

Multiple strategies but small gains: Trade union revitalization and power resources in Central Eastern Europe after 2008

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Abstract

This study comparatively examines the relationship between revitalization strategies and trade union power resources in Central Eastern Europe. It shows that the post-2008 weakening of union power resources in the region served as a catalyst for a wide range of revitalization strategies, many of which included elements not documented in the revitalization literature. In most cases, union revitalization strategies involved the mobilization of organizational and societal resources and were geared towards (re)building statutory rights for unions and (re)establishing legal guarantees for workers. This ‘institutional longing’, however, left many organizations oblivious to membership decline, which may threaten their long-term survival.

Keywords

Central Eastern Europe, crisis, institutions, power resources, revitalization, trade unions

Introduction

During the late 2000s economic crisis and its aftermath, workers and their organizations faced multiple challenges. Austerity drives, flexibilization of working conditions, and

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government-led reforms undermining collective employment rights diminished already scarce trade union (hereafter union) resources (Doellgast et al., 2018). One strand of the literature argues that unions are unable to counter these adverse trends and fall into oblivion (Ost, 2009), while another espouses Nietzsche's 'what does not kill me makes me stronger' belief: it asserts that the cumulative difficulties faced by labour organizations may trigger revitalization initiatives seeking to facilitate their adaptation to new circumstances (Murray et al., 2020; Weil, 2005).

These contrasting expectations, together with options falling between the two extremes, can also be analyzed in terms of the implications they entail for worker organizations. Visser (2019) identified four possible trajectories for the future of unions reflecting different expectations concerning union revitalization. The first is marginalization, which is likely to materialize if the current trends of membership decline and unions' diminishing influence on bargaining and political spheres persist. The second, dualization, assumes the deepening of labour market segmentation and the widening of the gap in pay and employment conditions between the unionized and non-unionized workforce. The third possible trajectory is replacement, in line with which unions' roles as representatives and defenders of workers' interests would gradually be replaced by new, alternative forms of employee voice. Finally, the fourth possible scenario involves union revitalization, which expects unions to 'regain their vitality and youthfulness' (Visser, 2019: 68) by boosting their membership base and winning broader societal support for their actions. The first three scenarios (marginalization, dualization, and replacement) reflect the expectations of the literature claiming that adverse conditions inhibit union actions seeking to strengthen their influence, whereas the revitalization scenario reflects the opposite view.

Which of these trajectories are CEE unions likely to follow? In light of earlier studies that pointed to notorious labour weakness in CEE countries prior to the 2008 crisis (Crowley and Ost, 2001; Meardi, 2012; Ost, 2009), the most obvious response to this question would be marginalization. In his article on the future of CEE unions, Ost (2009) argued that increasingly hostile conditions either prevent post-communist unions from taking actions, leading to their marginalization, or compel unions to solely defend the interests of their core members, leading to the dualization scenario identified by Visser (2019). However, recent analyses of union actions undertaken post-2008 in individual CEE countries (Bernaciak and Kahancová, 2017; Trif et al., 2021) defied such gloomy assessments indicating that CEE unions have launched systematic efforts to improve their capacity to address workers' concerns, including vulnerable groups.

This Special Issue aims to bridge the gap between earlier regional studies and the recent case study by comparatively assessing CEE unions' revitalization strategies to confront post-2008 challenges, especially the decline in institutional safeguards. Revitalization is defined as 'adaptations and change initiatives undertaken by unions to restore their strength and influence' (Kumar and Schenk, 2013:16). To identify which revitalization strategies were employed by CEE unions, we used the catalogue developed by Frege and Kelly (2003) (i.e. organizing workers organizational restructuring, coalition-building with social movements, partnership with employers, political action, and international links) and Meardi (2007) (i.e. servicing). By examining the interplay of power resources and union revitalization strategies, this Special Issue responds to recent calls for

further empirical research to advance the understanding of ‘how different types of power resources are mobilized and used’ over time (Reflund and Armholtz, 2021: 1).

Contrary to Ost’s (2009) expectations, the findings show that the depletion of power resources post-2008 pushed unions to use the full range of revitalization strategies identified by Frege and Kelly (2003) and Meardi (2007). It was often the ‘threat’ motivation (e.g. to avoid marginalization) that drove CEE unions to launch traditional and new forms of political actions (e.g. public protests and citizens’ initiatives), organizational restructuring (e.g. organizing vulnerable workers and establishing project-based union organizations), servicing (members and non-unionized vulnerable workers), and coalition-building (with social movements and professional organizations) to improve their strength and influence. In most cases, union revitalization strategies involved the mobilization of organizational and societal resources and were geared towards (re) building statutory rights for unions and (re)establishing statutory guarantees for workers. Nevertheless, unions’ excessive focus on (re)gaining statutory institutional strength may leave them oblivious to worrisome tendencies, particularly membership decline. Thus, it might be difficult for CEE unions to realize Visser’s revitalization scenario and ensure their long-term survival.

This article offers a comparative assessment of the interplay between power resources and union revitalization strategies presented in this Special Issue’s empirical papers. The next section provides an overview of CEE unions’ power resources. This is followed by a comparative analysis of power resources and revitalization strategies undertaken by CEE unions’ post-2008 and a discussion of the contribution of the findings to the revitalization literature. It also explores the viability of CEE union revitalization efforts in terms of their spread and sustainability, particularly focusing on unions’ efforts to (re)establish institutional safeguards.

