# Islands in the stream? The Challenges and resilience of of the Danish industrial relations model in a liberalising world

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It is widely argued that increasing economic internationalisation, financialisation, declining union density and a rise in neoliberal deregulatory politics have led to intense pressures on national IR (industrial relations) systems and key IR-institutions such as collective bargaining (Baccaro and Howell, 2011; Glyn, 2006; Howell and Givan, 2011; Marginson, 2015; Streeck, 2009), which in turn, has contributed to growing inequality – in income distribution and in labour markets (Dølvik and Martin, 2015; Gautié and Schmitt, 2010; OECD, 2011).

Labour market developments and broader welfare developments are closely aligned (Bosch et al., 2009; Dølvik and Martin, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 1990), and labour market changes may spill over into changes in social policies, as it has happened in Germany, where dualisation has increased with strong implications for society at large in terms of in-work poverty and inequality (Eichhorst, 2015; Lehndorff et al., 2009). To protect workers from the impacts of these changes, a minimum wage has been implemented, which has affected the dynamics in the IR-model by e.g. undermining the German “*Tarif-autonomie*”. These changes in the renowned German coordinated employment model indicates the strength of the pressures that the IR-systems are facing, raising the question of whether other similar IR-models are also in danger of disintegrating, or whether these are resilient and able to adapt.

Previous research has shown how Nordic IR institutions are also affected by the growing pressure of liberalisation; however, the impact on industrial relations is still highly divergent across national models (Meardi, 2015). Despite long-lasting neoliberal convergence pressure from EU institutions and international developments, in Denmark and the other Nordic countries key elements of egalitarian capitalism still prevail (cf. Amable, 2003; Hay and Wincott, 2012), combined with strong overall macro-economic performance (Dølvik et al., 2015; Kristensen and Lilja, 2011; Pontusson, 2011; Vartiainen, 2014).

The Nordic countries have among the lowest inequality levels among the OECD countries, and Denmark had the lowest gini-coefficient in the most recent OECD-figures from 2012. Denmark also has one of the lowest incidents of low-wage work in Europe (here define as workers earning less than two third of the median wage) with less than 8 % (Schulten, 2016). The industrial relations system has played a significant role in the development of widespread and encompassing social policies and various researchers ascribe organised labour the key role in the development of what has traditionally been termed the social democratic welfare states (see e.g. Andersen et al., 2014; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1984; Korpi, 1978; Pontusson, 2011). However, how the apparent labour market resilience and adaptability is shaped have not been explored in any greater detail. Moreover, how liberalisation and globalisation pressures materialise in the labour market remain unclear in many studies, and is often only operationalized in a single or a few indicators. Our aim here is to present a comprehensive assessment of these dynamic relations through a careful examination of one specific case, the Danish.

The Danish IR-model has been widely renowned as a “flexicurity system”, where active labour market policies and generous levels of unemployment benefits combined with low levels of dismissal protection have resulted in high labour market flexibility and a strong labour market performance (Bredgaard and Madsen, 2015; Madsen, 2006). Flexicurity is part and parcel of a well-educated workforce since the skills workers acquire are transferable between firms. Danish workers are among the most mobile in Europe (Kristensen and Rocha, 2014:163).

The Danish IR-model does, despite some significant differences, share many key characteristics with the other Nordic IR-models, in particular the Swedish (Andersen et al., 2014). The particular characteristics include strong labour market organisations with high union density and strong employers’ organisations and high levels of collective agreements. The Nordic IR-models display features, which make them particularly distinct from liberal and state-dominated IR-models (Crouch, 2012); accordingly, by examining one of these countries in detail, we can illustrate how the general liberalisation tendencies affect these IR-systems. The Danish case can thus serve as a critical case or even extreme case (Gerring, 2007: 101–110); if liberalisation pressure is affecting these highly regulated models, then less regulated labour market models will most likely be even more affected.

