

## **I-WIRE**

### **Independent Workers and Industrial Relations in Europe**

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### **WP1. Mapping Quasi-unions**

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## Summary

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## 1. The Quasi-Unions (QU): Theoretical Framework

In the international literature on the subject, the wide range of alternative organizations that have emerged to represent the interests of non unionized workers, also known as the "unorganized," are defined in a number of different ways: Hecksher and Carrè (2006) speak of 'quasi-unions', Jenkins (2012) calls them "pre-unions", while Sullivan (2010) defines them "proto-unions".

The Quasi-Unions (QU) are found with particular frequency in two areas: among the poorest and most marginal groups, such as low-wage temporary workers or undocumented immigrants who work in labour-intensive sectors, and among relatively privileged white-collar workers with technical skills who work in the advanced tertiary sector. A third characteristic that sometimes cuts across this economic division is social identity: many organizations have formed around categories of race, gender, ethnicity and sexual identity.

As a rule, QU have a common target: to strengthen the voice of workers who, acting alone, risk seeing their working condition undermined. They also have similar networking strategies, «including systematic alliances with related groups and the use of "swarming" pressure in the place of mass strikes» (Hecksher and Carrè, 2006: 313). Therefore, QU are a new type of association, self-organized, with limited financial resources, that do not follow the traditional collective bargaining approach. They focus mainly on voluntary work, with a strong "core group" whose commitment is permanent, plus a "liquid membership". In many organizations, members can be "supporters" who take part in specific collective actions, "registered members" who sign up for websites /social media or "paying members" who pay a yearly subscription fee to support the activities. QU can rely on servicing, at the local or regional level, and/or advocacy.

Although many of them try to combine the two approaches, they can be seen, and rather clearly, to emphasise one strategy over the other. The requirements of the two outlooks differ: advocacy-oriented organizations must be relatively confrontational and militant, while service-oriented ones are more pragmatic, concentrating on demonstrating competency and achieving power through market leverage (i.e. group purchasing of insurance) (Hecksher e Carrè, 2007: 610). Some QU offer individual services (legal and fiscal aid, employment counselling), others mostly collective services (health service discount cards, portable benefits etc.); this also depends on the features of the institutional contexts in which they operate. Other organizations provide services as a short-term approach, while organizing activities are underway and in order to develop loyalty (and eventually membership) among targeted workers: i.e. facilitating access to training, providing information about jobs or job opportunities. With regard to advocacy, QU use and combine various tools: lawsuits against employers, the creation of awareness campaigns that mobilize public opinion and aim to influence decision-making. When advocacy aims at achieving political change, it begins to resemble lobbying activities. Some interest groups have engaged in lobbying to influence, oppose or

support specific public policies or regulatory measures. The border between the two actions is often thin, as the objective is the same, although there are various means: advocacy to influence decision-making relies primarily on the mobilization of civil society and not on direct interaction with holders of political power (members of government, parliamentarians, government officials and managers). It is worth noting that awareness campaigns draw mainly on the web and social media, as tools to encourage participation and disseminate information, so as to succeed in involving other circles outside of the one represented.

In the next section, we will focus attention on the main QU that, in several European countries, have organized themselves to give voice to self-employed workers in knowledge-intensive professional sectors. As Rapelli (2012) and Leighton (2014) show, the major growth in freelance professional work has taken place outside the traditional professions of self-employment, in particular in ICT, the media, design and consulting and similar service jobs. Section 2 will provide a description of QU "in the strictest sense", meaning with regard to self-organized structures presenting the following features:

- they are first-level organizations;
- they help workers who lack other means of representation, apart from collective bargaining;
- they are organizations that reach across different working sectors (not professional bodies).

Section 3 will describe the "hybrid" QU, which differ from the first group in terms of at least one of the features listed above. The reconstruction of case histories was carried out through clerical research, along with an analysis of web sites and a review of the pertinent literature; to analyse four QU, we sent out an email questionnaire (Appendix 1).