CEE labour weakness: Overview of unions’ power resources

Despite a degree of cross-country variation, the political, economic, and social transformation from communist to capitalist societies led to similar challenges for CEE unions (Glassner, 2013), resulting in relatively weak organizational, societal, structural, and institutional power resources (Meardi, 2007; Ost, 2009). The extant studies convincingly argue that (post)communist legacies hindered the development of strong organizational resources after 1989 (Ost, 2009). Unlike their counterparts in Western Europe, post-communist unions have not emerged as a result of class struggles (Frege and Kelly, 2003). As they played a ‘transmission belt’ role between the party and workers, most communist unions had no distinct identity, authority, or internal legitimacy coming from their rank-and-file members. Moreover, to avoid being considered ‘communist relics’ after 1989, both communist successor unions and newly created unions sought to differentiate themselves from communist legacies. This meant that most unions did not oppose neoliberal economic reforms seeking to transform centrally planned economies into market economies. In exchange, they gained access to policy-making through newly established tripartite institutions (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). Communist legacies combined union roles in the painful restructuring of many state-owned enterprises, leaving many CEE workers disillusioned with unions (Ost, 2009).

These legacies primarily affected union organizational and societal power resources. Trends in union density, the most common indicator of organizational resources (Lehndorff et al., 2018), showed that the average union density in the eight countries examined in this Special Issue decreased from 31% to 14% between 2000 and 2015 (see Table 1). Likewise, unions' mobilizing capacity remained lower in CEE countries than in Western Europe despite protest rates increasing slightly throughout the 2000s (Meardi, 2007). In addition, although important cross-country differences can be observed, unions' societal appeal and discursive power resources, as proxied by public trust in unions (Lehndorff et al., 2018), have also been relatively low (Table 1). The level of trust in unions varied across countries during the 2008 economic crisis, with the societal image of unions improving in Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary but considerably declining in Slovenia and Romania (Eurobarometer, 2020), which could be linked to the massive decline in collective bargaining coverage post-2008 in the two countries (OECD/AIAS, 2022).

Unquestionably, CEE unions also faced severe challenges related to countries' institutional setups and market structures, particularly the government adoption of 'business-friendly' policies (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Ost, 2009). As many communist-era enterprises – traditional union strongholds – went bankrupt or downsized, the region's unions experienced a significant decline in membership. In addition, multinational corporations that linked production in CEE countries with the global economy generally remained hostile to unions and used their eastward expansion to experiment with new management and production method to reduce labour costs. While setting up their production facilities in the region, foreign companies invested primarily in labour-intensive industries and/or activities at the lower ends of the supply chain, which required low-skilled workers (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). Consequently, CEE workers and their organizations rarely enjoy a strategic position within their respective sectors (or

Table 1. Selected indicators of union power resources in the examined CEE countries (based on latest available data).

Country	Trade union density (%), 2015*	Trust in unions (% of respondents), 2010**	Share of temporary workers, including self-employed (%), 2019***	Collective bargaining coverage (%), 2015*
Croatia	24	34.4	26.5	52.7
Czechia	11.9	58.6	22.5	34.2
Estonia	4.5	55.4	13.2	14.1
Hungary	9.2	36.3	16.4	28.3
Poland	14.1	39.4	34.9	17.3
Romania	21.6	25.9	17.9	22.6
Slovakia	12.6	44.6	21.5	24.4
Slovenia	23.8	25.4	22.9	67.5

Sources: *OECD/AIAS (2022); ** Eurobarometer (2020); *** Eurostat (2020). Note: If data for a given year were not available, the figure for the closest following year was used.

companies) that would enable them to disrupt production or services. In the context of a shortage of capital and a high supply of labour until the mid-2000s, a notable power imbalance favouring employers existed in the region.

Furthermore, the position of workers within the labour market is weak in many sectors due to a large share of workers on non-standard contracts. Workers' structural power also varies greatly, even within a sector, contingent on demand for labour in specific occupations (Trif et al., 2021). Considering CEE unions' limited societal appeal, worker discontent in the region was often expressed through individual strategies, such as migration (exit), and non-traditional channels, such as informal protests and social campaigns (Meardi, 2007). Moreover, the effective use of the 'fleeing workforce' argument to demand improvements in employment standards in CEE countries was conditional on union capacity to mobilize workers and the presence of a favourable institutional environment; such conditions were met by very few labour organizations (Trif et al., 2021). Thus, the acute labour and skill shortages in the region due to labour migration rarely boosted CEE unions' structural resources.

In the face of shrinking membership and structural hurdles, institutional power resources – in the form of statutory protections and non-statutory provisions negotiated via bi- and tripartite bargaining structures – have often been the most important means of securing employee rights and legitimizing CEE unions. Since the early 1990s, workers' fundamental rights, namely, the freedom of association in unions, collective bargaining, and the right to strike, have been introduced in the CEE, but the neoliberal policies pursued by CEE governments and the intra-regional competition for foreign direct investment led to progressive dismantling of employee protections (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). The late-2000s crisis constituted a particularly heavy blow to statutory protections, such as the right to strike and bargain collectively, especially in countries that required international financial assistance (Glassner, 2013).

