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Trade union organizing in Eastern Europe: A viable pathway to trade union revitalization? –A case study of the automotive sector

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This article examines the mechanism of trade union organizing in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) by exploring automotive sector trade union strategies in Estonia, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. Data includes expert interviews, the case studies of companies and biographical interviews with company-level trade union leaders. Contrary to Anglo-American experiences, the most successful attempts to organize workers were bottom-up driven rather than top-down designed. This article explains this feature of organising in terms of the resource-based model of union revival, the institutional features of Polish, Slovenian, Estonian and Romanian industrial relations and worker agency at the company level. In the conclusion, the shortcomings of the company-centered approach are discussed.

Keywords: trade union organising, union renewal, union resources, worker agency

In developed capitalist countries, trade union power has been undermined in the last 30 years by the effects of the neo-liberal turn. The effects include, among others, the increasing mobility of labour and capital in the context of globalization, decentralization of collective bargaining, changing structures of employment and the crisis of traditional trade union identities (Fairbrother/Yates 2003; Frege/Kelly 2004; Hyman 2001; Turner/Hurd 2001). In this context, trade unions have had to continuously adjust their strategies to changing conditions by making use of their resources and capabilities, in order to more effectively represent workers' interests (Levesque/Murray 2010). However, there has been much discussion about the kind of tactics which could present a viable alternative to the labour movement's decline in various parts of the capitalist world (Frege/Kelly 2004). One of the core trade union strategies in the Anglo-American context has been trade union organizing (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1997; Milkman/Voss 2004). The model was developed in the 1990s in the USA and then extended to other, mostly Anglo-American, countries. It emphasized the central role of membership empowerment and recruitment via comprehensive coordinated organising campaigns, often in cooperation with new social movements. However, there has been much debate regarding the extent to which the organizing model presents a pathway to trade union revitalization that can be transferred beyond the Anglo-American context of liberal market economies (Gall 2009; Turner 2007; Voss 2010).

This article aims at contributing to the ongoing discussion by comparing trade union organizing strategies in the automotive sector in four Central and East European (CEE) countries, namely Poland, Estonia, Romania and Slovenia. The Capitalist regimes which emerged in these countries after the end of state socialism range from a "neoliberal regime" in Estonia and a little discussed state-led neo-liberal regime in Romania, to an "embedded neoliberal regime" in Poland and a "neo-corporatist" regime in Slovenia (Bohle/Greskovits 2007). The diversity of capitalist regimes offers a good foundation upon which to assess the importance of the institutional context for the union strategies of membership recruitment. Despite a common experience of sharp union membership decline, CEE trade unions in the 1990s rarely engaged in membership acquisition (Crowley/Ost 2001). However, recent comparative research suggests that at least some trade unions in the region began to be more

involved in organizing unorganized workers (Meardi 2007a, Krzywdziński 2010). Yet, we know still very little about these recent tendencies. Is there any common mechanism of trade union organizing in CEE countries that would resemble Anglo-American experiences? How can the distinct features of trade union organising in CEE countries be explained? And, finally, is trade union organizing at all a viable option for trade union renewal in CEE?

Contrary to earlier studies on trade union revitalisation, which focused primarily on the Visegrád countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and Slovenia, this article extends the field of research to two relatively neglected countries, Estonia and Romania. The analysis, following Turner (2007: 1), focuses on the interaction of two factors: unionists' agency, understood as "the choices and strategies pursued by union leaders and their organizations" and opportunity structure, "located in the presence or absence of particular barriers in the institutional, political, and social context." The article delivers the first results of the empirical research that has been carried out in the automotive sector since spring 2010. It begins with an overview of existing research on trade union organizing. It then sketches out the institutional background of trade union strategies in Estonia, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. In the body of the paper, sectoral level union organizing strategies are discussed and 9 company-level case studies are explored. Finally, more general conclusions addressing the core research questions are formulated.

Trade union organizing from a comparative perspective

The understanding of trade union organizing attempts in CEE requires putting them in the context of broader debates on the organizing approach. The approach originated from the USA trade unions experiences of membership acquisition for the sake of certification elections. The USA experiences demonstrated that trade union success was dependent upon multifaceted, comprehensive trade union recruitment campaigns, involving person-to-person contacts, house calls, small group meetings and internal and external pressure tactics involving members both in the workplace and outside the workplace, locally, nationally and internationally (Bronfenbrenner/Hickey 2004: 21). Membership acquisition led by AFL-CIO and some of its affiliates involved "building community-based organizing coalitions with non-government organizations, and utilizing more grassroots, bottom-up union-building strategies during organizing campaigns" (Fairbrother/Yates 2003: 19). This specific approach was grounded in the organisational and institutional conditions in which trade unions operated in the USA. These conditions will be discussed in the next two sections.

Organisational conditions of trade union organising: the role of resources

Over two decades of experiences with trade union organizing has dampened initial optimism regarding the method. First, comparative research suggests that "most nationally based union organizing projects have merely staved off further or greater decline rather than reversing it" (Gall 2009: 2). Second, the assumptions of the "empowering" potential and grassroots character of organising has been questioned. Voss argues the following (2010: 377):

"The research on union renewal in the US, in short, questions the rosy picture of bottom-up, worker-driven democratic change so prevalent in the academic work on union democracy. Member engagement and rank-and-file involvement are clearly important in their own right, but, to date, paid union staff, strong leadership and central coordination have played a more consistent key role in union renewal"

The contested role of paid union organizers points to a problem in the relationship between union organizing and trade union resources. According to Levesque and Murray (2010: 335), trade union power resources include "internal solidarity" (collective cohesion and deliberative vitality), "network embeddedness" (the links of unions with other unions, movements and

organisations), “narrative resources” (the existing stock of stories that frame understandings and union actions) and “infrastructural resources” (material and human resources). The central role of network embeddedness and narrative resources for trade union organising is clear from the USA experiences. In the USA, trade union organising campaigns were led by a new generation of labour leaders, including left-wing student volunteers supported by the post-1960s left-wing activists, who moved to the leadership positions of the AFL-CIO. Trade union organising also assumed internal solidarity within trade unions and sufficient infrastructural resources to carry out expensive organising campaigns.