## 2. QU "in the strictest sense": an initial European map

The quasi-unions mapped in this group were analyzed in terms of the following factors:

1. Age;
2. Types of workers they organize;
3. Organizational forms;
4. Organizational structures;
5. Strategic approaches;
6. Membership leverage;
7. Political roles;

8. Origins;
9. Governance;
10. Geographical extension;
11. Forms of involvement and mobilization

On table 1, a number of these factors will be summarized by taking into consideration the following indicators:

1. Year of foundation
2. Target
3. Legal format
4. Staff
5. Fees and size of membership
6. Services offered and advocacy actions
7. Main political results achieved.

The other factors (from 8 to 11) will be described further on in the text.

Factors	ORGANIZATIONS						
	IPSE – UK	VGSD – Germany	ACTA – Italy	FEDIPRO vzw – Belgium	AF – Romania	SSa – Poland	CIPA – Croatia
Year of foundation	PCG in 1999; IPSE in 2014	2012	2004	2013	2013	2014	2013
Legal format	Limited company	Cross-sector association	Cross-sector association	Cross-sector association	Cross-sector association	Cross-sector association	Cross-sector association
Staff	34 employee staff	Mostly volunteers	Mostly volunteers	Mostly volunteers	Mostly volunteers	Mostly volunteers	Mostly volunteers
Target	Freelance professionals and the self-employed	Freelance professionals & microenterprises (-10 employees)	Freelance professionals	Freelance professionals	Freelance professionals and microenterprises	Freelance professionals and microenterprises	I-pros, microenterprises and the unemployed
Fees	Standard membership: £154.73 + VAT per year; IPSE Plus membership: £247.65 + VAT per year	Monthly fee from €5 to €10;  Community membership free	Annual fee €50	Annual fee €120 + VAT or Gold membership: €360 per year	Annual fee €100 + VAT	Annual fee €30	48 EURO regular membership 125 – 250 – 500 EURO supporting membership
Size of membership	21,000 paying	300 paying, 1300 non-paying	1000 paying, about 11500 non-paying	-	-	5 paying	33 paying 2,550 non-paying
Services	Standard: Tax defense e legal help-lines; Debt recovery: special member rate; consumer discounts; Plus: Life insurance, flexible benefits (medical insurance), insurance against payments not made	Encounters for networking, access to “clubs” (professional communities, professional networks)	Information desk, help-lines, external contacts/arrangements advantageous to members	Training, legal advice, community networking, external contacts/arrangements advantageous to members	Information, training, marketplace for members	Information, Training, community networking	Information, training, tax consulting, legal advice, community networking, job opportunities exchange
Advocacy	Lobbying, EU lobbying	Lobbying and social media campaigns	Lobbying and social media campaigns	Lobbying	Lobbying	Lobbying	Lobbying and social media campaigns
Political results achieved	X	X	x				

In the UK, after fifteen years as the **PCG** (Professional Contractors Group), the organization became the IPSE - The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed - in 2014. The PCG was formed in May 1999 by a group of concerned professional contractors to provide independent consultants with a voice in opposition to a tax law known as IR35, which placed additional burdens on the self-employed. Since then, IPSE has evolved from being a single-issue campaign group to the largest association of freelance professionals in the EU. IPSE's objective is to demonstrate the economic value of freelancing to those in power and to ensure that freelancing is both taken into consideration and supported in all areas of regulation and policy. IPSE does this by supporting extensive research into freelancing (i.e. the studies of Rapelli, 2012, and Leighton, 2014) and by maintaining strong relations with politicians, government departments and trade associations. Specifically, the IPSE hosts and attends events within Parliament, including roundtable discussions of key policy issues and launches of new research or policy work; in addition, the IPSE's policy and public affairs teams work with Parliament in evaluating bills, addressing select committees and ensuring that any calls for clarification or justification made on behalf of freelancers are responded to promptly; IPSE also acts as the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Freelance Sector, a cross-party grouping of MPs with a particular interest in the freelance sector. Although its title is that of a private concern, IPSE has an internal structure similar to that of an association: anyone can become a member by presenting an application and paying the fees; members elect a thirty-person advisory council, which in turn appoints up to twelve directors, and the board of directors employs officers to run the organization. It has now grown to represent 21,000 individuals and operates an office in central London with a staff of 32, including policy officers who lobby politicians and bureaucrats (Dullroy and Cashman, 2013; [www.ipse.uk](http://www.ipse.uk)).