The weakening of statutory employment protections in CEE countries post-2010 has not been compensated for by unions' increased reliance on collective bargaining. Despite significant cross-country variation, collective bargaining coverage in CEE countries eroded faster than in Western European countries, mainly because of the weakness of multi-employer bargaining structures (Müller et al., 2019). During the late 2000s, the scope of bargaining became further limited in view of government-imposed restrictions and bargaining system reforms (Glassner, 2013). As a result, the collective bargaining coverage in the eight examined countries declined from 45.8% of the total eligible workers in 2008 to 32.6% in 2015.

The final institutional resource of CEE unions, the tripartite social dialogue, has been intermittently used post-1989 in all eight examined countries. Even though unions' capacity to influence government decisions is questioned (Ost, 2009), tripartite bodies often serve as an important channel for unions' policy input (e.g. in the realm of minimum wage) (Trif et al., 2021). The effectiveness of social dialogue became severely limited during the late-2000s when governments transformed the tripartite bodies into toothless consultation structures (Hungary and Romania), using them to legitimize government policies (Poland), or ignoring the body altogether (Estonia) (Bernaciak, 2015). Thus, the post-2008 downturn and the subsequent 'reforms' of CEE industrial relation regulations and

bodies took a heavy toll on unions' institutional resources, weakening what could be viewed as the last bastion of union strength in the region.

Overall, the severe depletion of power resources of CEE unions' post-2008 makes developments in the region suitable for verifying whether adverse conditions foster or inhibit union revitalization. The next section provides a comparative analysis of empirical evidence concerning the relationship between the weakening of power resources post-2008 and CEE union revitalization strategies.

Power resource configurations and union revitalization strategies in CEE

Table 2 presents an overview of the revitalization strategies and power resources utilized by the unions in the 12 case studies included in this Special Issue. The findings show that CEE unions used the full range of revitalization strategies identified by [Frege and Kelly \(2003\)](#) and [Meardi \(2007\)](#) in response to the post-2008 challenges. The most common revitalization strategies were political action (in ten cases), organizing, organizational restructuring, coalition-building (in six cases), and servicing (in five cases). Although no apparent mix of revitalization strategies is emerging in CEE countries, the most frequent combinations used were political action and coalition-building to increase union influence (in six cases) and organizing and organizational restructuring to increase organizational capacity (in four cases). CEE unions used various combinations of up to six revitalization strategies, except for healthcare unions in Czechia and Slovakia which used solely political action. This suggests that, in adverse conditions, unions often have to employ several revitalization strategies in tandem to strengthen their organizational capacity and/or influence.

The findings also show no apparent pattern concerning the relationship between revitalization strategies and the type of power resources employed by unions across the 12 cases. Organizational resources were used in each case, societal resources were utilized in 11 (out of 12) cases, and structural and institutional resources were utilized in six and five cases, respectively. Moreover, organizational and societal resources were the most favoured combination of power resources insofar as they were mobilized as a pair in four cases and in coordination with other types of resources in seven more analyzed cases. In all cases, revitalization involved the mobilization of more than one type of power resource.

The CEE unions examined in this Special Issue mobilized multiple organizational power resources. Some, such as Romania's FSC and BNS, implemented organizational reforms geared towards improving their external image and internal communication. Others aimed to increase union membership by staging organizing drives. Perhaps the most emblematic initiative in this regard was the Estonian Baltic Organising Academy, which drew on the support of Scandinavian unions and relied on organizing techniques that had previously been used, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon context. Finally, several CEE unions changed their leadership and/or staffing policies, removing controversial leaders who hindered inter-union rapport and/or opening up for a new generation of labour activists possessing new skillsets related to project management and attracting external funding.

Table 2. Resources mobilized by the examined CEE unions and their revitalization strategies.

Trade union(s)	Power resources mobilized				Revitalization strategy
	Organizational	Institutional	Structural	Societal	
Counselling Office for migrants (then workers) (COM/WCO) (Slovenia)	x	X	X	x	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7
Trade Union Young Plus (TUYP) (Slovenia)	x	X	X	x	1, 3, 4, 6, 7
Trade unions in the healthcare sector (Czechia, Slovakia)	x	x	X	x	6
Baltic Organising Academy (Estonia)	x		X	x	2, 3, 4, 6, 7
Trade union confederations in Croatia	x		x	x	1, 6
Trade union confederations in Poland	x		x	x	1, 6
FSC federation (Romania)	x	x		x	2, 3, 4, 5
Union confederations in Hungary	x			x	1, 3, 6
KMJ (Hungary)	x			x	4, 7
KMSZ (Hungary)	x			x	4, 6
BNS confederation (Romania)	x			x	3, 6, 7
Metalworkers' federations acting on behalf of temporary agency workers (Czechia and Slovakia)	x	x			1, 6

Source: Authors' compilation on the basis of empirical articles in this Special Issue.

Note: 1 = coalition-building, 2 = international links, 3 = organizational restructuring, 4 = organizing, 5 = partnership with employers, 6 = political action, and 7 = servicing.

In line with earlier studies, the cases examined in this Special Issue feature elements of sequencing regarding the mobilization of various types of power resources. The assistance offered by the Hungarian KMJ to public works participants improved the latter's structural position insofar as it increased their chances to join the regular labour market, thereby confirming [Weil's \(2005\)](#) prediction that revitalization starts with membership increase and expands to unions' efforts to gain influence. In some cases, consistent with [Murray et al.'s \(2020\)](#) account that union experimentation may induce the institutionalization of new 'ways of doing things', the mobilization of organizational power resources paved the way to enhancing unions' institutional position. For instance, in the Romanian retail sector, membership gains achieved through an organizing drive enabled plant-level worker organizations to demand collective agreements in a sector characterized by dismal working conditions and high employee turnover.

