorsen *et al.*, 2016; Hemmings and Prinz, 2020). A developed support mechanism for PwD work integration prefers and supports the open labour market integration of disadvantaged groups, including PwD (Bento and Kurzetsova, 2018; Barth and Moene, 2012). The support mechanism in Norway largely results from negotiations between employer organisations, unions and the government. Unions represent workers in general, not exclusively PwDs. Employers bear extensive responsibility for PwD work inclusion, whilst financial and practical support both to PwDs and employers related to PwD employment is facilitated by the public Labour and Social Welfare Administration (NAV) (NAV, 2023; Torp, 2020).

This paper investigates how social partner approaches to PwD integration have evolved in different social ecosystem settings. It also explores whether these approaches align with expectations within country-specific employee relations systems. It argues that despite trade unions' presence in the workplace and the predominance of decentralised bargaining in Slovakia, support for PwD integration in the workplace remains constrained. In a policy environment where PwD integration occurs via sheltered employment, trade unions and employers in Slovakia do not engage in workplace support; unlike in Norway, where PwD are integrated directly into the open labour market. Although opportunities for social partners for PwD integration support are present in both countries, patterns of this support differ and can be understood and explained in a broader social ecosystem view. This shows that social partners' practices in PwD work integration are enabled (Norway) and constrained (Slovakia) by the overall industrial relations design, including the history and quality of social dialogue, as well as public sector approaches to PwD integration. In combination, these elements in Norway provide an important support mechanism for open-labour-market workplace integration, whilst in Slovakia they keep PwDs at the fringes of the labour market and outside the playing field of social partners.

2. Analytical framework

PwD are defined as individuals with a formally recognised health disability, usually based on medical assessment and those who feel subjectively hampered by health disabilities, such as after chronic disease and/or treatment. This affects the worker's daily life and labour market access. A shift from a medically to a socially oriented definition of PwD allows a broader understanding of the disability concept, in that it considers environmental and attitudinal barriers and facilitators that shape PwDs' engagement in society (Eide and Loeb, 2016; Gray *et al.*, 2008; United Nations, 2006). We purposefully adopt this broader PwD definition to conceptualise persons whose employment could be interrupted by health issues and are seeking (re)integration into the labour market. These persons are more likely to be represented by trade unions than PwDs outside the labour market.

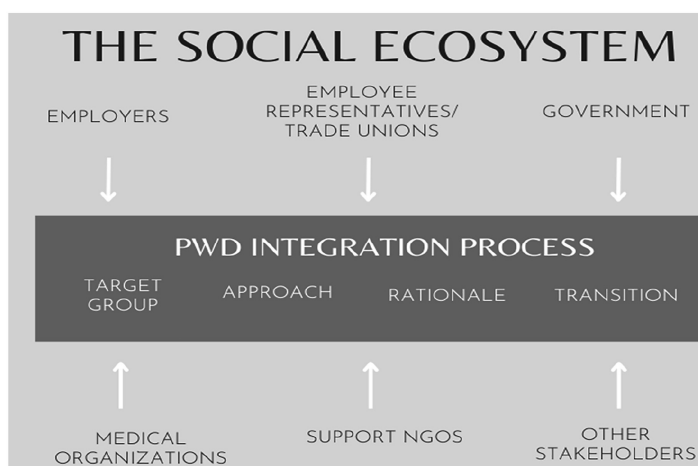
Existing research on PwD work integration typically addresses job quality, skill demand in sheltered workplaces vis-à-vis the open labour market and the causes and remedies of discrimination at work (Kuznetsova and Yalcin, 2017; Hansen *et al.*, 2011). The literature shows variation in the specific support tools employed in PwD work integration (Scharle *et al.*, 2015). A positive association with better labour market outcomes has been found for active labour

market policies targeting the PwD as an individual and collective support from the person's family, employer and other stakeholders; whereas passive support (e.g. disability pensions or benefits) has been found not to yield such effects (Knipprath and Cabus, 2020; Sabariego *et al.*, 2018).