The article aims at explaining how and to what extent the Danish IR-model has adapted to the liberalization pressures in the last 10-15 years in order to explain the apparent resilience of the model. The article primarily draws on insights and empirical findings from a research project on precarious employment (Precawo)[[1]](#footnote-1), as well as other research projects on the Danish labour market and industrial relations in which the authors have been involved. We first identify the key challenges caused by liberalisation and international economic integration and discuss whether these challenges are curbed by the IR-system. The article then discusses the potential explanations for the overall resilience and adaptability of the model, emphasising some of the key features of the Nordic IR-models.

**Challenges rising?**

Several authors have questioned the durability of the Nordic and Danish model in the face of the increasing global economic integration as well as liberalisation and deregulatory pressures (Gill et al., 1998; Knudsen and Lind, 2014; Sippola, 2012; Woolfson et al., 2010). However, these effects remain somewhat unclear and the mechanisms through which liberalisation affects the IR-model remains vaguely defined. Therefore, a key contribution of this section is to create an overview of where and how liberalisation affects the Danish case. The evaluation in this article of the current developments indicates a renewal or re-calibration of the model rather than erosion. However, there are significant challenges, many of which also affect other European countries. Some issues are interrelated, e.g. labour migration and the Europeanisation of IR. Although some issues are more significant than others, we do not discuss the challenges in any specific order. Discussions of how the specific challenges are mitigated within the model are also included in this section, while we in the next section discuss and seek explanations for the overall adaptability of the Danish IR-model.

*Labour migration*

The Eastern enlargement of the European Union has placed a strain on high-wage countries especially in Northern Europe due to the inflow and low-wage competition of workers and firms from the newer member states (Cremers et al., 2007; Dølvik, 2013a). However, the main reason is some employers are trying to take advantage of labour migrants in order to circumvent labour market regulation (Lillie, 2010; Refslund and Thörnquist, 2016). This is particularly true in sectors characterised by low skill qualifications, low union density and low levels of collective bargaining (Rasmussen et al., 2015; Refslund, 2014). The issue of social dumping and labour migrants has gained a great deal of attention in the collective bargaining rounds and can affect the bargaining environment negatively, as seen in construction (Arnholtz and Andersen, 2015).

In the sectors most affected by labour migration such as cleaning, hotels and restaurants, and in particular in horticulture, a significant proportion of jobs have been taken over by labour migrants, often without collective agreements and at wages below the levels set in the collective agreements, which has led to labour market segmenting and deteriorating working conditions (Rasmussen et al., 2015; Refslund, 2014). In construction, it is widely reported that migrants are paid below the collective agreements’ wage levels or precisely at the baseline wage stipulated in the collective agreements, which is (according to the unions) a de-facto violation of the agreement, since the migrants’ qualifications should in general secure them a higher wage according to the collective agreements (Arnholtz and Hansen, 2013). However, the employers can circumvent the system, because the migrant workers do not know the system, are afraid of being “sent home”, and because they are used to a much lower wage level. The social partners recently introduced a new paragraph in the collective agreement that states that the collective agreement should be used according to the intentions and not as a minimal protection regulation. This paragraph still needs to be tested in the labour court (Rasmussen et al., 2015). Social dumping in these sectors may result in wage pressures spreading to other sectors. However, the social partners disagree about how big the challenge is and whether sufficient measures have been taken to minimise the pressure (Interviews with LO, 3F and DA, May 2015).

Another problematic issue is the very low unionisation rates of labour migrants, since high union density is vital in the Danish voluntary IR-system. In a large survey among Polish workers in Copenhagen, Arnholtz and Hansen (2013) found that only 12% were members of a Danish trade union. However, interview and survey data indicate that the unionisation rate of labour migrants might be growing (Interviews unions, November 2015; A4, 2015b; Refslund and Larsen, 2016).

In addition to issues of payment and working conditions, labour migrants also tend to have worse occupational health and safety (OHS). While firms solidly based within the scope of the ”*Danish model*” appear to be moving towards a more problem-solving and consensus-based approach to OHS (Hasle et al., 2016), large construction sites with transnational industrial relations setting have a more antagonistic and conflict-based approach and higher rates of accidents (Dyreborg, 2011).