The fundamental role of organizational power resources illustrated by the evidence from our cases is consistent with that of earlier scholarly findings. The specificity of post-communist union revitalization efforts, however, rested on the simultaneous mobilization of organizational *and* societal power resources. Utilization of the latter type of resources seems to be closely linked to the threats and opportunities inherent in the 2008 crisis. Almost universally across the region, the late 2000s brought about the intensification of attacks and subsequent depletion of CEE unions' traditional power resources, especially institutional ones. To (at least partially) compensate for losses incurred in the latter sphere, many labour organizations sought to reorient themselves towards activities involving alternative and/or previously underutilized resource types. In this respect, societal power resources were low hanging fruit for CEE unions as belt-tightening policies launched in response to the downturn had stirred up dissatisfaction and provided fertile ground for protest actions. Together with CEE societies' growing awareness of their inability to 'catch up' with Western standards in the foreseeable future, there has been growing widespread disillusionment with CEE countries' neoliberal policies (Bernaciak, 2015). Seeing this, unions tapped this popular discontent and developed narratives and action repertoires to address broader societal concerns.

While the utilization of both organizational and societal power resources depended primarily on the union agencies themselves, some factors, largely beyond their control, affected unions' capacity to mobilize institutional and structural resources (Lehndorff et al., 2018). Unions' differing capacity to mobilize institutional power resources was clearly demonstrated in the study of Estonia and Slovenia; while Slovenian unions and labour activists succeeded in deploying institutional power resources to enhance the working conditions and statutory rights of vulnerable worker groups via social dialogue, no such channel was available to their Estonian counterparts. Accordingly, institutional power resources were more likely to be mobilized by CEE unions, which enjoyed a relatively favourable institutional standing.

The mobilization of CEE unions' structural resources was similarly dependent on their initial power resource endowments and factors external to union organizations. Nevertheless, two broad patterns of utilization have been documented in our empirical studies. First, CEE workers and their organizations exploited domestic labour shortages resulting from heightened migration and skill shortages to leverage employers and the state. The collective resignation campaign launched by the Czech and Slovak healthcare workers was used as a bargaining tool in the struggle for higher wages and new pay regulations. Second, growing structural interdependency and market-induced dualization of working conditions prompted stronger union actors to safeguard existing employment standards by expanding protections on their weaker counterparts. In the international context, the Baltic Organising Academy was perhaps the best example of such a dependency-based initiative, being driven not only by Scandinavian unions' willingness to assist Baltic workers in their struggle for better working conditions but also by their desire to protect Nordic standards, which came under pressure following the intensification of investment and migration flows between Scandinavian and Baltic countries.

Adverse conditions and CEE unions: Marginalization, dualization, replacement, or revitalization?

The findings of this Special Issue's empirical articles are largely in line with the literature arguing that adverse conditions foster union revitalization (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013; Murray et al., 2020). However, they neither fully support Ost's (2009) gloomy predictions concerning the future of CEE unions (i.e. marginalization or dualization) nor Visser's (2019) revitalization or replacement scenarios.

CEE unions: Marginalization or going the extra mile?

In contrast to Ost's (2009) prediction, our case studies show that the post-2008 weakening of union power resources in the CEE country context served as a catalyst for union revitalization. The decline of institutional safeguards for union actions was of particular importance insofar as institutional access channels and statutory and non-statutory protections of worker rights had long served as the main source of strength and influence of organized labour in CEE countries. However, the seriousness of the threat to worker organizations' institutional positions varied significantly across our cases. In Hungary and Romania, the risks included direct attacks on employee representation rights and organized labour's pre-crisis standing. In Romania, union federations and confederations mobilized new organizational and societal resources to further their members' interests and increase membership in weakly unionized sectors when the government undermined unions' fundamental rights to organize, bargain, and strike. Similarly, extensive anti-union reforms and limitations on strike actions guided closer collaboration between Hungary's union confederations, which were excluded from the social dialogue process by the FIDESZ-led government and prompted the establishment of new unions and worker-assistance organizations combining political action with membership recruitment and assistance.

The 'threat' motivation behind unions' actions was also discernible in countries in which crisis-related austerity and regulatory changes were not as disruptive as in Hungary and Romania but nevertheless negatively affected unions' institutional position. Croatian and Polish unions, for instance, channelled new organizational and societal resources into political action and coalition-building in reaction to their diminishing capacity to influence the course of their countries' socioeconomic policy. Likewise, the establishment and subsequent organizational restructuring of Estonian and Slovenian project-based union organizations could be seen as a response to border liberalization and marketization trends accompanying the countries' European Union (EU) integration process. Despite diverging starting points in terms of unions' endowments in institutional power resources, Estonia and Slovenia's integration into the EU's labour and product markets rendered the existing mechanisms and forms for employee interest representation increasingly inadequate, inducing adaptation on the part of newly emerged and more established union organizations.