Evidence from across the EU shows that employment policies for PwD integration consist of the following: employment preparation (training and education both at the school level and in transitory programmes), school-to-work transition programmes, financial incentives for employers and workers/job seekers, job placement, adjusting a working environment to PwD needs, work rehabilitation programmes and other counselling services that PwDs need to be sustainably integrated in the workplace (Gilson *et al.*, 2017; Landmark *et al.*, 2013; Mazzotti *et al.*, 2021; Schutz and Carter, 2022). Nevertheless, recent PwD work integration models have been criticised for being extensively particularistic, by following simplistic top-down policy approaches (Shaw *et al.*, 2022). These fail to consider interactions and power dynamics amongst stakeholders, including employers, trade unions and the PwDs as a workforce. As a result, the insufficient representation of PwDs' interests related to working conditions and opportunities often results in unbalanced power relations, which raises barriers to their work integration (Howard *et al.*, 2018; Shaw *et al.*, 2022).

The narrow perspective outlined above neglects the importance of an entire *social ecosystem*, where multiple stakeholders and a chain of interventions combine to shape the PwD work integration process (Shaw *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this paper adopts a framework that provides a holistic perspective within a broader social ecosystem (see Figure 1). This approach reiterates the involvement of multiple stakeholders with different expertise and policy tools in shaping the PwD integration process at various levels, to overcome multidimensional integration barriers (European Commission, 2018; Nevala *et al.*, 2015; Saltkjel *et al.*, 2023).

Within a social ecosystem, the PwD integration process comprises several elements. These include the identification of the target group to be integrated and its specific needs; an overall approach to the integration process; a rationale for integration that derives from particular welfare state settings; and the actual tools used in the transition to the labour market. The approach to PwD integration embraces elements such as the involved actors' preference for coordinated action versus decentralised action, during both policymaking and the actual PwD work integration. It also refers to the question of whether PwD interests are



Source(s): The authors

Figure 1.
A holistic actor-oriented framework on PwD integration

organised by equipping them with associational power with regard to other actors. The rationale for the PwD integration process derives from an overall welfare state policy that includes both the provision of opportunities and protection for PwDs. This rationale may differ across different countries' ecosystems; therefore, actors exercise their agency within the boundaries of an institutional system. Finally, the transition tools refer to specific regulatory elements such as sheltered employment (or lack thereof), which yield different transition processes when PwDs enter the labour market, or move from the sheltered to the open labour market. Actors can influence the transition tools at either the policy or implementation phase and may adjust their supportive practices accordingly.

We now consider the role of actors in PwD work integration within our analytical framework. National governments and public employment services are at the core of the ecosystem. They engage in mutual coordination with multiple stakeholders during PwD integration and are usually responsible for (1) adopting and enforcing the regulatory framework for PwDs' working conditions and social rights; and (2) designing and implementing social protection policies and educational and labour market policies to incentivise PwD work integration (Holubová *et al.*, 2020; Patrini and Ahrendt, 2021). Non-governmental organisations and social partners are also critically important for the integration of PwDs (Patrini and Ahrendt, 2021). Collaborative strategies and partnerships vary across countries, ranging from informal alliances to legislatively established partnerships and social dialogue mechanisms. Publicly funded integration programmes are often implemented by NGOs, or within a cooperation between NGOs and governmental actors (Carroll and Jarvis, 2015). NGOs are usually engaged in advocacy, raising awareness and campaigning for PwD rights, including labour rights.

Finally, within the ecosystem, the involvement of trade unions and employers is crucial for PwDs' effective work integration, since the companies and workers' representatives often possess unique information and knowledge about work legislation, job content that the PwD can carry out and occupational health and safety regulations (ILO, 2018). The representation of new groups of workers has been a priority on unions' agendas recently, especially with the rise of atypical and precarious work forms (Choonara *et al.*, 2022; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018) and increased labour market participation of women, migrants, part-time workers, "gig workers" and other types of workforces beyond regular, full-time workers (Eldring *et al.*, 2011).