Attempts have been made to expand existing regulation to better cover migrant workers in several regulatory areas including legislation, collective bargaining as well as policy measures (Andersen, 2014). This has been a two-sided approach to curb social dumping as well as securing decent working and living conditions in Denmark for the affected migrant workers (Andersen, 2014). Often unions and other national actors are accused of only protecting local jobs, but Danish unions appear to show genuine interest in securing decent conditions for labour migrants (Refslund and Larsen, 2016). However, it is difficult - if not impossible - to separate the unions attempt of improving migrants’ working conditions from effectively curbing any wage dumping, and hence protect unions members’ wages and working conditions.

A recent and initially contested regulatory initiative is the RUT-database. Since 2009 it has become compulsory for foreign companies to register in a central database (RUT) when setting up operations in Denmark. Since 2011 the social partners have access to this register, which is very helpful for the unions when targeting foreign firms without a collective agreement (Arnholtz and Andersen, 2015). In addition, most public contracts include social clauses and work clauses (Refslund and Larsen, 2016). Finally, the latest collective agreement in construction includes a clause stipulating that wages should progress with sector tenure, to prevent companies solely using the agreements as minimum wage agreements. The construction unions also bargained for an “*akkord-afsavns-tillæg”*: a wage compensation for workers not working on piece-rate remuneration, which would be a de-facto wage increase for labour migrants, since they rarely work on piece-rate contracts. This has, however, been rejected by the employers’ side (Andersen, 2014). These developments illustrate the numerous initiatives that have been taken to mitigate the impact of labour migration and raise the working conditions and wages of the migrant workers within the context of the existing Danish IR-system.

*Transnational activities*

Activities such as transportation and air traffic which, by definition, can be transnational in character, often constitute problems for IR-regulation, which remain very national in character (Crouch, 1993; Hyman, 2004). This is also true in the Nordic countries where increased market integration within the European single market is reinforcing issues related to the transnational dimension e.g. in transportation. Due to the increased intra-European competition, virtually all transnational road transport in Denmark and Sweden except for a few highly specialised tasks has been overtaken by cheaper and less organised drivers – often from Eastern Europe and Germany (Refslund and Thörnquist, 2016). However, the Danish national road transport is still strongly organised due to national legislation setting up strict requirements demanding that companies comply with the wages and working conditions set in the collective agreements (Refslund and Thörnquist, 2016). Transportation is important within Nordic industrial relations regime, because involving transport in secondary or sympathy industrial action to deprive a firm of supplies is a highly efficient way for unions to put pressure on firms.

A recent example of transnational activities is from aviation where, in 2015, Ryan Air wanted to begin operating out of Copenhagen Airport. Until 2015, they operated from a smaller Danish airport in Billund only, where the unions could not mobilise significant resistance e.g. though sympathy action. However, when Ryan Air announced a base in the traditional union stronghold of Copenhagen Airport, it generated considerable resistance and public attention. Following a ruling from the Danish labour court (AR2015.0083) in the summer 2015, which found that a strike warning from the Danish unions against Ryan Air was completely legal and in line with Danish IR-regulation, Ryan Air decided to relocate the operating base to Lithuania.

*Europeanisation of IR*

The increasing economic integration and free movement of labour in the European Union is presenting challenges for the Nordic labour markets. Policy areas that were traditionally perceived as purely national, such as industrial relations and labour markets, are increasingly affected by European developments (Crouch, 2014). In particular, the removal of barriers within the European Single market, the Posted Workers Directive and the much-discussed Service Directive combined with several rulings from the European Court of Justice (ECJ), notably the Laval ruling, have gained much attention. The EU emphasis on market freedoms and competitiveness, primarily through austerity policies, is creating pressure for recommodification of labour (Hyman, 2015). Moreover, the intra-European labour migration discussed above is driven by European integration.