In addition to the need to combat threats, some revitalization efforts undertaken by CEE unions were driven by new opportunities for action emerging on the part of both

individual workers and their organizations. To give an example of the first type of mobilization, the credible 'exit' option from the domestic labour markets that opened up for Czech and Slovak doctors after their countries' EU entry enabled them to successfully press for pay increases and regulatory changes in their sector by means of individually submitted termination notices – a campaign that was subsequently collectivized in both countries by traditional unions, sometimes in collaboration with professional organizations. In terms of collective opportunity-based initiatives, the post-accession intensification of cross-border contacts between workers' representatives from the 'new' and 'old' EU member states provided a favourable setup for the establishment of Estonian and Slovenian project-based union organizations. Union representatives and activists from these two countries gained access to foreign union-related know-how provided by their stronger and more experienced colleagues, as well as to the EU and other international sources of funding for (cross-border) worker assistance projects.

Overall, in the examined period, CEE unions did not passively behold their demise, but instead undertook multiple attempts to re-establish their strength and influence. Moreover, it seems the 'threat-related' motivation behind unions' revitalization efforts featured more frequently than the 'opportunity-related' one. This suggests that in extreme circumstances, such as those in post-crisis CEE where unions' capacity to act on workers' behalf is seriously jeopardized, unions have no other choice than to act and are more inclined to experiment with novel actions and revitalization strategies.

CEE unions: Dualization or a focus on vulnerable workers?

Ost (2009) predicted that CEE unions would evolve towards elite organizations representing a fraction of the labour force – that is, highly skilled male workers situated in the most productive segments of CEE economies. Determined to defend the interests of their constituencies, organizations would leave behind other groups of workers, particularly unskilled workers on non-standard contracts. The latter, ignored by unions during restructuring processes to launch systemic change, would therefore be deprived of a collective voice in CEE countries 'actually existing capitalism' (Ost, 2009: 22).

More than a decade later, Ost's gloomiest predictions have still failed to materialize. In most countries analyzed in this Special Issue, workers on non-standard contracts continue to be subject to differential, usually inferior treatment with regard to wage and working conditions. At the same time, however, revitalization initiatives in CEE countries targeted not only unionized workers on standard contracts but also those in market segments characterized by high turnover and low levels of employment protection. Union efforts in this respect ranged from political action/lobbying for legislative protection of disadvantaged groups in Czechia and Slovakia, where temporary agency workers saw their employment conditions regulated as a result of union advocacy, to making vulnerable workers the target of organizing campaigns, as in the case of public work participants in Hungary and retail sector employees in Romania. While approaching migrant workers, the Slovenian initially project-based union organization COM/WCO's efforts went even beyond employment-related matters, catering to the group's specific needs in areas such as housing and residence status.

The gradual opening up to vulnerable groups of workers in CEE unions' revitalization strategies can be viewed as a necessary strategic adjustment in view of the high – and still growing – proportion of non-standard workers within the post-communist workforce. Beyond the moral desire to assist the vulnerable, union activities in this regard seemed to be also guided by more pragmatic motives. On the one hand, CEE unions were aware that the increased share of precarious workers would negatively impact their ability to defend the interests of their core members (Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015; Trif et al., 2021). On the other, taking up vulnerable groups' concerns provided unions an opportunity to deploy narrative resources and gain broader societal support for union actions. From this perspective, assistance to the most disadvantaged groups may demonstrate to the broader public that unions play an important social role in society. Furthermore, in some cases, there was the potential to obtain external financial resources to support vulnerable workers. All things considered, unions' actions to address the concerns of workers on non-standard contracts were generally triggered by a combination of the threat of precarity for core members and opportunities to use societal or financial resources to improve unions' public standing.

CEE unions' revitalization: What is new?

In response to the post-2008 challenges, the examined CEE labour organizations launched various revitalization strategies. From the viewpoint of Frege and Kelly's (2003) revitalization strategies, CEE union actions contained novel elements. Below we discuss the most noteworthy 'variations' on the revitalization theme in the post-communist region as observed in relation to political action, organizational restructuring, and coalition-building.

Political action featured in 10 cases of the examined country contexts. The post-2008 challenges faced by CEE unions had a major impact on the way in which it was utilized across the post-communist region. Specifically, as the austerity course and crisis-related 'reforms' largely precluded union alliances with government actors, CEE unions would often direct their political appeals to either 'above' or 'below' the official state structures. To give an example of the former strategy, Hungarian union confederations 'skipped' the hostile national institutions and approached international organizations – the EU and the International Labour Organization – to expose the limitations of worker collective rights imposed by the new Labour Code. By so doing, they hoped that the international pressure would force the government to revoke the most harmful provisions. Alternatively, CEE unions would reach out to the wider public and use societal pressure to either stop or move forward with a particular policy or legislative proposal. Such political actions 'from below' took multiple forms across the post-communist region, ranging from referendum calls and legislative initiatives (Croatia, Poland, and Romania) to societal campaigns and public marches that attracted significant media attention (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary). Finally, the Czech and Slovak healthcare and metalworking union actions add a novel element to existing classifications: they constitute rare cases in which unions' political actions focused on replacing the existing bargaining structures with statutory regulations.