In summary, this paper adopts a holistic analytical framework to explore the role of social partners in the work integration of PwDs within a larger ecosystem of actors and processes. The integration process is analysed through the target group, approach, rationale and transition tools in two different industrial relations systems: social democratic and embedded neoliberal (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Eurofound, 2018; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Powell and Balientos, 2004).

3. Research design and methods

To analyse how unions and employers engage in PwD integration within two types of social ecosystems, the methodology is comparative and actor oriented. Data was collected via desk research, qualitative interviews and stakeholder workshops in 2019–2020, whilst the latter two methods were conducted only in Slovakia. Literature about Norwegian industrial relations (i.e. Ravn and Øyum, 2020; Tøssebro, 2013) and PwD integration (Kuznetsova and Yalcin, 2017; Scaratti *et al.*, 2018; Moe *et al.*, 2023) is richer than that for Slovakia and the Norwegian case thus draws extensively on available literature. The study is, according to Grant and Booth's (2009) typology of reviews, a literature review. The search for relevant literature on Norway focused on well-known publications on the current theme and also on relevant materials found through a keyword search ("disability and work", "work

integration”, “sick leave” and “labour relations”, combined with “Norway”). The search focused on international research databases (Proquest and Web of Science), the Norwegian University Libraries’ database Oria and Google (for reports and grey literature).

In Slovakia, data was collected via interviews and stakeholder workshops. First, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 51 participants in 2019 and 2020 (see Table 1). Of these, 10 interviews were with public authorities involved in PwD work integration (e.g. the Ministry of Labour, social insurance authority and regional labour offices); 5 with trade unions that could influence policy and tools for PwD work integration via social dialogue and collective bargaining; 5 with employers’ associations and single employers that directly facilitated PwD work integration and/or engaged in related policy development; and 15 with non-governmental organisations that directly supported PwDs in their work integration. The average time of the interviews was approximately 1.5 h. Standardised coding using a coding tree with three layers of codes and subcodes were used to identify patterns (e.g. current and potential cooperation amongst the stakeholder and social partners/actors in PwD work integration, barriers and facilitators of current/potential cooperation; barriers or facilitators of the PwD work integration; and tools and politics of the PwD work integration – including awareness of them, implementation, suggestions for improvement, etc.). For this purpose, Dedoose software was used to develop codes and, subsequently, code and analyse transcripts of the interviews.

Besides the interviews, three regional workshops with an additional 40 participants took place in Slovakia in 2020, to facilitate a discussion between all types of actors in the social ecosystem. These included representatives of the regional self-government offices, employers, trade unions and civil society organisations operating at the local or national level. Recruitment was based on the stakeholders’ database, which the research team had created during previous projects. Workshops were run as focus groups, to thematised experiences of PwD integration in the context of labour market actors. The interviews and workshops followed a similar structure of topics: the role and competencies of the actors in the PwD work integration, ways of cooperation amongst the actors, policies and their implementation practices and the work integration specified for persons with multiple vulnerabilities, including disabilities. Both data collection methods were in person and thus provide added value for future networking and knowledge sharing.

Assumptions: Within this research design, the focus on actors’ roles is embedded in institutional considerations, in order to identify how the established social dialogue structures and PwD-related legislation shape the strategies adopted by unions and employers in this integration process. The two countries studied – Slovakia and Norway – differ in their industrial relations, with gaps in terms of trade union and employer density, bargaining coverage and different standards in bargaining coordination at the industry and workplace levels (see Table 2). In addition, despite a similar population size, Norway and Slovakia differ in several other aspects. About 30% of Norwegian employment is in the public sector (Statistics Norway, 2021), and the government draws significant resources from the main