As suggested by Milkman and Voss (2004: 7), the full adoption of the organizing model would mean “shifting priorities away from servicing current members and toward unionizing new ones.” Such a particular shift has often encountered the opposition of trade union leadership and existing members who were reluctant to transfer union resources to organizing the unorganized (Fairbrother/Yates 2003). The case of CEE allows us to explore the extent to which such a shift of resources could actually take place in a region in which the traditions of the servicing model are strong, due to the region’s post-socialist legacy (Ost 2005), and the idea of active membership recruitment is still relatively new.

Institutional incentives for trade union organising: West and East compared

Although there is evidence for the selective adopting of organising approaches in continental Europe, e.g. Germany (Turner 2007), and the combination of union organizing with social movement unionism is widespread in the countries of Global South (Phelan 2006: 21), the organizing model has its clear roots in Anglo-American liberal market economies (Fairbrother/Yates 2003). According to Heery and Adler (2004: 58), incentives for trade union organizing are higher in decentralized collective bargaining systems, in which trade union workplace recognition depends on its membership (e.g. via certification law) and in single-channel systems of worker participation, in which trade unions are the sole representatives of worker interests at the workplace. In coordinated market economies (CMEs), such as Germany or the Scandinavian states, trade unions are more entrenched in the socio-political system and, as Baccaro, Hamman and Turner (2003: 121) suggest, “pay less attention to organizing, since declining membership does not represent the same immediate threat to organizational survival and has less impact, at least in the short run, on union influence on labour market and social policies”. In other words, if the strategic goals of trade unions can be achieved without investments in membership recruitment, for instance through all-encompassing and binding sectoral level collective agreements, incentives to organise unorganized workers are likely to be low.

According to Phelan (2006: 22), the strategies of trade union revitalisation in most of CEE resemble those observed in Anglo-American countries, since both contexts share some common institutional features, such as decentralized collective bargaining. Yet, despite the existence of decentralized collective bargaining systems in the majority of CEE countries, trade union organising – in particular in the form of comprehensive campaigns in the private sector – was very rare in the 1990s (cf. Crowley/Ost 2001; Phelan 2006). There are cultural, institutional and structural explanations of trade union inaction in the existing literature. According to the “ideational legacy” thesis (Crowley/Ost, 2001), trade union inertia derives from the limited traditions of unionism independent of the state, employers and the support granted by former anti-communist unions to market reforms. Clarke (2005), studying trade unions in Russia (and China), developed an institutionalist theory of “state-capture”. It documented the paradox of institutional trade union resources reflecting their state-dependency in some post-socialist countries that limited the trade union’s capacity to enter into open industrial conflict and effectively represent workers. Bohle and Greskovits (2006: 12) argued that the structural preconditions responsible for trade union growth in Western Europe after World War II, including the economic and political relevance of skilled workers as mass consumers and mass producers in capital-intensive industries, were lacking in most CEE countries.

However, the approaches explaining the weakness of organised labour in CEE refer mostly to the early period of system transformation in the region. It is worth exploring the extent to which their assumptions still hold two decades after the collapse of communism. Taking into account the increasing decentralisation of collective bargaining in CEE and the loss of the trade union's political influence (Gonser 2010; Meardi 2011), trade union organising is often the only option for trade unions to influence the workers' position in companies.

Trade union organising in Central and Eastern Europe: is there an emerging model?

Contrary to the prognosis that saw state-socialist trade unions merely as residual organisations from the socialist past, in the first decade of the 21st century CEE trade unions have finally moved to implement selective and cautious attempts to organize unorganized workers (Krzywdziński 2010; Meardi 2007a). Ost (2009) accounts for this recent trend by highlighting three factors: the survival needs of the union bureaucracy threatened by radical membership outflow; incorporation into the European Union, which recognizes trade unions as a key force in the European social model; worker's "new subjectivity", arising from their disappointment in "actually existing capitalism". Others point to the role of a new generation of union activists (Krzywdziński 2010) confronting established union structures with the need for internal reforms. Worker agency and grassroots mobilisation were mentioned as important factors forcing trade unions to change their strategies (Hardy 2009; Mrozowicki et al. 2010)

As documented by the data from the recent Eurofound study, membership recruitment strategies were already adopted by trade unions in the late 2000s in the majority of CEE countries (Pedersini 2010). Yet, existing studies suggest that the mechanism of trade union organising in CEE might diverge from the one developed in the Anglo-American context. Ost (2009) asserts that the legacy of post-communist unionism modifies the meaning of the practices of union renewal in the region. While the economic unionism model was strongly criticised in the Western literature on trade union revitalisation (Fairbrother/Yates (2003: 16), Ost's study on Polish trade unions led him to suggest that union renewal in post-socialist countries implies "the continuing importance of old-fashioned economic unionism" (Ost 2005: 177). According to Ost (2005: 177), trade unions "must act like narrow trade unions, in terms of defending short-term economic interests of their members, before they do anything else". The re-emergence of business unionism in the East and the weakness of social movement unionism reflect the disappointment of workers with the political role of trade unions (including social movement unions such as NSZZ Solidarność), which sought to ally themselves with political parties pursuing liberal market reforms in the 1990s.

If Ost is right, we can expect the dominance of diffused, company-centred practices of trade union organizing with weak or no connections with broader social movements and trade union politics at the national and sectoral level. The prevalence of company-centred practices of membership recruitment is also implied by some of the studies on trade union revitalization in multinational companies (Kahancová 2010; Meardi 2007a). However, the company-centred model of trade union revitalisation might be less universal than assumed by research in the countries with decentralised collective bargaining, such as Poland (Ost 2005) or Hungary (Kahancová 2010). As suggested by Clarke (2005: 2), the path-dependent development of Eastern European trade unions makes it necessary to explore diverse institutional conditions in which labour organizations operate to understand the diversity of trade union strategies aimed at trade union revitalisation.