Since the late 1990s, in the West European context, revitalization via organizational restructuring has mainly entailed mergers between unions. These were usually initiated by the established union confederations, implemented in a top-down manner, and driven by the willingness to maintain their bargaining power in adverse external circumstances (Waddington et al., 2003). Against this background, the evidence from the CEE region represents an interesting variation in the organizational restructuring theme. In Estonia and Slovenia, organizational restructuring was not the domain of large, established unions but of project-based union organizations created at the 'fringes' of the two countries' labour movements. The precarious status of these unions and the instability stemming from their reliance on external resources pushed their activists to develop the specific capacities necessary to ensure organizational survival, and over time, to expand organizing, servicing, and political actions on behalf of underrepresented groups. Organizations' efforts to turn their project-based revitalization strategies and organizational forms into more sustainable ones may serve as inspiration for unions in settings where new organizations are formed to provide employee interest representation in previously unorganized labour market segments. In both the Slovenian and Estonian contexts, activists' initiatives had a demonstrative effect on the established unions, inducing the latter to adopt their strategies to the emerging representation needs. This suggests that we have not yet witnessed Visser's (2019) replacement scenario in the post-communist region. To the contrary, it seems that the complementary character of established unions and newly emerging organizations, coupled with the occasional synergies between them, have strengthened the employee voice in CEE countries.

In addition to the bottom-up organizational restructuring launched by project-based union organizations, our Special Issue documented an interesting attempt at top-down reconstruction and democratization undertaken by an established union confederation. In an effort to reverse the devastating regulatory changes of 2011, Romania's BNS confederation launched new intra-union communication channels that enabled rank-and-file union members to feed into the confederation's future strategy. According to Voss (2010), such centralized 'top-down' initiatives driven by reform-oriented union leadership may be particularly suitable for weaker industrial relation settings where few institutional safeguards exist for union actions. This assertion is confirmed by the evidence from Slovenia and Estonia, which demonstrates how difficult it is to set up, let alone sustain, new bottom-up channels for employee voice and democratic representation.

Although not included in Frege and Kelly's (2003) original typology, service provision has been employed as a revitalization strategy by CEE plant-level unions (Meardi, 2007). Our case studies demonstrate that servicing can also be effectively used by occupational and sector-level union organizations (the KMJ and BOA member organizations in Hungary and Estonia, respectively), and even by confederations (the BNS in Romania). Services may also be adapted to the needs of new categories of employees, such as young workers on non-standard contracts or public works participants. Moreover, servicing unions may surpass their traditional constituencies and/or employment-related concerns. The virtual interface launched by Romania's BNS, which is accessible to non-members, and the assistance with housing and residence status provided to migrant workers by

Slovenia's Counselling Office for migrants (then workers) (COM/WCO are cases in point.

Last, but not least, CEE unions' efforts at coalition-building merit scholarly attention for two reasons. First, earlier studies (Meardi, 2012; Shlyk, 2009) have pointed to the sporadic incidence of alliances between unions and social movements across the post-communist region. Several of our case studies suggest a change in this regard; however, insofar as they document strategic alliances between CEE unions and civic society organizations on a variety of socially relevant issues. Second, it is noteworthy that the range of actors joining such issue coalitions extends beyond the social movements featured in Frege and Kelly's (2003) initial catalogue. In the Croatian context, for instance, it includes the Catholic Church and religion-inspired associations that shared the unions' desire to abolish Sunday work, as well as business associations united with their union counterparts in their opposition to a planned regulation on causal and provisional work. A similar pro-regulatory coalition was forged between the Czech and Slovak metalworkers' unions and employers in the temporary agency work sector. In Hungary, union confederations who were formerly foes buried the hatchet to jointly face a regulatory offensive that heavily weakened their institutional position and collaborated to repeal the most disadvantageous provisions. Their strategic collaboration illustrates an interesting instance of coalition-building among unions undertaken in the context of a heavily fragmented industrial relations landscape.

The ultimate goal: (Re)building institutions

In their comparative article on union revitalization strategies in Western Europe and the United States, Baccaro et al. (2003) argued that unions that cannot rely on statutory guarantees and/or do not enjoy institutionalized access to decision-makers tend to be more open to strategic experimentation. The evidence presented in this Special Issue suggests that this was also applicable to unions in post-communist economies: crisis-time attacks on the already fragile institutional guarantees for CEE union actions prompted varied and often novel responses.

At the same time, our findings allow us to nuance the applicability of Baccaro et al.'s (2003) argument to the post-communist region. It seems that despite unions' diverse revitalization strategies in the examined context, they did not represent the goal in themselves. Rather, they can be viewed as an intermediary step towards (re)building a more favourable institutional setup and (re)establishing statutory protections for worker rights and union actions. This finding implies an element of circularity in CEE union actions: the weakening of institutional resources prompted union reactions and made them embark on revitalization strategies geared predominantly towards impacting their countries' legal frameworks.

Irrespective of the extent of the post-2008 weakening of legal protections and participatory mechanisms they experienced, union efforts to improve their institutional position and/or induce favourable regulatory changes could be identified in all our case studies. In the case of a nearly complete overhaul of union institutional resources in Hungary and Romania, political actions of the examined union confederations sought to

revoke the disempowering legislative provisions. Organizing campaigns launched at the company/occupational level, in turn, aimed at (re)creating union capacity to represent and bargain collectively in areas where it had been missing (public works in Hungary) or had been severely weakened by new regulatory requirements (Romania's retail sector). At the other extreme, the relatively strong labour organizations in Czechia and Slovakia similarly responded to the growth of precarious employment and meagre working conditions in the healthcare sector with a 'hard' institutional solution: by favouring statutory guarantees for worker rights, they followed the path that seemed to them more predictable and more easily enforceable than collective bargaining outcomes. In Croatia and Poland, political actions in the form of social campaigns and alliances with political parties and civil society organizations similarly sought to convince law-makers to revoke certain provisions (rules on retirement age increase in Poland) or, conversely, have them enshrined in law (ban on Sunday work and better protections for vulnerable workers in both countries).