The push for removal of barriers at European level conflicts with the Nordic IR-models, which was very clear in the Laval case, and also the Viking case (Refslund, 2015). The Nordic tradition of self-regulating labour market is challenged by the European tradition for legislative regulation and a very proactive ECJ. Moreover, the Nordic tradition for collectivism in the labour market is clashing with European traditions of emphasising individual rights (Kristiansen, 2013). While the Danish model seems to have adapted for now to these pressures raised by, amongst others, the Laval ruling (Refslund, 2015), it remains unclear and disputed how the Nordic industrial relations tradition with industrial blockades etc., is compatible with the free movement of services, labour and firms in the European Union. The conflict between Danish unions and Ryan Air could very well be a test, since Ryan Air has claimed they will bring the case to the European courts.

*Outsourcing and privatisation*

The privatisation and outsourcing of public services often leads to declining working standards and wages as well as increased workloads and stress (Hermann and Flecker, 2012). Due to the increased fiscal strain on public authorities, mainly Danish municipalities, in particular following the economic crisis, significant shares of public work has been outsourced, particularly within cleaning and outdoor maintenance (Refslund and Thörnquist, 2016). Public cleaning has been outsourced on a growing scale since the mid-1980s, which has led to growing levels of precarious work and significant shares of labour migrants in the sectors (Refslund, 2014). This has, however, led to a growing attention on pay and social clauses in public procurement (Schulten et al., 2012). These clauses are of most relevance in IR-systems, where minimum wages and collective agreements are not extended to the entire labour market (like Denmark and Sweden). Schulten and colleagues (2012: 105) argue that; “*In some respects, pay clauses in procurement can be seen as a substitute for legal extension mechanisms*.” The Danish application of clauses in public procurement is among the most advanced in Europe (Jaehrling, 2015:13). Several empirical studies have also shown considerable cross-national variation in the outcome of privatisation and outsourcing , with the Nordic countries typically displaying less severe drawbacks in wages and working conditions due to the reach of labour market regulation and the strength of the unions (Hermann and Flecker, 2012; Jaehrling, 2015).

*Non-standard employment and precarious work*

The flexicurity model, and thus high numerical flexibility of Danish firms with very flexible hiring and firing options, means they have lower incentives for applying non-standard employment. This – combined with a tradition for solidaristic wage bargaining and encompassing unions – means that the Nordic countries are less affected by the “insider/outsider” divide or labour market dualisation (Pontusson, 2011: 111), which has become widespread in many European countries – not least in Germany (Rueda, 2007; Eichhorst, 2015). Non-standard employment still remains at comparatively low levels, although it has increased slightly since the height of the financial crisis (Rasmussen et al., 2015).

Temporary agency workers (TAW), who often constitute a key component of non-standard employment, are generally covered by collective agreements in Denmark, and temporary workers agencies are often members of an employers’ association (Rasmussen et al., 2015). TAW have thus, unlike in most other countries, become a rather well integrated part of the Danish IR-model. Due to flexible conditions in the collective agreements, agency work only accounts for 1-2% of total employment (Rasmussen et al., 2015). Danish unions’ attention towards precarious employment also appears to be rising (Larsen and Mailand, 2015: 10; Refslund and Larsen, 2016). Case studies indicate, however, increasing use of temporary agency workers (TAW) and accompanying problems e.g. workers having very few guaranteed hours or companies using labour migrants as TAW through an agency without a collective agreement in order to bypass the user company’s collective agreement (Refslund and Larsen, 2016). Furthermore, due to the high wage level in Denmark, there have been multiple examples of employers circumventing the collective agreements through the application of non-standard employment such as short-term contracts, subcontracted workers and TAW. However, the main problems regarding precarious and non-standard work still come from workers being employing without a collective agreement in exposed jobs, which very often are labour migrants (Rasmussen et al., 2015).