The cross-sector association **VGSD** (Verband der Gründer und der Selbständigen Deutschland) was born in Germany in 2012. It is based in Monaco and represents freelancers and small business entrepreneurs (with less than 10 employees). VGSD operates under a standard association structure, with articles of association, an elected leadership, and one paid assistant. Its aim is to help independent workers who lack other means of representation (such as unions or business owners associations) to improve their social security and tax status through lobbying activities targeting decision makers. The general mission of supporting the interests of freelance workers entails a series of activities: i) the formulation of proposals for the establishment of a flexible pension system and a social insurance fund for small business owners and freelancers; ii) the promotion of information campaigns and the mobilisation of members to raise public awareness regarding the new panorama of self-employment. To this end, the association carries out periodic studies and research on the self-employed, with the ultimate goal of developing the concept of the "mainstreaming freelancer". Paying members number approximately 300, and more than 1,300 supporters have signed up for newsletters ([www.vgsd.de](http://www.vgsd.de)).

In Italy, a group of consultants founded **ACTA**-The Association of Freelancers, in 2004, with the goal of filling the representation gap for workers in unregulated professions. The association protests unfair tax and social treatment, as well as the limited welfare protections provided to the new types of independent professionals, as compared to other categories of the self-employed: business owners and independent professionals. ACTA has pursued its mission by promoting initiatives to raise awareness and inform the general public (flash mobs and social theater), as well as collective mobilization campaigns utilising social media, intensive lobbying efforts at both the local and national levels and the creation of networks to exert various forms of pressure on European-Community institutions while facilitating exchanges of international experience. In fact, ACTA was a co-founder (with PCG) of the European Forum of Independent Professionals, or EFIP, bringing together the quasi-unions of Europe, and it is the only association to be considered a "sister organization" by the Freelancers Union (FU) of New York. Its headquarters office is in Milan, though in recent years local groups have been established in other Italian regions as well. Today ACTA operates under a federal structure, with branches that encourage member participation in 7 different regions. These branches combine to form the national organization, which elects the leaders and sets policy. The Board, with its 14 members (1 chairperson, 1 assistant chairperson, 1 honorary advisor and 11 councillors), is elected every three years. In organizational terms, ACTA operates largely through the work of volunteers.

In Belgium, the association **FEDIPRO vzw** was founded in 2012 (and founded a new in 2014). Its main objective is to achieve social recognition for I-pros and arrive at the formulation of a special legal status for this professional figure, in order to guarantee fair treatment and access to contracts, plus measures of support for training and the simplification of administrative procedures. The biggest challenge facing FEDIPRO is to raise awareness as to the unique profile and importance of highly skilled and engaged independent professionals. Most efforts are directed towards authorities and stakeholders, but IPROS themselves are a significant target as well. FEDIPRO also seeks to establish a professional community promoting peer-to-peer training and collaborative working. In addition, the association carries out research aimed at gaining an understanding of issues and elements of common interest to the entire category of freelancers: «We want to reach out to as many IPROS as possible (including non-members), in an attempt to collect all kinds of information, be it legal advice, best practices, sources for information» (<https://fediprolab.wordpress.com/english>). FEDIPRO is a small organization with an elected board and a volunteer who works on an ongoing basis. It communicates with its membership via newsletters, social media and periodic meetings.

The association **AF** (Asociatia Freelancerilor) was founded in Romania in 2013, with the aim of promoting the interests of freelancers and promoting a national network for the exchange of information and job opportunities ([www.asociatiafreelancerilor.ro](http://www.asociatiafreelancerilor.ro)). The category has registered strong growth in Romania, to

the point were it now numbers more than 1.5 million people (Eurostat, 2014). The association's activities address three main areas: 1) networking; 2) training (coaching sessions and workshops); lobbying. In terms of networking, AF organizes periodic events to promote face-to-face encounters between professionals and potential customers, while its website serves as a marketplace exchange. The association's lobbying activities are aimed at achieving a more effective social welfare system for freelancers. It is a small association meant mainly for workers in conceptual fields, though it is open to all self-employed worker and small-business operators.