Type of organisation	Number of interviews		Number of interviewees Regional/local
	National	Workplace	
State/public authority	8	2	21
Trade union	5	0	6
Employers’ organisation/single employer	5	0	6
Non-governmental organisation	9	6	18
<i>Total</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>51</i>

Source(s): Authors

Table 1.
Overview of interviews
in Slovakia

Table 2.
Industrial relations and expectations regarding PwD work integration

	Norway	Slovakia
Trade union density	50.4% (2019)	11.3% (2018)
Employer organisation density	80% (2018)	50.3% (2018)
Predominant level of bargaining	Centralised, coordinated, solidaristic	Company/workplace, with industry bargaining still practised in some sectors (wage bargaining limited)
Bargaining coverage	69% (2017)	24.4% (2015)
National-level social dialogue characteristics	Tripartite council with representatives of unions, employers and independent experts or government (-appointed) representatives	Tripartite council with representatives of unions, employers and the government – advisory body to the government, no binding outcomes
Expected level of social partners' involvement in PwD integration	Coordinated, national level	Decentralised and fragmented, workplace level
Type of expected social partners' action	Coordinated policy influence	Fragmented support to individuals at the workplace

Source(s): The authors based on national statistics and [Holubová et al. \(2020\)](#)

source of national income: mining of oil and gas reserves. In Slovakia, the economy is driven by foreign-investment-dominated industry and state policies that protect the interests of foreign investors.

Social dialogue in Norway is based on cooperation between social partners and other stakeholders, with limited direct government involvement ([Bondy, 2022](#); [Reiersen and Torp, 2020](#); [Swenson, 1991](#)). In contrast, in Slovakia social dialogue converges to national-level political influence, whilst collective bargaining is decentralised and fragmented ([Kahancová and Martišková, 2023](#)). The national social dialogue council serves as an advisory body to the government, without binding decisions. Collective bargaining, where stipulations regarding PwD integration can be addressed, is mainly negotiated with single employers.

Acknowledging these differences between Norway and Slovakia, we assume that in social democratic industrial relations (Norway), social partners will engage in multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaborative strategies to support PwD work integration in different phases. Their coordinated approach should then be informed by a rationale to provide an overall social protection framework at the policy level. This approach embraces coordinated services to overcome administrative barriers and transition tools whereby employers might be compensated via publicly funded schemes (e.g. tax benefits, wage subsidies) ([ILO, 2018](#); [Kuznetsova and Yalcin, 2017](#)). Employers' and unions' involvement in the PwD work integration process is thus expected to prioritise the refining of the existing regulatory framework, proposing novel legislation and improving PwD integration and working conditions via collective bargaining ([European Commission, 2018](#)).

In contrast, in Slovakia's case of embedded neoliberal industrial relations with politicised and decentralised industrial relations, employers' and unions' support for PwD work integration is expected mostly in the implementation of transition tools at the workplace level. Despite lacking policy coordination, establishment-level transition tools may be effective because in decentralised industrial relations, social partners' voluntary-agreement-based commitment to jointly defined transition tools should prevail over imposed legislative measures ([Eurofound, 2018](#); [Ilsøe et al., 2018](#); [Visser, 1998](#), p. 306).

4. Findings

Table 3 presents the key findings from the analysis. These are further elaborated below, according to the four dimensions of the PwD work integration process identified in the analytical framework.

4.1 PwD as a target group of work integration

Norway's employment policies are designed according to the principle of equality and lead to an emphasis on PwD work integration (Jessen and Tufte, 2014; NOU, 2019:7, 2019; Proposition to the Storting, 2004–2005). Norway fosters an inclusive approach and recognises different subgroups of PwD (e.g. long-term sick listed workers and young persons struggling to enter the labour market due to lack of motivation and/or formal education) and their diverse integration needs. It is more important to assess PwDs based on their work skills than on their medical diagnosis and the definition of "PwD" accepts the existence of various subgroups of PwD (Andreassen, 2019). In contrast, in formal regulations but also informal interactions, Slovakia recognises PwDs narrowly as persons with a formal disability status, whereby the definition of disability is medically conditioned and regularly scrutinised to prove benefits access.