Trade unions in Poland, Slovenia, Estonia and Romania: institutional contexts

Both the hypothesis regarding the "ideational" sources of labour weakness and the recent research on trade union revitalization in CEE has focused on Visegrád countries and, in particular, on the case of Poland (Hardy 2009; Krzywdziński 2010; Ost 2009). They

underplay the diversity of capitalist regimes and industrial relations systems in CEE (Stanojević 2010b). The decision to focus on four different CEE countries makes it possible to explore in more detail the role of institutional background for the models of membership recruitment in the region. The four chosen countries differ from each other in terms of their industrial relations structures, their paths of economic transformation after 1989 and the outcomes of economic changes for the collective situation of workers. Some basic information on the countries studied is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Industrial relations and trade unions in Poland, Slovenia, Estonia and Romania

		Poland	Slovenia	Estonia	Romania
1.Population (2011)		38,200 037	2,050 189	1,340 194	21,413 815
2.GDP/capita in PPS (2010) (EU27 = 100)		62	86	64	45
3.Unemployment	01.2011	9,4%	8,1%	13,6%	7,2%
4.Trade union density	1991	28%	66,5%	86,1%	80%
	2009	16%	26,6%	8,1%	40% -58%
5. Collective bargaining coverage		25-30%	95%	22%	55%
6. Collective bargaining system		Decentralized	Centralized	Decentralized	Centralized / State-controlled

Sources: 1-3: Eurostat; 4 –Poland (Wenzel, 2009), Romania (Chiviu, 2010), Estonia (Nurmela, 2010), Slovenia (Stanojević, 2010b); 5-6 Kohl, 2009

Poland was the only country in the communist bloc where a mass independent labour movement existed before 1989 (NSZZ Solidarność was created in 1980 and banned in 1981). It was also the first country to adopt a radical strategy of market reforms at the beginning of transformation, including market liberalization and the accelerated privatization of state owned companies. The reforms were partially supported by post-Solidarność elites (Ost 2005). The Polish industrial relations system is decentralized, despite the existence of (weak) tripartite bodies at the national level (Kohl 2009). Trade union density fell from 28% in 1991 to 16% in 2009; the coverage of collective agreements remains low (less than 30%) and multi-employer collective agreements are very rare. Bohle and Greskovits (2007) considered Poland an “embedded neoliberal system”, in which the social costs of neoliberal “shock therapy” have been partially compensated by social welfare protections (e.g. massive early retirement schemes). Trade unions began to organize workers in the private sector in Poland by the end of the 1990s (Gardawski 2001). NSZZ Solidarność established a Union Development Office (DRZ), which currently employs around 50 paid union organizers in regional union structures and 14 people in its central office. In 1999, the reformed socialist confederation, OPZZ (All Poland Alliance of Trade Unions), also founded a multi-branch trade union, the Confederation of Labor, with the explicit aim of organizing unorganized employees (Gardawski 2001).

Slovenia and Estonia were sometimes presented as “two success stories of transition adopting very different yet successful political economies.” (Feldman 2006: 833). In response to mass worker protests at the beginning of transformation, Slovenia, led until 2004 by social-democratic political elites, developed a neo-corporatist model of industrial relations (Bohle/Greskovits 2007: 445). It involved the inclusion of labour organisations in economic and political decision-making (through the Economic and Social Council) and high collective bargaining coverage (95%). The success of the Slovenian economy at the micro-level, as argued by Stanojević (2010a), was based on the “formation of survival coalitions of workers, their trade unions and managers based on exchange of an extreme work load for almost fixed payment and job security.” Trade union density, which stabilized in the mid 1990s at a level of circa 40%, began to drop only after the Slovenian accession to the European Union in 2004, and reached 27% in 2009 (Stanojević 2010b). Stanojević (2010a) explains this

membership decline by way of the exhaustion of the micro-foundations of Slovenian corporatism confronted with external economic competitive pressures (EU monetary policies), as well as the divide between micro-level cooperative union practices and macro-level political conflicts involving trade unions. As documented by Lužar (2010) “trade union strategies to recruit new members are diffused and mostly organized at workplaces where union members already exist”.

In contrast to the case of Slovenia, Estonia, led by liberal and conservative political elites, is presented as an example of “neo-liberal” capitalist regimes in CEE (Bohle/ Greskovits 2007). According to Bohle and Greskovits (2007: 447), the costs of neo-liberal market reforms after Estonian independence from the Soviet Union were radical de-industrialisation, the dominance of resource- and labour-intensive industries and the growth of inequality additionally buttressed by new lines of exclusion based on nationality (Estonians and Russians). The Estonian industrial relations system is marked by decentralized collective bargaining and very low trade union density, which has declined from 85% to 8% over the last 20 years. The global economic crisis that began in autumn 2008 has profoundly demonstrated the lack of union influence on policy making (Woolfson/Kallaste 2011). The recent strategy of the Estonian Trade Union Confederation (EAKL), the larger of the two trade union confederations in the country, has presented a plan to counteract membership decline (“Estonian Unions 2020”). With financial support from the European Social Fund, it predicts a 50% increase in membership over the next 10 years, by way of, among other approaches, public campaigns aimed at raising awareness of the role of unions in Estonia (EAKL organizational secretary interview by the author).

Romania rarely appears in the discussions on the varieties of CEE capitalism. However, it has been suggested that its primary feature is the dominance of the state in industrial relations (Ghebreia 2005: 50), which tends to undermine the outcomes of tripartite negotiations. Unlike Polish trade unions, Romanian unions did not support market “shock therapy”. Instead, they were engaged in massive social protests in the 1990s. Partially due to workers’ resistance, Romanian elites adopted a gradual approach to economic transformation (Trif 2008: 462). Collective bargaining coverage in Romania is relatively high (55-85% depending on data sources, cf. Kohl 2009; Trif 2008). On the other hand, the collective bargaining coverage in Romania could rapidly decrease due to unilateral changes in the collective bargaining law imposed by the Romanian government in May 2011. These recent decisions abolished national-level collective agreements as the reference point for negotiations at all levels (Ciutacu 2011). Despite union density decline, Chiviu (2010) suggests that membership recruitment is rarely adopted by large national trade union confederations. Nevertheless, new trade unions have begun to emerge among others in the retail sector, where their creation was supported by international unions, and in the public sector.