*Decentralisation of collective bargaining*

It is widely claimed in the literature that decentralization of the collective bargaining systems in the 1980’s in the Nordic countries can be seen as a weakening of the system in general and the unions in particular (e.g. Thelen, 2014; Howell and Givan, 2011). This has, however, been challenged by Nordic researchers who claim this is contingent on local union strength and the single channel representation structure which reproduces the bargaining power and structure at local level (Kjellberg, 1983; Due et al., 1993; Ilsøe, 2010, 2012; Scheuer, 1992). The decentralisation in Denmark has typically been described as “centralised decentralisation”, where the parties largely agreed on the need for increased flexibility at the firm- and sector level emphasising the strengthening of competitiveness (Due et al., 1993; Scheuer, 1992; Vartiainen, 2011; Andersen et al., 2015). Moreover, nationwide agreements settled at sector level have, in general, replaced national wage bargaining (Andersen et al., 2015: 163). The collective bargaining levels remain high at around 84% (DA, 2014). Therefore, a strong element of coordination can be maintained in a decentralised bargaining system (Traxler, 1995) and nine out of ten shop stewards report contact with their union during local negotiations (Ilsøe, 2012:769). Consequently, because of the power resources embedded in the unions at national, sectoral and local levels, the collective bargaining regime in the Nordic countries remains strong – both at the local level and the central level, where many key dimensions are still settled (Vartiainen, 2011; Andersen et al., 2015). Some of the more vulnerable sectors such as cleaning, transport and agriculture still have sector-wide negotiated wages, which makes the workers less vulnerable at the local level.

Stamhus (2014) found in a quantitative analysis that Danish firms with a local collective agreement use achievement-based pay systems more frequently than companies without union presence. If there is no local union presence, the firms typically apply fixed hourly wages instead. This indicates that local union presences increased flexibility over wages, most likely because there is someone with which to negotiate. When there is no local union representation, the wages follow the central negotiated agreements more closely.

The local unions can opt out of any local agreement with a two-month warning and fall back on sector-settled agreements which, *de facto,* give unions a veto on local agreements (Ilsøe, 2012:762). Collective (and multi-employer) bargaining remains a very strong institution in the Nordic countries at a time where collective bargaining is losing importance in most European countries, which confirms Marginson’s (2015) claim that decentralisation, or a move towards single-employer bargaining, is more pronounced in Southern Europe than in the Northern EU countries.

*Conflicts in the Danish IR-model*

While the Danish IR-model has been known as rather consensual, there have been increasing tensions in recent years both between the state as an employer and the union movement and between the established union movement and so-called “yellow unions”.

”Yellow” or ideologically alternative unions do not in general negotiate collective agreements (with a few exceptions, where they tend to underbid the wages in the traditional unions’ collective agreements), they are not affiliated with the union confederations and in general, they offer much lower membership prices, since they typically limit their assistance to member services, which they use to attract members from the traditional union movement. Researchers have labelled them free-riders of the Danish IR-model, since they benefit from the already established collective agreements (Ibsen et al., 2013). In 2014, 16 % of all Danish union members were member of an alternative union or a union not affiliated with the union confederations growing from 5 % in 1995 (DA, 2014).

There are different explanations for the increase in the alternative unions’ member base such as the political association of the traditional unions or dissatisfaction with the traditional unions. However, in a large survey among union members Ibsen et al. (2013) found that the cost level was paramount for shifting to an alternative union; 78 % stated that the lower price was part of the reason. However, as organisation rates remain relatively high in the traditional unions, and because the yellow unions in general do not negotiate collective agreements, the employers still only negotiate with the traditional unions. However, if the membership rates of the traditional unions decline further, it is difficult to know what the future will bring according to high ranked officials in the employers’ associations (Interview, autumn 2015).

Another conflict that has been rising, especially since the economic crisis, is how the IR-system works in the public sector, where the dual role of the state as legislator and at the same time employer has created quandaries (Høgedahl and Ibsen, 2015). The latest incidence of state interventions in collective negotiations in the public sector was an intervention in the collective agreements by parliament in 2013 that forced a new working time arrangement on school teachers (who are mainly publically employed). After four weeks lock-out, where the members of the teachers union received no salary (and the pupils no classes), the social-democratic government intervened with a law, which the majority of observers agreed was in favor of the public employers. This has made some researchers conclude that the mechanisms of the Danish IR-model, which were mainly built around the private manufacturing sector, are de-facto disabled in – and ill-suited for - the public sector (Høgedahl and Ibsen, 2015). Other researchers, however, concluded that these examples are rather exceptions and that the IR-model still is suited for the public sector as well (Due and Madsen, 2013). While this inception was led by the social democratic government, research findings show that left-wing governments tend to more supportive in the long-term of the institutional privileges of the unions in the Danish IR-system (Klitgaard and Nørgaard, 2014).