4.2 Approach to PwD work integration

Norway has adopted several legislative measures and established set of guidelines, such as for returning to work after long-term incapacity (Markussen *et al.*, 2017; Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2005; NAV, 2015; Ose *et al.*, 2022; Torp, 2020). Nevertheless, legislation does not serve as a directive; the purpose of legal stipulations is to support the implementation occurring in the workplace, with assigned roles for particular actors (such as including employers in inclusion networks, cooperating with state agencies, providing counselling and participating in joint programmes). There is a widespread culture of cooperation between government and government institutions and trade unions and employers, both in the welfare state and in policymaking (Gustavsen, 2007; Reiersen and Torp, 2020).

Tripartism plays an influential role in promoting inclusive working environments in Norway. A tripartite cooperation agreement for a more inclusive working life has been concluded between the government, employer organisations and trade unions (Ministry of

Dimensions	Norway	Slovakia
Target groups/ definition of persons with disabilities	Broadly defined, various subgroups of PwD supported in work integration	Narrowly defined legal status of PwD, definition of disability based on formal medical assessment
Approach to PwD work integration	Inclusive approach; coordinated system across several levels of action Key policies: delegation of competencies to employers, diversity to address interests of particular PwD subgroups	Centralized system but lacking coordination across levels of action Key policies: financial incentives to employers to hire PwDs, sheltered employment
Rationale of PwD work integration	Place and then train	Train and then place
Transition tools	PwD placement at the open labour market, tailored support and mentoring at the workplace, by trade unions, the employer and other stakeholders	Sheltered employment as the main transition tool, lack of direct tailored union and employer support

Source(s): The authors

Table 3.
Labour market
integration policies for
PwD in Norway and
Slovakia

[Labour and Social Inclusion, 2019](#); [Ose et al., 2009](#)). Amendments to this agreement (“Letter of intent regarding a more inclusive working life”) have been negotiated every fourth year since 2001. It has been voluntary for single enterprises to sign the agreement; however, the latest agreement extended these support measures to all enterprises in Norway. Despite slightly different foci, the overall aims of the different agreements have been to reduce sick leave statistics and increase the labour market share of PwDs and elderly persons. Within such a coordinated policymaking environment, the implementation of PwD work integration in Norway is decentralised and integration competencies are delegated to particular employers. This leads to support being provided directly at the workplace in the open labour market, where employers’ commitment to PwD work integration remains high. Nevertheless, despite this extensive coordination across actors and levels, even Norway faces employment gaps for PwD in the mainstream labour market ([Bhuller et al., 2022](#); [Garrels and Sigstad, 2021](#)).

In contrast, the policy mix that targets PwDs in Slovakia structurally and normatively differs from that of Norway and includes protected forms of employment, such as sheltered employment and repressive arrangements for employers (i.e. financial punishment for non-compliance). These policies are defined at the national level, but do not specify expectations for particular actors in the ecosystem and their expected cooperation. In turn, coordination between actors and across levels – from policymaking to actual integration – is underdeveloped. More details on sheltered employment and employer fines, presented below, illustrate this case.

4.3 Rationale of PwD work integration

In Norway, the rationale is to first place PwDs in job positions and then provide them with support tools, such as training, mentoring and other means, to gradually increase their performance at work. Occupational interventions are a priority, in particular, the principle of first placing and then training workers, including PwDs ([Bråthen and Lien, 2015](#); [Reme et al., 2019](#); [Torp, 2020](#)). The aim is to identify the competencies Norwegian employers need within defined geographical regions. Furthermore, the scheme is designed to provide the necessary training early, so that PwD can start working relatively quickly.