In Poland, the association **SSa** (Stowarzyszenie Samozatrudnieni), headquartered in Warsaw, was created with the aim of improving the conditions of independent professionals, who are known to be "a third of the country's labour force" (<http://samozatrudnieni.org>). The main points of its program are: i) participation in social dialogue; ii) the creation of a "Self-Employed Workers' Statute" establishing a specific legal status for the professional group; iii) reduction of social security contributions and compulsory health insurance; iv) the introduction of parental leave for freelancers. The staff consists of 10 volunteers in specific roles who deal with the various activities on a permanent basis. Governance is provided by a board and a supervisory body, and elections take place once every five years. The services offered involve information and training on access to credit and European funding. There are also services for unemployed workers who wish to become self-employed.

Finally, Croatia has the **CIPA** (Croatian Independent Professionals Association), founded in 2013 and headquartered in Zagreb. The association is open to I-pros, small businesses and the unemployed. Since its establishment, it has organised more than 50 events meant to function as networking meetings and days of training and information, in the course of which advice is provided on taxes and legal questions. The association's mission is to offer operating and legal support to freelancers and/or students and the unemployed, encouraging the development of professional activities through training and networking. To achieve these objectives, the CIPA program operates as the national co-working community and platform supporting all local communities and co-working spaces. Currently, the CIPA represents close to 2,500 of the more than 200,000 independent and self-employed professionals active in all sectors offering its members business and legal support, possibilities for educational and professional development, networking and information on job opportunities, purchasing discounts and benefits, access to office infrastructures that are affordable, collaborative and socially aware (through the association's members and partner organizations) and advocacy through its networks (<http://upis.hdn.hr>). The organization relies on the work of 12 volunteers. Its coordinating structure includes a steering committee (with an elected chairman and assistant chairman), an advisory board, a court of honour (for the resolution of disputes) and a general administrative office.

A comparison of the different factors indicated on the table highlights the similarities and contrasts among the various QU.

Starting the age of the organisations, the one with the longest history is IPSE (founded in 1999), followed by ACTA (2004); in most cases, the associations have been established recently, within the last 4 years. The founding date is important, because, as Heckscher and Carré surmise (2006) in their study of the situation in America, one of the main problems of quasi-unions is their longevity: the difficulty of procuring funding and the reliance on volunteers often prove to be insurmountable obstacles to achieving stable structures, bringing their activities to an end. «In terms of longevity, of the 30 quasi-union websites we surveyed in 2001, 26 were no longer operating five years later. (...) They generally remain small and highly insecure; funding is uncertain; their average lifespan appears to be short» (2006: 614-615).

Of the group considered, only IPSE has a paid staff focused solely on its operations (34 employee); the others are mostly voluntary associations. The fact that IPSE is formally organized as a limited company also makes it unique among freelance organizations. The specific legal format utilised is that of company limited by guarantee, a common form for associations and clubs in the United Kingdom. In most cases, QU are registered cross-sector associations.

In terms of their target groups, almost all the unions are focused on freelancers, though this expression is often used, both globally and regionally, as a catch-all, incorporating several categories of workers, including some that might be excluded under narrower definitions. In addition to regional variations in terminology, there are also vast differences to be found within national borders and between one government or administrative sector and another. Organisations, corporate bodies and governmental departments draw up their own definitions, based on the research or discussions they engage in (Dullroy and Cashman, 2013;). In the specific cases of Italy's ACTA and Belgium's FEDIPRO, freelancers are independent professionals who have no employees and are engaged in activities of an intellectual nature and/or activities that fall under the service sectors (knowledge workers). According to IPSE's definition (2012), Freelancers are workers who supply their services on a contingent project or limited-duration basis, with remuneration depending on output. Freelancers take on all or most of the cost and risk of their own labour downtime and any lower-than-expected productivity. They also carry all the cost and risk of periods of economic inactivity.