Are there any indicators of a common approach to organizing the unorganized in CEE? If we could observe similar types of bottom-up trade union organizing practices across various institutional contexts, a hypothesis on the role of grassroots mobilization and worker agency would be granted significant empirical support. Alternatively, the sources of convergence will need to be explored in the features of “opportunity structure” in the region, including post-socialist legacies and/or the effects of the semi-peripheral position of CEE within the global capitalist system (Nölke/Vliegenhardt 2009). By contrast, if trade union organizing practices similar to those in the Anglo-American sphere emerged in more decentralized industrial relations systems, such as Poland *and* Estonia, but not in more centralized ones, like Slovenia and Romania, an important aspect of the institutionalist explanations of trade union organizing approaches would be substantiated.

Examining trade union strategies: research on the automotive sector

The empirical study, whose tentative results are presented in the remaining part of the article, aims to explore the mechanism of trade union organizing in CEE in the automotive sector.

The automotive sector was chosen as a symbol of the evolution of 20th century capitalism which demonstrates its internal tensions and developments, having had more general consequences for trade unionism. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the sector has witnessed the emergence of new management techniques related to “lean” production regimes, which made it a testing and learning ground for other industries and sectors in capitalist countries (Stewart 1996). However, automotive companies have historically been and remain a site of worker resistance to managerial power (Silver 2003). New MNC automotive plants in CEE have witnessed attempts at trade union organizing (Meardi 2007a) as well as the emergence of transnational trade union cooperation (Bernaciak 2010). As Meardi (2007a) argues, multinational automotive corporations in CEE can be considered “a privileged field in which to test the possibility of union revitalisation in post-communist countries, as they are arguably the front-runners of capitalist restructuring, where the nature of employment relations should be clearer and ‘purified’ from past state-paternalist legacies.”

The automotive sector is very well established in Poland, Romania and Slovenia, involving both car manufacturers and a dense network of automotive parts’ suppliers. In Estonia, the sector is much less developed and consists of small and medium enterprises oriented towards component manufacturing. Automotive companies (suppliers and car producers) are moderately unionized. According to information provided by trade union leaders, trade union density in Poland is around 30% in the case of car producers, but only 5-10% in the case of supplier companies. In Romania, around 30% of employees are trade union members, in Estonia about 20% and in Slovenia around 30%. In the metal sector, employees are covered by sectoral-level collective agreements in Romania, Estonia and Slovenia. Yet, only in Slovenia and Romania the extension of collective agreements to non-unionized employees is practically used (Kohl 2009; Trif 2008).

Given the very limited scope of existing comparative research on trade union revitalization in Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Estonia, the empirical research was based on the combination of inductive and deductive techniques within the overall framework of grounded theory methodology (Glaser/Strauss 1967). Empirical data was derived from three types of data sources. First, we collected 15 expert interviews (4 in Poland, 5 in Romania, 2 in Estonia and 5 in Slovenia) with the leaders of the major trade union federations active in the automotive sector. As a context data, the leaders of selected trade union confederations, to which these federations were affiliated, were also interviewed. Sectoral federations studied included the National Automotive Industry Section of NSZZ Solidarność and the Metalworkers Federation (Metalowcy) of OPZZ in Poland, the Federation of Romanian Automotive Industry Unions (FSAR), the Trade Union Federation for Machine Industry (FSCM) in Romania, the Estonian Metalworkers Federation (EMAF) and the Trade Union of Metal and Electrical Workers of Slovenia (SKEI). National-level interviews covered NSZZ Solidarność (Poland), CSNRL-Fratria, CNS Cartel Alfa (Romania), EAKL (Estonia) and ZSSS (Slovenia). Second, we selected company cases in which trade unions were either established in the course of trade union organizing or managed to achieve significant gains for their workforce, in terms of wages and influence on work organisation, after the phase of restructuring and privatization. These “islands of resistance and partnership practices”, as we called them, are certainly not representative of the sector as a whole. However, they provided us with useful insights into the local mechanism of membership recruitment and factors that mediate its outcomes. We collected 3 cases in Poland (1 car producer and 2 automotive suppliers), 2 cases in Romania (1 car producer and 1 supplier), 2 cases of suppliers in Estonia and 2 cases in Slovenia (1 car producer and 1 supplier) (see table 3). The data for these cases comes from interviews with trade union leaders and existing press and historical reports.

In each company studied, biographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983) with company-level trade union leaders were conducted. The open-ended character of the interviews, recording the unionists’ entire life stories, made it possible to explore the evolution of activists’ subjectivity and their reflexive commitments to unionism as important factors enabling or constraining institutional innovation within trade unions (Mrozowicki et al. 2010). Those interviewed were predominantly blue-collar workers, both women and men, active as

company-level trade union leaders (presidents, deputy presidents, and union board members) and 30 to over 50 years old. 14 biographical interviews were collected in Poland, 7 in Romania, 4 in Estonia and 4 in Slovenia. Data analysis was based on the twofold coding procedures (open coding and selective coding) developed by the grounded theory methodology (Glaser/Strauss 1967). Its ultimate goal was to reconstruct the relationships between practices and processes present at all levels of research, sectoral, company, biographical, in order to develop a theoretical understanding of the union organizing mechanism in relation to institutional and organizational contexts and strategic trade union choices.

Trade union organizing in the automotive sector: sectoral approaches

National- and sectoral level interviews with trade union leaders, supplemented by the analysis of secondary data sources such as press reports, made it possible to explore both trade union practices and their methods of discursive framing by interviewees. Discursive “framing” is understood by Levesque and Murray (2010: 343) as a “union's ability to define a proactive and autonomous agenda.” Yet, the definition of pro-active trade union agenda rarely featured in interviews with national and sectoral trade union leaders. Instead, they tended to emphasize structural, cultural and organisational obstacles which constrain their attempts to attract new members. Structural problems referred to the decomposition of the manufacturing sector, the expansion of small and medium enterprises, the introduction of non-standard forms of employment (self-employment, temporary employment) and anti-union management in some private enterprises. Cultural problems clearly reflect the lack of narrative resources that can be utilised by trade unions to attract new members. Trade union leaders mentioned a tendency to identify trade unions with the socialist past, the limited awareness of workers’ rights among young people and the spread of a culture of individualism. The latter was strongly emphasized in Estonia. The conviction that “Estonian people are very quiet” and “passive” due to the lack of collective mobilization traditions in the country was present in all the interviews Estonians collected.