In contrast to Norway, in Slovakia the PwDs’ placement with an employer should occur only after they have gained support, training and experience at a sheltered workplace. Many PwDs are restricted to sheltered workplaces as their terminal destination in the labour market ([Ondrušová, 2014](#)). Since trade unions offer encompassing policies to the entire workforce without extensive tailor-made policies for particular worker groups, PwDs remain outside union interest, especially when they are not in regular employment at workplaces with union representation.

4.4 Transition tools in PwD work integration

Within a broad but coordinated approach, work integration tools in Norway are linked to the specific workplace. The trend in the work inclusion and activation policy is to activate workers early in the workplace, follow up closely and encourage employers to be socially responsible by focussing on their companies’ competencies and labour needs ([NAV, 2015](#); [Proposition to the Storting 46, 2004–2005](#); [Andreassen, 2019](#); [Ose et al., 2022](#); [Torp, 2020](#)). Inclusive Workplace Support Centres help employers and employees to establish tools and procedures and a company culture that appropriately treats individuals with reduced working capacity ([NAV, 2023](#)).

In stark contrast to Norway, Slovakia extensively uses sheltered employment, social enterprises, employment quota and financial punishment for employers for non-compliance. Sheltered employment originated in the periods of state socialism before 1989 and survived the transition to a market economy. About one-third of new employees in sheltered

workplaces were placed there via public employment services, which shows that this transition tool is a viable option for PwDs' work integration and adaptation to their needs. The most common job roles performed in Slovakia's sheltered employment include administrative tasks, manufacturing of various products (e.g. decorative items, sewing), public administration services, retail, security and care services (Ondrušová, 2014; COLSAF, 2016).

However, sheltered workplaces remain segregated and thus cannot solve the challenge of PwDs' employment participation (Mladenov, 2017; Gould and Harris, 2012). Even interviewed government representatives admit that sheltered workplaces do not allow a PwDs' smooth transition to the open labour market. Importantly, sheltered employment as an integration tool also exists in Norway (Rustad and Kassah, 2021), but its practice is secondary to PwD integration into the open labour market, in which individual employers and their strategies, often coordinated with other stakeholders, play a key role.

In Slovakia, in the context of widespread sheltered employment, there is no similar support for the transition to the open labour market, to prevent systematic PwD segregation. This is due to a weakness in the general labour market policy set-up and a predominant focus on job subsidies for firms within the framework of active labour market policies (Hidas *et al.*, 2016). Sheltered jobs are perceived as low-paid and exploitative, in that they make isolation the key feature of PwDs' integration into the labour market and even create cycles of poverty (Hidas *et al.*, 2016).

Despite such criticism, the Slovak interview respondents appreciated the fact that, given the lack of employers' broader engagement, sheltered employment was financially supported by the government and enabled the adaptation of working conditions and performance expectations to PwDs' needs (Ondrušová, 2014). Nonetheless, some PwD workers have remained at the same sheltered workplace for over 10 years (Ondrušová, 2014), which effectively means that a sheltered workplace is a permanent one, without a transition option. Union representatives saw the sheltered workshops as protecting PwDs from high work demands, for example, at assembly lines. They were generally sceptical of the idea that sheltered workshops should serve as an intermediate step in the transition to the open market. Nevertheless, they doubted whether working in the open labour market, which is often driven by meeting performance indicators, is in the PwDs' interests.

According to interviewed non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, the reason for the limited transition from sheltered employment to the open labour market is the systemic lack of legislative instruments to support other transition tools. The solution would be to transition from sheltered workshops to so-called protected or supported jobs in regular working environments, to minimise PwDs' segregation in sheltered workplaces. A concurrent form of sheltered work in Slovakia includes legally recognised social enterprises, which were introduced in 2018 as a new form of PwD work integration. Whilst social enterprises as a concept are perceived positively by diverse stakeholder types in the social ecosystem, they face difficulties in gaining a recognised legal status as employers.