While independent professionals in Italy and Belgium enjoy a different legal status compared from that of individual companies, in the UK most freelancers are legally considered a limited liability company (Ltd) without employees. In this regard, an IPSE survey of its membership (2010) showed that most of members (84%) were a Ltd. company without employees, while 12% were a Ltd. company with 1 employee (Bologna and Banfi, 2011). The other QU considered (the German VGSD, the Romanian AF, the Polish Stowarzyszenie

Samozatrudnieni and the Croatian CIPA) are open both to independent professionals and small businesses: the VGSD, for example, aims specifically at companies with fewer than 10 employees.

QU have flexible definitions of affiliation, ranging from members who pay an annual fee to supporters, meaning anyone who signs up for information, contributes or takes part in collective activities. In most of the cases considered, QU do not require dues payments from their members, though that is a long-term goal. Three QU (ACTA, Stowarzyszenie Samozatrudnieni and AF) require annual payment of a fixed fee, while others charge a fee that varies, depending on the "set of services" (standard or premium) supplied.

All the organizations offer a number of "individual" or "collective" services, in order to encourage "supporters" to become "members" and broaden the base of the paying membership. Membership fees are, in fact, the main source of funding for associations, allowing them to pursue their advocacy activities. In other words, through the delivery of services and benefits, QU can produce *club goods* meaning goods that are not rival services and are subject to the payment of the membership dues. The advocacy activities, which work in favour of the entire professional group (and not only paying members), generate *public goods* that are not rival services and cannot be rendered exclusive, open to "free-riders". The associations that carry out advocacy activities and have not developed "attractive services" usually have a low number of paying members and a large number of supporters (simply on account of the "free riding"). Those who pay the membership fee usually do so for ideological or identity-driven reasons.

Of the associations selected, IPSE is the one with the largest number of paying members (about 21,000). The types of services offered, well suited to the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism (tax counselling, business protection, tax investigation insurance, debt recovery etc.), respond to the needs of independent workers and constitute the core element of the organization's mission. The delivery of these benefits underlies the success of IPSE at the same time as it plays a key role in the effectiveness of its lobbying activities. According to an IPSE study, thanks to the expert advice and insurance offered by IPSE, freelancers who are not IPSE members are more than twice as likely to pay extra tax under the IR35 than those who are. An analysis of the services offered by other organizations shows that several QU, and especially those established more recently, aim at building community and professional networks and/or marketplace exchanges to bring together job supply and demand. Though advocacy does not bring in paying members, it is also true that the membership is not the only measure of the effectiveness of new forms of representation. The cases of the VGSD and ACTA show that significant results can be achieved through effective lobbying and non-traditional approaches to mobilising consensus.

The German association VGSD was formed to oppose the introduction of compulsory retirement insurance for the self-employed, proposed in a reform by former Labour Minister Ursula von der Leyen. In 2012, in the

wake of the success of the e-petition (online parliamentary petition system <https://epetitionen.bundestag.de/index.php>) to eliminate the measure, which obtained 80,000 signatures in just a few days' time, the founding group of VGSD was heard in Parliament, succeeding in obtaining the postponement of the bill ([www.deskmag.com/en/freelancers-to-pay-more-in-germany-coworking-377](http://www.deskmag.com/en/freelancers-to-pay-more-in-germany-coworking-377)).

Over the years, ACTA has managed to garner widespread media attention by successfully initiating advocacy campaigns via social media (social bombing, flash mobs), legitimizing itself as an association representing a noteworthy constituency. Thanks to its detailed studies on the new forms of independent work, the association has become well known among policymakers. Since 2012, it periodically testifies before parliamentary committees dealing with reform of independent labour, and it has achieved noteworthy results in achieving changes on specific issues. Among its most effective actions, mention should be made of: blocking increases in social security benefit contributions (reform of Labour Law no. 92/2012); drafting the proposed reductions in social security benefit contributions for the self-employed that were approved under the latest budget act (2016); the effective application by all of Italy's regional governments of EU Regulation 1303/2013, allowing independent professionals to obtain access to European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI) 2014-2020. The association is working alongside the government in drawing up the Self-Employed Workers' Statute. Contrary to what Heckscher and Carré (2006) bring to light in the case of America, the impact of the ACTA is not limited by geography (day labour groups; city living wage ordinances) or by employer, but is felt on a national scale.