The analysis of expert interviews offers a further cross-national confirmation of the thesis by Ost (2005) regarding the weakness of social movement unionism in CEE. In all countries studied, trade union organizing is rarely based on coalition-building with new social movements. An explicit explanation mentioned by interviewees is the lack of strong, new social movements. Less explicit is the reluctance of a part of the union leadership and membership to engage in shaky coalitions which might be criticized as too radical and too political. This view was mentioned, among others, by the EAKL organization secretary in Estonia, who reported that some attempts to cooperate with radical left wing groups “were negatively received by older members of the union.”

Insufficient infrastructural resources, which could help to develop comprehensive organising campaigns, were also frequently mentioned as the reason for limited organising. The most repetitive theme was the lack of sufficient budgets for membership acquisition. Similar to Anglo-American experiences (Milkman/Voss 2004), trade union leaders emphasized the internal opposition of sectoral federations and company-level unions against transferring a part of membership fees to organize new members. According to interviewees, this internal opposition reflects both the expectations of existing members to obtain traditional services for their fees, such as Christmas parcels, and the attempts of some union leaders to keep their positions at the cost of the efficiency of larger organisations. The result is the fossilization of the trade union structure which was emphasized, among others, by the president of the Youth Committee of ZSSS in Slovenia, indicating a tension between the older generation of union leaders and new, younger union activists pressuring for reforms: “I think the biggest problem is that people who work professionally in branch trade unions, sectoral trade unions (...) stick to their positions. They would feel threatened if young members meant more”.

Table 2: Sectoral trade union organizing strategies

	Poland	Slovenia	Estonia	Romania
Employing union organizers	Only regional structures of NSZZ Solidarność; otherwise, union leaders as organizers	No, union leaders (regional and company) as organizers	No, union leaders (company level) as organizers	No, union leaders as organizers in FSAR
Sectoral organizing campaigns	Not in the automotive sector	Yes, SKEI project since May 2010	Not in the automotive sector	Not in the automotive sector
Special groups organizing	Organizing fixed-term workers (Solidarność, Metalowcy OPZZ)	Yes, SKEI (youth and fixed-term workers)	Not in the automotive sector	Not in the automotive sector
Consciousness-raising campaigns	Not in the automotive sector, yes at the national level (Solidarność - ads in mass media)	Yes, school visits (Youth Committee SKEI)	Yes, EAKL (Estonian Unions 2020), but not in the automotive sector	Yes at the national level (school visits)
Leadership trainings in trade union organizing	Yes (Metalowcy OPZZ, Metalworkers Secretariat of NSZZ Solidarność)	Yes (SKEI)	Yes (EAKL)	Yes (national con-federations: Cartel Alfa; CNSRL-Fratria)
Special benefits for members	Yes, NSZZ Solidarność (shopping discount card)	Yes, ZSSS (shop-ping discount card),	No	Yes (discount for holidays in SPA's)
Cooperation with social movements	No	No	No	No

Source: Research by authors.

Table 2 presents a summary of approaches to trade union organizing adopted by the major trade union federations in the automotive sector in the countries studied. As argued earlier by Krzywdziński (2010), NSZZ Solidarność in Poland is the only CEE trade union confederation which employs paid trade union organizers to recruit non-unionized members through its regional structures and via the Union Development Office at the national level. The embeddedness of NSZZ Solidarność in international networks is one of the factors which accounts for the distinctiveness of its coordinated approach to membership recruitment. The establishment of Union Development Office was founded on an early transfer of know-how about trade union organising thanks to the cooperation with AFL-SEIU dating back to 1993. In addition, the unitary and centralized trade union structure of NSZZ Solidarność, as opposed to a loose federation structure of other unions in the sample, made it easier to transfer resources for organizing. This assertion is confirmed by the fact that SKEI, the second unitary union, was the only one in the sample in which a strategically designed campaign aimed at recruiting new members at the sectoral level was developed. Since May 2010, a minimum of 2 % of the SKEI budget is devoted to informing and training local union leaders in membership acquisition. Even though this is very small amount of money (about 5 % of the

union budget is spent for organizing within NSZZ Solidarność, cf. Krzywdziński 2010: 281), it is still better than the lack of budget for organizing in other unions.

Trade union organizing often features in the training agenda of trade unions, which is offered due to the support of international union cooperation and European funds. Special benefits for union members, such as discount shopping cards or holiday discounts, are offered by unions in Poland, Romania and Slovenia, but their effectiveness is regarded as being rather limited by the interviewed leaders. Another approach involving attempts to recruit a special group of workers, such as young people (SKEI Youth Committee) or workers on fixed term contracts, was adopted by trade unions in Poland and Slovenia. Trade union campaigns aimed at raising awareness of unions were carried out in all countries. Methods included visiting schools, leafleting, promoting trade unions in media, but their effectiveness was also considered quite limited by trade union leaders. The role of national and sectoral-level organisations in recruiting new union members is usually restricted to legal and practical support for the bottom-up efforts of workers to unionize their companies. This was made most explicit in Estonia, where the president of EMAF said “Sometimes young people come to us on their own and tell that they want to establish a trade union even though they don’t know what trade unions are.” Except for Polish Solidarność, these are sectoral union leaders and union staff at the regional level, who are supposed to be practically involved in organizing workers in non-unionized firms. The best example is the leader of the Romanian FSAR, who reported that he himself approached employees in non-unionized firms, trying to gather “those 4-5 people” he needed to start the union founding process.