**Explaining the resilience and adaptability of the model: The embedded and institutionalised power resources of organised labour**

Having discussed the key challenges faced by the Danish IR-system as well as how the system adapts, we now turn to a discussion of why the Danish IR-system appears more capable than most other IR-systems in adjusting to the growing pressure caused by closer international and European integration of labour and product markets. We have touched upon some of the partial explanations in the previous sections, but we now look at the overall adaptability of the model.

Changes in national socio-economic models are uneven and experimental by nature and vary across both national settings and within sectors (Kristensen and Lilja, 2011; Lane and Wood, 2009), and are furthermore dependent on historical national compromises and institutional settings, since institutions, in a broad sense, are mediating the pressures for change (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hay, 2004; Hay and Wincott, 2012). While we have identified several major challenges for the Danish model, we argue that there are several institutional anchors countering these challenges, in particular the institutionalised power resources of the Danish unions and the institutional setting in which the unions and the IR-model operates (cf. Lévesque and Murray, 2010). We further argue that other important factors embedded in a broader social context than the institutional, contribute towards explaining the outcome.

Accordingly, the main explanatory variable we emphasise is the power resource of the unions, as also argued by Korpi (1978, 1983), which should be given more attention in political-economic analyses of labour markets and welfare states than has often been the case (cf. Pierson, 2011 for a similar argument). Union density remains very high, at 68% of the Danish labour force (DA, 2014: 187) as seen in figure 1 (although the “yellow” unions’ share has increased markedly) and in an international comparison the Nordic countries still have a unique high union density. Although union density has declined somewhat in recent decades, it is still significantly above the levels of the “golden ages” in the 1960s and early 1970s. The high union density is affected by the “Ghent-system”, where the unions also administer the unemployment insurance system, which means that many workers have a double membership of both the union and the unemployment insurance fund (a-kasse) (Høgedahl, 2014). The decline in union density is explained by the changing industry structure, a weakening of the Ghent-system (Høgedahl, 2014), changing understandings of the IR-system as well as changes originating in the political system (Klitgaard and Nørgaard, 2014; Ibsen et al., 2013). High union density is vital for the function of the Danish labour market model, since – in the absence of any legal foundation – the collective agreement system is based on the labour market organisations, in particular unions having the ability and power to force the companies to sign agreements e.g. by coordinated actions. Moreover, since local union presence is an important aspect of the Danish model, a decline in unionisation – which, in turn, means less workplace representation - can weaken the overall model (Kjellberg, 1983).

Unions often take an active role in improving productivity and work environment (Kristensen et al., 2011) and cooperation seems to be a self-perpetuating norm (Sørensen et al., 2015) with high levels of employee involvement in work processes (Gallie, 2003). Other scholars have emphasised that the dynamic and flexible elements of the Nordic models entails highly adaptable capacities, high educational levels, also for low-skilled workers, innovative business systems, social mobility and high degrees of government decentralisation (Kristensen and Lilja, 2011; Vartiainen, 2014). In general, Danish unions have a largely positive approach to globalisation as well as labour migration (A4, 2015a) and tend to accept that job losses occur e.g. as a result of relocation of production (Knudsen and Lind, 2012: 385–86). Overall, the model empowers workers by safeguarding high skill levels and constantly emphasising the upgrading of skills for the workforce (Pontusson, 2011).

