

Trade union revitalization in hard times: a mission impossible?

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Abstract

The relation between trade unions' power resources and their ability to revitalize is contentious. One strand of literature claims that weak power resources prevent unions from undertaking efforts to restore their strength and influence, while another research strand argues that the depletion of power resources may stimulate unions to take such actions. This Special Issue tests these conflicting expectations with evidence from eight Central-Eastern European (CEE) countries. It focuses on the drivers and outcomes of different types of revitalization strategies that CEE unions employ to respond to challenges. By examining the link between union power resources and their revitalization strategies, it expands the scholarly knowledge on the preconditions and limits of union revitalization in adverse contexts.

Keywords

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

European trade unions have been facing increasingly adverse conditions since the 2008 international economic crisis ([Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013](#)). Still, many unions have experimented with various strategies to tackle these challenges ([Murray et al., 2020](#)). Such 'adaptations and change initiatives undertaken by unions to restore their

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strength and influence' (Kumar and Schenk, 2013: 16) are referred to as 'union revitalization'. Revitalization strategies involve deliberate actions by unions to increase their influence and constitute an 'active and creative reaction' to the challenges that unions face (Meardi, 2007: 179). They range from organizing workers and organizational restructuring to joint decision-making with employers (e.g. partnership) and political actions (Frege and Kelly, 2003; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). Revitalization strategies are considered successful when they result in either stronger organizations (in terms of membership, participation and governance) or increased influence over employers or governments (Behrens et al., 2004).

However, studies on union revitalization strategies (Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Frege and Kelly, 2003) have not provided a definitive answer to the question of whether adverse conditions hinder and/or facilitate unions' capacity to revitalize. One strand of the literature claims that low membership and deregulated labour and product markets hinder unions' ability to engage in actions intended to increase their membership and/or consolidate their role and influence (Ost, 2009). Doellgast et al. (2018) argue that weak institutional resources (e.g. low bargaining coverage and limited statutory support for unions) coupled with the weak capacity of workers to disrupt production (low structural resources) and limited workers' solidarity (e.g. weak organizational resources) mutually reinforce each other, creating an inescapable vicious circle of low union power and high work precarity. Accordingly, the weakening of unions' power resources reduces their capacity to adopt revitalization strategies (Ost, 2009).

In contrast, another strand of the literature posits that the depletion of unions' resources may push them to actively work towards restoring their influence (Eaton et al., 2017; Weil, 2005). In the words of Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013: vii), 'hard times can stimulate new thinking and hence provide new opportunities'. In a nutshell, their expectation is that the weakening of unions' power resources drives them to adopt revitalization strategies.

Developments in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries offer a suitable testbed for these conflicting expectations. With the partial exception of Slovenia, both internal challenges associated with post-communist legacies (e.g. the acceptance of capitalism) and external challenges associated with market-oriented reforms undermined the influence of unions (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). In the late-2000s, the international economic crisis further reduced workers' capacity to disrupt production while undermining unions' institutional support, particularly in countries with high collective bargaining coverage such as Romania and Slovenia (Trif et al., 2016). On the one hand, it could be expected that under these adverse circumstances, CEE unions would become marginalized; at best, they were predicted to continue to use fragile institutional positions which, for the last 30 years, have provided them with a degree of influence to defend the interests of their members on standard contracts employed in sectors where workers can still disrupt production (Ost, 2009). On the other hand, CEE unions could be expected to be prime candidates to 'go an extra mile' and undertake revitalization efforts to ensure organizational survival.

To establish which set of expectations better capture post-2008 crisis developments in CEE, this Special Issue examines critical instances of union revitalization strategies undertaken in Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. First, it identifies whether CEE unions can utilize their limited power resources

to adopt revitalization strategies similar to those used in Western Europe and the United States. Second, it examines the drivers and outcomes of different types of revitalization strategies employed by CEE unions. Examining the link between union power resources and their revitalization strategies expands scholarly knowledge on the preconditions and limits of union revitalization in adverse contexts.

Two articles in the Special Issue examine the revitalization strategies undertaken by unions with similar power resources. Aurora Trif and Imre Szabó investigate the activities of poorly endowed unions representing public work participants in Hungary and retail workers in Romania, while Marta Kahancová and Monika Martišková explore calls for statutory protections voiced by relatively strong Czech and Slovak healthcare and metalworkers' unions. The remaining articles explore revitalization efforts in contexts characterized by differing levels of institutional power resources. Hrvoje Butković, Jan Czarzasty and Adam Mrozowicki examine the effects of political actions taken by unions with stronger (Croatia) and weaker (Poland) institutional resources, whereas Barbara Samaluk and Kairit Kall investigate project-based organizational restructuring in Estonia and Slovenia. Comparative lessons on the links between union power resources and their revitalization strategies are discussed in the concluding article.

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