### 3. Hybrid QU

In this section, we will analyze the "hybrid" QU, or those that lack at least one of the characteristics which define a QU "in the strictest sense": a cross-sector structure, the first level of representation, exclusion from collective bargaining.

The organizations that belong to this group are:

- Unión de Profesionales y Trabajadores Autónomos (UPTA): a member of Spanish trade union "Unión General de Trabajadores" (UGT), it is involved in collective bargaining, representing economically dependent freelance workers (TRADE);
- Platform Zelfstandige Ondernemers (PZO), a Dutch national "umbrella organization" for sectors, professionals and network organisations belonging to the community of self-employed professionals.

In Spain, the Unión General de Trabajadores - UGT was the only trade union that abandoned, in the 80s, a strictly 'class-based' form of representation in favour of a more pluralistic approach, subsequently establishing a union especially devoted to self-employed workers – the Union of Professionals and Self-Employed Workers- UPTA. This organization was founded in 1999 and has long supported the introduction of a Self-Employed Workers' Statute to complement the regulation of salaried employment. In fact UPTA, together with the main employer associations representing self-employed workers, the Self-employed Workers' Association (Asociación de Trabajadores Autónomos, ATA) and the Spanish Federation of Self-Employed Workers (Federación Española de Autónomos, CEAT), negotiated with the government the drafting of the text of the Self-Employed Workers' Statute, which was eventually passed as Law no. 20 of 11 July 2007. The Statute introduced significant innovations and social protections for economically dependent freelance workers (TRADE), including the possibility of concluding so-called 'agreements of professional interest' (Pedersini, 2010). UPTA has 15,000 paying members. Its annual fee is €72. The services offered cover different areas: information, training, tax consulting, legal advice, accounting, supplementary social security, insurance covering non-payment by clients etc. The organization has a staff of 25 employees and 40 consultants (<http://upta.es>).

The Netherlands has one of the most highly developed and effective organizations. PZO is a national umbrella organization representing 45 smaller associations which are divided along lines of professional activity, such as translators, consultants and small networks of mixed membership. Interestingly enough, individuals can become both direct members of the PZO and of the smaller associations that it represents. The Netherlands' lengthy history of independent work and its high proportion of self-employed individuals made it fertile ground for the emergence of professional lobbying groups. In 2002 the disparate specialized associations joined together under a shared national structure (Dullroy and Cashman, 2013). PZO operates from within the framework of the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (Vereniging van Nederlandse Ondernemingen-Nederlands Christelijk Werkgeversverbond, VNO-NCW). Since 2010, PZO has sat on the Social and Economic Council (SER), the government's permanent advisory body. With a membership base of 20,000 workers, PZO is the largest organisation representing self-employed workers who have no staff (zelfstandigen zonder personeel, ZZP) – known as ZZP'ers. Along with other organisations for the self-employed, PZO is a voice for some 650,000 ZZP'ers, who now represent 9% of the national workforce; their numbers have grown by 33% over a 10-year period (2000-2010). In the past, this group was largely ignored in the political arena, especially in terms of socioeconomic consultation. Traditionally, such consultation took place with representatives of employees and employers ([www.pzo-zzp.nl/visie](http://www.pzo-zzp.nl/visie)).

France is an example of a country with no single national-level organization for independent professionals or "new independent workers" (NIW). Instead, it has a variety of smaller groups with overlapping scopes of

activity and responsibility. Like the Netherlands and Italy, France has many specialised associations for the various trades, with several umbrella organizations structured on a cross-sector basis. Some of these specialised associations interact at the meetings of the European Forum of Independent Professionals, a European-wide body ([www.efip.org](http://www.efip.org)).

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## Websites

Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE) – UK  
[www.ipse.co.uk](http://www.ipse.co.uk)

Verband der Gründer und Selbständigen e.V. (VGSD) – Germany  
[www.vgsd.de](http://www.vgsd.de)

Associazione Consulenti Terziario Avanzato (ACTA) – Italy  
[www.actainrete.it](http://www.actainrete.it)

FEDIPRO vzw – Belgium  
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