Another key policy of PwD work integration in Slovakia is mandatory quotas. Each employer with at least 20 employees is obliged to employ those who have a formally recognised PwD status; PwDs must reach at least 3.2% of employees. Alternatively, the employer can fulfil this obligation by paying a fee of 0.9 times the total price of the labour costs, or purchasing goods from sheltered workshops, or by combining these methods. Whilst unions see the fines as a coercive mechanism for preventing employers' non-compliance with PwD employment, the fee is not seen as a high cost item for employers, and they often prefer to pay it rather than undertake PwD work integration. Employers find that adjusting the workplace to PwD needs, coupled with a lack of appropriate mentoring strategies, is a higher burden than paying a fine. The overwhelming voice of most interviewed employers is that employers should not replace the role of the state in PwD work integration.

4.5 Unions' and employers' roles in PwD integration

Focussing on the role of unions and employers in the integration process, the analysis shows key differences between Norway and Slovakia. [Table 4](#) summarises these findings. First, employers in Norway enjoy a broader range of competencies in the implementation phase, being equal partners to state agencies and other involved organisations, such as occupational rehabilitation centres. Employers also play a role in policymaking, due to the coordinated structure of social dialogue. In contrast, in Slovakia employers' involvement in facilitating PwD work integration also includes a sanction-based component. A key feature of the Slovak policy framework is mandatory quotas for PwD employment by medium and large enterprises, or a purchase of services from sheltered workplaces and social enterprises that employ PwDs. Employers call for more institutionalised support in strengthening their role and a shift in the policy philosophy to a less adversarial treatment of employers, such as providing motivation rather than punishment in facilitating PwDs' work integration. A lack of information and suitable approaches for workplace adaptation to PwDs' needs, are the most profound barriers to gaining employers' support. As a result, employers lack interest in, or skills and knowledge of developing PwD integration support; they also lack broader support, in the form of cooperation between actors in the existing ecosystem. An overall barrier to integration is also that the perceived demands regarding performance, high working pace, or keeping standard working procedures, do not allow the fulfilment of PwDs' special needs.

Second, the role of trade unions also differs between the countries: in Norway, they are active both at the tripartite level of policy adoption concerning PwDs and in the implementation phase at the workplace level. In contrast, in Slovakia, union activities vis-à-vis PwDs are very limited both at the policy level and national tripartism and in terms of workplace level support. This is contrary to the paper's original expectation that in decentralised settings of collective bargaining, unions could take the opportunity to represent PwDs and develop strategies for their integration at the workplace level. Instead, union strategies, albeit virtually non-existent for PwDs, increasingly target national legislative solutions, rather than collective bargaining at more decentralised levels of union operation.

The Slovak unions' role is constrained by the overall approach whereby PwDs are prepared for the labour market mostly outside a regular employment relationship and thus cannot benefit from trade union representation. PwD work integration in Slovakia suffers from the weak role of non-state employment service providers ([Ondrušová and Repková, 2021](#)). These could serve as mediators for PwDs' employment in the open labour market, as in Norway. Given the lack of non-state employment services providers, it is difficult to practise the "first-place-then-train" strategy – which is the dominant approach in Norway, where a supportive broader institutional and incentive structure is defined for all actors in the PwD integration process.

	Norway	Slovakia
Role of employers	Broad competencies; employer as an core partner in tools implementation, clear guidance and support	Legislative sanction-based approach if employers do not comply with PwD employment quota; lack of guidance for employers on how to provide support
Role of trade unions	Relevant both at the tripartite level (policy) and at the workplace (transition tools' implementation)	PwD integration not a trade union priority, marginal attention at the tripartite (policy) level, and actual union absence at the workplace (implementation) level

Table 4.
Role of unions and employers in PwD integration compared

Source(s): The authors

5. Conclusions

Using a comparative qualitative methodology, this paper has studied the role of social partners in the work integration of PwD. The study relies on data collected differently for the two countries: a literature review for Norway and qualitative empirical data for Slovakia. We acknowledge the different types of data are a limitation of the study. Nevertheless, we maintain confidence in the trustworthiness of our key findings having identified key differences between the two cases. Furthermore, collecting empirical data about Slovakia fills a large academic gap regarding PwD integration in CEE, where the countries have undergone specific socio-economic transitions with particular outcomes for different disadvantaged groups, including those with disabilities (Holubová *et al.*, 2020).