The assessment of the effectiveness of union strategies is difficult not only due to the lack of reliable internal union statistics, but also due to the fact that most trade unions studied, with the exception of Solidarność in Poland, began to actively search for members only during the last couple of years, during the economic crisis, when membership declined due to mass layoffs. According to available data (internal union statistics), EMAF in Estonia lost 25% of its membership between 2006 and 2010 and had merely 1,360 members in 2010. While SKEI membership declined from around 40,000 in 2005 to around 35,000 in 2008, it had 38,000 members in 2010 (Stanojevic 2010b and interview with SKEI president). These statistics might reflect the halting of membership decline. Stability was also reported by the leader of NSZZ Solidarność National Section of the Automotive Industry Workers in Poland, which retained around 14,000 members in the years 2006-2010. According to its leader, the Metalworkers Federation of OPZZ also lost members, but no precise statistics were made available. Finally, the membership in Romanian FSAR, whose leader was personally involved in organizing workers, grew between 2003 and 2010 from 18,000 to 21,862 (internal statistics), while FSCM, which failed to adopt a recruitment strategy, noted membership decline in the last years to roughly 22,000 members.

The analysis suggests that membership stability or growth was only observed in cases where trade union federations adopted pro-active, direct recruitment strategies (FSAR) or multifaceted, coordinated tactics aimed at membership growth (NSZZ Solidarność, SKEI). However, even where top-down strategies were adopted, the main responsibility of attracting new members tends to be placed on company-level union leaders. Company case studies and activists’ narratives demonstrate some of the core features of this “work at the grassroots”.

Company-level union organizing: organizational contexts and union activism

Existing research in Poland suggested that the weakness of top-down trade union recruitment strategies might be misleading as it can ignore bottom-up union activism at the company level (Hardy 2009; Mrozowicki et al. 2010). To what extent is this assertion also valid in the other countries studied? Table 3 presents an overview of basic facts about the companies chosen to explore company-level trade union strategies.

Table 3. Company case studies: an overview

	PL1	RO1	SI1	RO2	PL2	PL3	SI2	EE1	EE2
FDI	Italian (since 1992)	French (since 1999)	French (100% since 2004)	German greenfield	Swedish greenfield	French greenfield	US brownfield	Finnish brownfield	local (Estonian) brownfield
Core business	Personal vehicles	Personal vehicles	Personal vehicles	Electrome- chanical	Airbags and security belts	Interior systems	Tires	Cable systems	Car textiles
Employment	Around 7,000	13,273 (2008)	2,600 (2009)	600	1,500	300	1,564 (2010)	997 (2009)	137 (2010)
Trade unions	OPZZ, August '80, NSZZ 'S' + 4 other	BNS/FSAR affiliate dominant (+ 3 others)	local union, SKEI + 2 others	Cartel Alfa affiliate only	OPZZ affiliate dominant and NSZZ 'S'	NSZZ 'S' only	ZSSS / KNG and KNSS	EMAF /EAKL affiliate only	EAKL affiliate
Union density	Around 35- 40%	82%	33%	17%	33%	10%	30-50% (not revealed)	32%	25%
Major protests	1992, 1994; 2003, 2007 2009	1999, 2003, 2008	1999, 2000, 2008	none	none	none	1997 and "warning strikes" afterwards	none	none
Major achievement	Collective agreement Wage rise in 2007: 500 PLN	Collective agreement Wage rise in 2008: 450 RON	Pay increases (2-3%); collective agreement; influence on sectoral colle- ctive bargaining	Extra pauses Struggle for overtime pay Collective agreement	Shorter working day for mothers Managing redundancies	Control over employee benefit fund Liquidation of four-shift system	Collective agreement (suspended); struggle for better working conditions for agency workers	Extra vacation days; medical vouchers; quality bonus; protection during downsizing	Collective agreement; legal assistance for individual workers
Strategies	Cluster organizing Protest and Partnership Internal democracy	Cluster organizing Protest and Partnership	Servicing, Partnership; Cluster organising	Servicing Legal assistance	Cluster organizing Strengthening Internal democracy	Attempts to organize workers on fix-term contracts	Servicing, Partnership Cluster unions	Cluster organizing Partnership	Servicing

Source: Research by author

PL1, RO1 and SII belong to the most important producers of personal cars in Poland, Romania and Slovenia. Their traditions reach back to the period of state socialism, when they produced cars under Western licenses. After the end of state socialism, they were bought by Western investors. In PL1, the immediate reaction of workers to privatization was a 56-day strike action led by a radical autonomous trade union, Free Trade Union August '80, which emerged as one of the break-away organisations from NSZZ Solidarność. Thanks to the strike, membership grew to 2,000 in the PL1 group (currently 3,000) in August 1980, largely at the cost of Solidarność and the affiliate of the OPZZ Metalworkers Federation, which did not support the strikers. In RO1, the dominant trade union belonging to FSAR attributes the great majority (85%) of employees to successful wage strikes in 2003 and 2008, which also reinforced its position. In SII, various forms of workers protests took place in 1999 (wages), 2005 (wages) and 2008 (working time), strengthening the position of the Local Trade Union (LTU) which broke away from ZSSS SKEI. The LTU emerged as an attempt to take advantage of the central role of SII in the Slovenian economy and have direct influence on national-level collective bargaining. In order to secure the SII interests in the Economic and Social Council of Slovenia, the LTU union joined a union confederation, Solidarnost, which was co-established by the LTU leader.

There is a consistent pattern of inter-union rivalry in PL1 and SII, but not in RO1, where membership is the highest. As a result of trade union rivalry, SKEI trade union in SII lost the majority of its members and the LTU membership grew to 1,600 at the beginning of 2000s. However, the LTU also began to lose members, due to the reluctance of young people to join the union, and there is an increasing share of temporary agency workers, including migrants from ex-Yugoslavia, who are difficult to unionise on the workplace level. Yet, in SII, trade unions seem to be less interested in membership recruitment, as long as they are able to maintain their strong bargaining position at the company, sectoral and national level. By contrast, in RO1 and PL1, direct trade union organising strategies were undertaken. PL1, NSZZ Solidarność, led by a new female president who was elected in 2002, carried out a union organizing campaign in 2005-2010 and engaged in a series of pay demonstrations in front of the factory gate. This resulted in an increase of union membership in the PL1 group from 600 in 1998 to 1,800 in 2010 and an increase of the minimum pay in 2005-2010 by almost 100%, up to 2,000 PLN (around EUR 500). In RO1, an average pay rise gross of RON 450 (around EUR 120) followed an 18-day strike action in 2008. By contrast, in SII pay rises (2-3% yearly) are routinely negotiated via company-level collective bargaining.