Overall, our findings testify to the continued salience of statutory institutional power resources for unions. This 'institutional longing' is clearly discernible in the CEE region, where statutory framework for industrial relations has been a source of influence and security for the region's unions since the 1990s. In the eight examined countries, unions embarked on a variety of revitalization strategies in an effort to (re)build institutional arrangements weakened by the 2008 economic crisis. This suggests that, irrespective of their 'institutional starting points', unions continue to view the presence of statutory guarantees and formal access channels as prerequisites for their strength and influence.

The limits of union revitalization in CEE countries

By mobilizing multiple types of power resources, the examined CEE unions restructured their organizations, lobbied successfully for various groups of workers, and gained broader societal support for their actions. However, the question remains as to whether these revitalization efforts can be sustained and improve unions' organizational standing in the future. We argue that the prospects for full-fledged revitalization of CEE unions are rather bleak owing to difficulties in expanding the current initiatives and positioning the strategic orientation of union revitalization efforts.

'Spread' and sustainability of CEE revitalization efforts

Notably, not all unions in the countries covered in this Special Issue embraced the revitalization agenda. For instance, in Romania, only one out of the five union confederations managed to mobilize societal and organizational power resources to boost its organizational capability via political action, organizational restructuring, and servicing. The unions' proactive, reform-oriented leadership played an important role in this mobilization, by launching new initiatives to service the existing members and supporters and attract new ones. This positive example notwithstanding, the Romanian case is indicative of two trends that are characteristic of the region. First, it demonstrates that union revitalization efforts in CEE countries are heavily contingent on unions' capacity to

mobilize power resources, which may result in substantial differences in revitalization efforts across individual organizations. Second, it suggests that the initiatives examined in this Special Issue need to be viewed as critical cases or 'islands' of (relatively) successful union revitalization in post-communist Europe.

The rather exceptional character of union revitalization in CEE countries is further evidenced by the fact that the revitalization initiatives were often undertaken not by established organizations but rather by actors located at the outskirts of the countries' labour movements. In our case studies, some of the most effective actions were launched by newly emerging unions supporting vulnerable workers (Hungary) or organizations representing particular professions (Czechia and Slovakia). The Estonian BOA or Slovenian COM/WCO and the TUYP were both launched as project-based organizations. Thanks to the bottom-up efforts of dedicated activists, they managed to expand their organizations' resources and turn their revitalization strategies into more permanent ones. Considering the novelty of the initiatives and the precarious status of the majority of TUYP and BOA activists, their long-term sustainability should not be taken for granted.

Last, but not least, it may be difficult for CEE unions to uphold their revitalization course due to organizational inertia. Many revitalization actions were launched on a trial-and-error basis and failed to deliver the desired effects in the short term. The unsuccessful attempts of Croatian confederations to induce the ban on Sunday trade via the mobilization of broader public support and alliances with civic society organizations or the early failure to organize retail sector workers by the Romanian sectoral union FSC are cases in point. Such experimental actions, which may well be beneficial for unions in the long run, may require more time to bear fruit and thus prove difficult to justify internally. If not supplemented with an adequate communication campaign within the implementing organizations, they are at serious risk of being discontinued, especially in the context of resource-poor CEE labour organizations.

The risks of (longing for) institutional safeguards

In addition to the limited scope of revitalization, the strategic orientation of the CEE unions' revitalization efforts may be problematic. By launching multiple revitalization strategies, CEE labour organizations have primarily sought to (re)build their institutional positions and secure a favourable regulatory setup. Such a strong emphasis on boosting institutional resources, however, does not bode well for union capacity to 'turn the tide' and tangibly increase their strength and influence.

Unlike some of their Western European counterparts that can capitalize on their institutional embeddedness, CEE unions have lost much of their institutional power as a consequence of post-transition reforms and the 2008 crisis. Therefore, their ability to push for institutional provisions that improve their standing is severely limited. This status quo is difficult to change, given that the level of institutional power resources remaining at union disposal does not depend solely on union actions; it is also conditioned by structural factors beyond union control and the relative power of unions vis-à-vis other actors. Against this background, it is not surprising that CEE unions' efforts to (re)gain their institutional position have rarely generated the expected results. Despite their extensive

revitalization campaigns, the examined Hungarian and Romanian confederations failed to induce changes in the countries' unfavourable labour regulations imposed post-2008. Even the Czech and Slovak cases, which feature some of the most institutionally embedded unions in the post-communist region, cannot be read as success stories. In the context of the declining scope and enforceability of collectively agreed provisions, organizations in the two countries advocated legislative solutions for their temporary agency work and healthcare sectors. The resulting regulations have been a Pyrrhic victory; as they have precluded the unions from co-shaping working conditions in these two market segments in the future.