In general, the IR-system is based upon self-regulating labour market organisations regulating wages and other key aspects of the labour market through collective agreements, with only low levels of direct legislation and political interference in the labour market. However, the state has an important role of supporting the system, which tends to be somewhat neglected in the literature (cf. Bosch, 2015; Dølvik, 2013b). Knudsen and Lind (2012), emphasise how IR regulation is part of a broad corporatist tradition in Nordic regulation. Although the corporatist institutions have been weakened over the last decades, the state still has an important role in the model through industrial relations institutions such as the labour court and the arbitration council and through social policies such as unemployment and educational policies (Knudsen and Lind, 2012). IR has an important role in societal development (Bosch et al., 2009; Dølvik and Martin, 2015; Hollingsworth and Boyer, 1997), but it is also embedded and thus contingent on the historical development of the state and social policies. The function of the Danish IR-model is enforced by active labour market policies, high levels of unemployment benefits and high levels of investments in public education; accordingly, the state still has an important role in the development of IR-models (Bosch, 2015; Dølvik, 2013a; Meardi, 2015). The Nordic model is hence embedded in the institutional setting of both the labour market and social policies, and these seem to reinforce each other.

Collective agreement coverage remains high at 84% of all workers in Denmark. What is also unique is the absence (in Denmark and Sweden) of legal minimum wages. The de-facto minimum wage is stipulated in the collective agreements and is above $20 in all Nordic countries, which is very high by international standards. There is broad consensus in the population that unions are an important part of the labour market. In a large survey Danish employees showed broad support for the IR-system including industrial conflicts regulated by the unions and employers association, with only 16% opposing this form of regulation (Caraker et al., 2014: 21). In addition, collective bargaining enjoys very broad support in the population, where 72% of Danish employees stated that wages and employment terms should be regulated in the collective agreements and only 13% opposed this (Caraker et al., 2014: 17). Workplace presence is a key determinant in explaining unionisation rates and there is still a high coverage of shop stewards in Denmark, at over half of all firms (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011: 118). There is, however, significant variation between and among public and private firms; especially larger companies frequently have shop stewards while small companies and certain sectors such as agriculture have lower levels (Navrbjerg and Larsen, 2015). Shop stewards enjoy substantial legal protection against dismissal and usually have resources as well as working hours allocated to fill the representative role and participate in further training and meetings at union confederation levels. In many larger Danish firms, the shop steward is a professionalised full-time position which, in combination with the single-channel representation systems, leaves Danish unions with a strong locally embedded power position.

*FIGURE 1: Union density in Denmark 1960-2010*

Source: Visser, 2013

*Consensual and trust-based IR-systems*

The strong and institutionalised labour market organisations combined with the early historical recognition of unions as legal negotiation partners (dating back to 1899 in Denmark) have resulted in consensual and pragmatic industrial relations (Jørgensen, 2002; Kristensen and Lilja, 2011; Lind, 1996), with a low level of tension between workers and managers, since employers and unions recognise each other’s role and legitimacy (Sørensen et al., 2009). The potential conflicts between unions and employers are institutionalised in the system and there is a peace obligation in the two years between the renewals of the collective agreements. The system does, however, feature reoccurring industrial conflicts, so the basis of the system is still “consensus-based conflict” (Jensen, 2012).

IR-analysis often focuses on institutional factors such as collective bargaining and union density; however, the analyses should in general be broadened and include socially embedded variables and values. Institutions can have both a regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive function (Scott, 2014). While much contemporary IR research tends to primarily reflect on regulatory dimensions, the Danish IR-model relies on important aspects of all three dimensions, which is embedded in the historical, social and political context. We therefore argue that, in order to understand the trajectories of the Nordic IR models and the continued divergence of national IR-models despite increased pressure of internationalisation, liberalisation and deregulation, one has to also include explanatory variables emphasising values and norms. Other variables, besides social policies, that are relevant to include are societal trust or social capital as suggested by Ebbinghaus et al. (2011). Consequently, Scandinavians come out on top in various trust surveys (Larsen, 2013) and trust has been emphasised in previous discussions of the Danish social model (Campbell et al., 2006), and in discussions of the Danish IR-model (Ilsøe, 2010). The high general levels of trust in Denmark also affect the labour market, resulting in a more consensual and participatory relationship between unions, employers and employees and in actions aimed at sustaining high trust levels (Rasmussen et al., 2015). More than two-thirds of shop stewards say they have a good or very good relationship with management (Navrbjerg and Larsen, 2015) and the same is true for management’s relationship with union negotiators (Ilsøe, 2012: 768). Survey data from the European Quality of Life Survey in figure 2 shows the Danish labour market has the lowest perceived tension level between workers and management among European countries. Other recent research shows that Scandinavians have a uniquely high level of egalitarian values on wage distributions (Kjærsgård, 2015).