Another difference between the cases of PL1 and RO1 and the Slovenian case can be found in the dominant strategies of trade union organising. While SII trade unions are predominantly grounded in their mother company, RO1 and PL1 expanded their activities beyond it. The LTU in SII attempted to organise workers in supplier companies which provide automotive components for the production plant. However, this activity was opposed by the management who interpreted it as "acting against the SII interests which wants to buy supplies at the cheapest possible prices." As the result, the LTU leaders decided to influence the situation of workers in supplier companies via sectoral level collective bargaining. By contrast, in RO1 and PL1 trade union bargaining power was enhanced by the "cluster organizing" in supplier companies, which emerged in the wake of restructuring of PL1 and RO1 groups were founded anew by private investors in economic zones, in which PL1 and RO1 operate. The strategy relied on the combination of trade union organizing in greenfield sites and the consolidation of existing trade unions within an umbrella-type of union organisations coordinated by trade unions based in PL1 and RO1. In the process of a "cluster" trade union development, large trade unions in PL1 and RO1 supplemented the activities of sectoral union federations, which had neither the resources nor the capacities to recruit new union members. In PL1, cluster organizing was additionally supported by the inclusion of temporary agency workers into trade unions in 2011, the decentralization of union structures and the involvement of new union activists, including women and young workers, all of which boosted internal solidarity. This process is enthusiastically described by NSZZ Solidarność leader in PL1, Janina:

Janina, PL1, NSZZ Solidarność: I presented a new kind of trade union structure in order to/... Well, to make it alive just like union development is. I simply thought how should it look like, so (...) that it goes back to the bottom, that all power goes to the bottom. And I gave more prerogatives to the people. (...) so that they felt useful and an employer couldn't ignore them (...) We worked on our image (...) Now people also join Solidarność here because of my name and people call me from the region, from the city, or from other [regions] that they want to be covered by my activity (...) I have a big structure and negotiating power (...) I love such strategic issues ((enthusiastically)).

The situation of trade unions was much more diverse in the automotive suppliers companies (EE1, EE2, SI2, PL2, PL3 and RO2). SI2 is an American owned plant producing tires. Americans bought shares in a former joint venture between a state-owned Slovenian company and Western investors in 1997 and became its sole owners in 2004, acquiring 100%. There are two major trade unions in the company, a KNG ZSSS affiliate (larger) and a KNSS (Independent Trade Union Confederation of Slovenia) affiliate which broke away from the KNG union in 2000. SI2 KNG union belongs to a cluster of unions covering three business entities that emerged after an organizational restructuring of the mother company. Similar to RO1 and PL1, the trade union position was strengthened through warning strikes following the entry of the foreign capital. Although the SI2 KNG union did not implement any special recruitment strategies, it managed to keep its membership high through securing wages, bonuses and working conditions better than the national average by combining cooperation with employer and direct involvement in sectoral level collective bargaining. A recent example of the “micro-flexicurity” approach (Stanojevic 2010a) was based on the avoidance of major lay-offs during the recent economic crisis in exchange for trade union agreement on a shorter work calendar (306 days) and flexibility regarding working hours. In addition, the union managed to keep the number of workers on fixed-term contracts and temporary workers low and secured the same pay for agency workers as for permanent staff.

EE1, a cable systems producer in Estonia, resembles to some extent SI2 in its partnership approach between trade union and management. However, the trade union's position in the company is weaker since, unlike in Slovenia, it is not rooted in the sectoral and national trade union power. The plant was founded by a Finnish investor who bought one of the departments of a regional electricity supplier. The majority of workers are women, 50% are Russians. While trade unions existed in the electricity supplier, they had to develop a new approach after its privatization. It relied on the partnership with the Finnish employer combined with the organizing strategy (similar to PL1 and RO1) within the cluster of companies that emerged on the premises of the ex-socialist company. Today, 32% of EE1 workers belong to the union, a core EMAF affiliate, and the number of unionized members systematically grew since 2002 when the company was privatized. Membership growth was an important factor in the decision of the Finish employers to incorporate their partnership principles into the Estonian plant. The trade union has been consulted on issues such as bus transportation, wages or changes in the bonus system. However, there have been no recent pay raise negotiations; the union only managed to prevent pay cuts during the recent crisis. The union's position is even weaker in the second Estonian case, EE2, a car textiles supplier company, which was first sold to Scandinavian investors and then bought back by an Estonian owner. Despite the strong commitment of union leadership to the partnership approach, union membership has continued to erode since Soviet times. The leader believes that employees should themselves understand the need to join the union and does not undertake any organising except for free legal consultancy for individual union members.

In PL2, PL3 and RO2, trade unions emerged from bottom-up and in conspiracy, a couple of years after the companies were founded. While in the case of PL1, RO1, SI1, EE1 and EE2 trade union leaders have been continuously employed in the company since socialist times, activists in PL2, PL3 and RO2 began to work in these firms after having experienced career fragmentation and involuntary job changes in their earlier occupational lives. The most

successful case is PL2, a Swedish greenfield airbag producer employing predominantly female and young workers. 33% of the workers are unionized in one dominant union affiliated with the OPZZ regional structures, which was established in response to a plan to lay off a group of workers. NSZZ Solidarność is very weak, with around 30 members, but cooperates with a stronger OPZZ affiliate. The OPZZ company-level union leaders were also engaged in union organizing in other automotive supplier companies in a special economic zone, in which the company is located. Although no pay raise was negotiated, the union activity brought about other tangible effects. In the time of the crisis, it negotiated layoffs in a way which enabled workers to get generous gratuities and to return to work when the difficult times were over. Other achievements included shorter working days for young mothers (7 instead of 8 hours) and union control over the employee benefit fund, consisting of employers' contributions.