Conceptually, the study introduces unions and employers as part of a social ecosystem of actors and practices that shapes the PwD integration process and its four dimensions. These actors' roles in the ecosystem have been overlooked in the literature. The empirical case looks at two strikingly different systems of welfare state and industrial relations. Norway, a social democratic welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), is a country where social partnership plays a major role in designing policies of work integration and prioritising PwDs' integration into the mainstream labour market. Slovakia, considered an embedded neoliberal welfare state (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012), has the predominant strategy of integrating PwDs via protected employment and punitive measures for employers. In such a system, social dialogue on facilitating PwDs' integration has only a limited role, even at the workplace level.

We argue that the overall ecosystem of actors, policies and norms in the two countries enables (Norway) and constrain (Slovakia) the role of social partners in PwD work integration; thus, they exemplify two fundamentally different approaches to the issue. The findings from Norway show a coordinated and vertically and horizontally streamlined strategy for PwD work integration, with specific roles for involved stakeholders, including social partners and the social dialogue process. This confirms the expectation regarding the coordinated action of unions and employers in PwD work integration in Norway.

However, in Slovakia, a country with decentralised and fragmented interest representation, the findings for how social partners thematised PwD support and exercised their agency differed from the expected level and type of intervention. Instead of the expected implementation support, via transition tools at the workplace, employers' and union approaches to PwDs are underdeveloped and practices are limited. This is due to decentralised industrial relations settings, as well as characteristics of the social ecosystem. If any action emerges, it targets the national policy level (such as employers demanding a less punitive framework for meeting the PwD quota). Simultaneously, social partners lack the capacity and interest to act on behalf of PwDs at the policy level. This leaves unions and employers with an underdeveloped role in PwD work integration, both at the policy and the workplace level.

Focussing on the role of trade unions, the paper highlights Slovak unions cannot exercise their agency at the workplace level, because of PwDs' marginal integration into the open labour market where unions are active. Slovak unions, with their predominant emphasis on "bread-and-butter" issues and limited internal capacities and organisational power resources, prefer a broad policy influence that targets the largest scope of workers; this is the opposite of developing tailored strategies concerning worker subgroups including PwD. Moreover, sheltered employment's role as a key institutional mechanism for PwD work integration serves as a systemic constraint for union and employer action at the workplace. Because PwDs are often restricted to the sheltered workplace without union representation, their transition to the open labour market does not occur. Therefore, unions lack opportunities to organise PwDs, which further decreases the former's interest in representing them and supporting their integration.

These findings are novel, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, the paper introduced employers and trade unions into the social ecosystem model of various actors (Shaw *et al.*, 2022). The industrial relations literature has previously overlooked their role in PwD integration. Whilst acknowledging the extent of voluntarism in social partners' action in a decentralised industrial relations system, the paper suggests their actions are limited by the broader institutional, policy and normative framework that goes beyond industrial relations characteristics. In turn, the paper argues that ecosystems enable, but also define the playing fields for the different participating actors. Empirically, the paper provides novel evidence on Slovakia, which contrasts with the proposed argument on unions' and employers' decentralised involvement in PwD workplace integration. These findings lead us to question to what extent the Slovak decentralised system of industrial relations opens more space for the emergence of new non-union actors, to represent the interests of PwD and other marginalised groups within the social ecosystem (Bondy, 2022). The study also prompts questions for further research, regarding the unions' and employers' policy influence in countries with decentralised industrial relations.

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