Evidence from Western European countries suggests that labour organizations that rely predominantly on their institutional strength tend to neglect other spheres of action, particularly membership recruitment (Baccaro et al., 2003; Hassel 2007). Such a voluntary 'lock-up' in traditional strongholds may have a detrimental effect on the unions' long-term survival, not least because high representativeness is an important argument justifying unions' institutional inclusion. In the post-communist region, the progressive erosion of institutional supports and the so-far limited success in 'bringing unions' statutory rights (back) in' has not seemed to deter unions from placing the (re)construction of their institutional positions high on their agenda. However, CEE unions' determination in this respect bears risks similar to those faced by their 'embedded' Western European counterparts. Specifically, they may treat other forms of action merely as stepping stones towards their institutional revival and altogether neglect other important challenges and strategies that would potentially address them.

Earlier studies on union revitalization in challenging contexts, particularly Weil (2005), pointed to the crucial importance of organizing as a tool for strengthening labour organizations. In light of the rapidly shrinking union membership and low trust in unions, the extension or at least retention of the current membership base constitutes the most pressing task for CEE labour organizations. At the same time, this is an issue area that CEE unions seem to neglect as a result of their excessive focus on institution (re) building: amongst the 12 examined cases, revitalization involved the recruitment of new members in only six cases. For example, rather than embark on the shaky road of overcoming legal hurdles and organizing high-turnover agency workers, the Czech and Slovak metalworkers' unions, which are some of the strongest sectoral organizations in the region, preferred to play it safe and pushed for the enhancement of temporary agency workers' employment conditions via legal channels. In effect, organizing in CEE countries was often launched by small unions or organizations located at the outskirts of their countries' labour movements whose individual-focused advocacy work and/or localized recruitment efforts could not 'turn the tide' and tangibly improve overall unionization rates.

Although the launch of an organizing drive does not guarantee unions' recruitment goals will be attained, in line with studies stating that increasing union membership is fundamental to their revitalization (Weil, 2005), we argue that organizing is imperative for CEE unions. Preservation of their membership base not only affects the sustainability of their revitalization initiatives but also their long-term survival. For this reason, in addition to attempts to (re)establish institutional safeguards that are never fully under their control,

CEE unions need to make more widespread and coordinated efforts to attract new members. [Weil \(2005\)](#) argues for the ‘sequencing’ of union revitalization, suggesting that it starts with increasing membership and expands to unions’ efforts to gain influence. We posit that the reverse process is also possible, namely, revitalization actions aimed at increased union influence could be used to boost union membership. Accordingly, we argue that unions would benefit from launching organizational campaigns following strategies that increase their influence, such as political actions documented in this Special Issue.

Conclusions: Towards the bright future of...?

This Special Issue documented the post-2008 revitalization initiatives launched by CEE unions. Contrary to [Ost’s \(2009\)](#) predictions, the adverse conditions following the global economic downturn in the late 2000s have pushed CEE unions to mobilize power resources beyond those that they could traditionally rely on. The most frequently observed ‘revitalization mix’ utilized by CEE unions involved the combination of organizational and societal power resources. The resulting initiatives added new elements to the strategic repertoire of revitalization identified in earlier studies, especially in the fields of political action, organizational restructuring, servicing, and coalition-building.

What will the future bring for CEE unions? Juxtaposing our findings with the four possible union trajectories developed by [Visser \(2019\)](#), we argue that the dualization scenario is unlikely to materialize. In view of the high incidence of non-standard employment in the post-communist region, unions cannot turn their backs on this growing group of workers. In effect, many examined revitalization initiatives targeted workers situated outside the traditional ‘core’ employed in market segments characterized by high turnover and weak bargaining power. As for the replacement scenario, we documented the emergence of new forms of employee representation that replaced unions. However, we found that non-union organizations, rather than competing with unions for public influence and employee trust, tended to cater to workers’ needs using their specific repertoires of action, which in most cases led to positive synergies between diverse forms of labour advocacy.

Will CEE unions be able to permanently boost their capacity and ‘regain their vitality and youthfulness’ ([Visser 2019](#): 68)? At first glance, the post-2008 revitalization drive in CEE countries confirms that even unions with weak power resources can effectively counter the mounting challenges and boost their organizational capacity ([Eaton et al., 2017](#); [Weil, 2005](#)). However, sanguine assessments of CEE revitalization efforts may be unwarranted. Most of the examined initiatives have thus far been limited in terms of both their scope and the long-term results. In particular, a tangible improvement of labour organizations’ capacities would require taking more decisive measures against membership decline, but unions remain primarily focused on (re)building their institutional position. Overall, CEE countries show that more adverse situations not only push unions to revitalize more (e.g. in the case of the Polish unions compared to the Croatian in the article by [Butković et al.](#) in this Special Issue) but also make tasks more difficult. Thus, it

remains to be seen whether, with the current patchwork of initiatives, CEE unions will be able to prevent Visser's (2019) first scenario – their progressive marginalization.

To what extent are the insights from this Special Issue applicable to other settings? Labour organizations in other particularly hostile environments (post-Soviet, Asian, Latin American, and liberal Anglophone contexts) may find some CEE dilemmas familiar. At the same time, the focus on (re)establishing institutional safeguards discernible in the post-communist region poses risks similar to those faced by organizations in more favourable institutional and regulatory environments. In conclusion, three decades after the transition, trade unions' challenges in Western and Central Eastern Europe, despite different conditions, can be seen as analytically very similar: united in adversity.

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