*FIGURE 2: Perceived tension between workers and management.*

Source: European quality of life survey 2011-12. Percentage stating “a lot of tension”)

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have addressed the challenges that growing liberalisation, deregulatory pressures, and economic globalisation inflict on the Danish IR- model, and have discussed how the model meets these challenges. While some elements are specific to the Danish case, a great deal of challenges can be identified across other IR-models - not least the other Nordic countries, with whom the Danish model still shares many characteristics, in particular the Swedish IR-model. The findings show that alternative outcomes are possible in the increasingly deregulated international economy. Therefore, while liberalisation and deregulatory pressures are presenting significant challenges for national IR-models as argued by Baccaro and Howell (2011), which is also the case in Denmark, the strong unions and highly embedded IR-settings suggest that these pressures can be somewhat mitigated and labour markets can remain highly organised. Ultimately, a “highroad” alternative and egalitarian capitalism remain viable – at least for now. This finding suggests that liberalisation pressures are likely to result in “co-convergence” in similar models, where convergence is occurring within institutional clusters (Iversen and Pontusson, 2000) rather than an all-encompassing deregulatory convergence, as argued in much liberalisation literature (e.g. Glyn, 2006). This outcome is highly correlated – in our perspective – with the strong and encompassing position of organised labour, with union density remaining uniquely high and supported by the institutional setting, which reflects previous power relations (Lévesque and Murray, 2010; Korpi 1983).

Overall, while we do identify some serious challenges for the Danish IR-model it appears to be re-calibrating rather than eroding in the light of these pressures, although without altering the key mechanisms and characteristics of the model substantially (Andersen et al., 2014; Due and Madsen, 2008). Key institutions such as collective bargaining, encompassing unions and high union density remain largely intact. Nonetheless, some developments, not least the increased labour market segmentation of labour migrants, might challenge the overall functionality of the model in the future and increase precarious work in the Danish labour market.

IR-research needs to analyse changes in IR-systems in a wider context than a purely institutional perspective. Welfare state policies are important elements in labour market developments (Bosch et al., 2009). While there might be some drift and impairments in the Danish IR-model, there is a broad variety of associational, institutional as well as societal “anchors” that makes the model resilient and reduces negative outcomes. Furthermore, the Danish model seems to be embedded in a wider context of values, norms and policies with high degrees of trust, consensual attitudes in the labour market and egalitarian values. This plays an important role in explaining the apparent durability of the IR-model, and we propose that future research explores how IR-developments are contingent upon individual as well as institutionally embedded factors such as trust and consensus, as well as research into the causal relations between these phenomena.

However, should the IR-system become undermined in various ways by some of the challenges identified in this article, this might be highly challenging for the overall social model and the consequences could be dramatic social changes as seen in Germany (Lehndorff et al., 2009). Hence a highly regulated labour market with high union power resources, consensual practices, and a coherent institutional setting can reduce risks of labour market dualisation spilling over into other policy areas. Although future perspectives for trade unions appear bleak in most affluent countries (Hassel, 2015), the Danish and Nordic IR-models show that unions, under the right conditions, can maintain an important role in competitive capitalism with a strong overall macro-economic performance (cf. Kristensen and Lilja, 2011). In fact, to paraphrase Pontusson (2011), the Nordic models can even be a role model for a more egalitarian outcome in contemporary capitalism.

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1. See <http://www.research.mbs.ac.uk/ewerc/Our-research/Current-projects/Reducing-Precarious-Work-in-Europe-through-Social> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)