The story of unionization looks quite similar in RO2, but its outcomes are much more limited. In RO2, employees, 85% of whom are women, earn between 600 and 1,300 RON (including overtime) [EUR 150-310], but most of them are unqualified. The RO2 management style combines paternalism and semi-authoritarian control over labour process based on the acute financial penalization of workers' mistakes. RO1 is located in an area that is not penetrated by the MNCs in the automotive sector. The network embeddedness of the RO2 union is low; the union is largely isolated. The narrative of Maria, the 38 year-old president of the union, which is affiliated with the CNS Cartel Alfa, shows the difficult process of unionizing the company, which she and her daughter (also employed in RO2) initiated:

Maria, RO2: It was summertime, 2 years ago, and we were waiting for the salary to be transferred to our bank accounts (...) It was past 3 o'clock, the money still wasn't there. We drank the juice, smoked couple of cigarettes, and, as I looked upwards, I saw: 'Cartel Alfa' [the union]. And I said: why don't we go upstairs and see for ourselves, what it is all about, what they have to offer. So we went upstairs, talked to a secretary (...) After 2-3 days they contacted me and asked me to come to Cartel Alfa again (...) They told me to make the announcement at the company that there was a trade union. (...) We had to sign up one by one, because the manager didn't allow for the first meeting to be held (...) We had our first meeting in November, it was a general assembly, for the whole hall. At the beginning almost all enrolled, except for those at the Quality Department. They were paid much too well and also told not to become a member: 'you won't be paid the same way' (...) Gradually many others have withdrawn (...) Although they were not told anything directly, gradually they started cutting from their allowances (...) Everything was being done silently.

After the initial success of the unionization, the RO2 management persuaded many workers to leave the union. As a result, trade union density decreased from 90% to less than 20%. The union has opposed the management's attempts to raise piece norms and cut overtime payment. It also provides legal support for employees in the case of conflicts with managers. However, its achievements in terms of wage rise are limited. Workers are said to be reluctant to join the trade union due to their fear of job loss and trade union leaders are afraid of taking more decisive legal actions against the management because of their fear of the company being relocated.

The role of the anti-union management was also crucial in the case of PL3. The company, a subsidiary of the French MNC, is located in a special economic zone, in a region dominated by the copper mining holding. It employs over 300 workers, 80% of which are below 35 years old and 30-40% of whom is female. The PL3 union (NSZZ Solidarność) was organized by a group of friends, skilled workers and ex-unionists who moved together to a newly opened MNC-owned plant when the state-owned factory in which they worked went bankrupt. An immediate reason for the founding of the union was the deterioration of working conditions, social networks and the status of craftsmen. In the course of year-long legal struggle, the union managed to oppose the introduction of a new four-shift shift system, which would have

lead to work intensification and the reduction of overtime and weekend bonuses. However, it seems that the conditions which enabled the establishment of the union were also amongst the factors of its successive weakness. Union leaders, skilled “core” workers, have difficulties in approaching younger employees, who are reluctant to join the unions considered by them to be too weak to solve their problems. The PL3 union’s power was undermined by increasing the number of workers on fixed-term contracts and by managerial strategies aimed at convincing workers to leave the union. With merely 10% of the staff unionized in PL3, trade union activity is described as “silent office work, in which unions attempt to control an employer so that he doesn’t make fool of you.”

Company case studies document significant differences in trade union power and the ability to attract new members. In the case of large care producers in Poland, Romania and Slovenia, high union membership was maintained through the combination of partnership approach and union capacity of collective mobilization. Yet another strategy adopted by trade unions in larger plants relied on “cluster organising” based on extensive networks and the usage of informal contacts to co-establish trade unions in a cluster of ex-socialist companies and in non-unionised local greenfield plants. Importantly, a kind of “cluster organising”, albeit in a smaller scale, was also adopted in supplier companies (SI2, PL2 and EE1). Bottom-up organising based on informal networks seems to be thus the most important strategy of company-level trade union organising across the studies of all four countries.

In the case of isolated and less numerous union organizations facing various forms of anti-union management (PL3, RO2), trade union activity was reduced to enforcing basic labour laws in the companies and influencing the regulation of working time, overtime pay and the companies’ social funds. There is the dominance of “small gains” as the threshold of actual trade union achievements seem to decrease. However, even these “small gains” should not be ignored, as it was trade union presence which made management respect labour standards. In this sense, the supplier cases in Poland, Romania and Estonia help us to substantiate the theoretical argument about the role of bottom-up worker agency for trade union renewal (Mrozowicki et al. 2010; Turner 2007). Neither objective composition of labour force, e.g. the level of feminisation or skills, nor the interconnections of new organisations with other unions, as the failure of PL3 demonstrates, can fully explain trade union (relative) success in EE1 and PL2 and their (relative) failure in EE2, RO2 and PL3. Yet, the analysis also suggests that trade union success also depended on the management’s readiness to accommodate moderate labour demands. We will return to this observation in conclusions.

Conclusion

Exploring the practices of trade union organizing in the automotive sector in Estonia, Poland, Slovenia and Romania, this article addresses two central questions. First, it asks if there is any common mechanism of trade union organizing in post-socialist CEE countries that would resemble Anglo-American experiences. Second, it poses the question of to what extent trade union organizing is at all a viable option for trade union renewal in CEE. Addressing the first question, the analysis suggests that trade union organising practices in the automotive sector in CEE differ from what we know about trade union organizing in liberal market economies, such as the USA or the UK. Contrary to the experiences of trade union organising campaigns in the USA (Voss 2010), the most successful attempts to organize workers were largely bottom-up, driven rather than comprehensive and top-down designed. In accordance with the resource based model of trade union revival (Levesque/Murray 2010), two important reasons for these results can be mentioned: limited material resources (underfinancing) of CEE trade unions and organizational structures of trade unions that constrain resource transfer to organize. Two exceptions, NSZZ Solidarność in Poland and SKEI in Slovenia, are centralized trade unions which had the capacities to transfer a small part of union resources either to employ paid organizers (NSZZ Solidarność) or to design recruitment campaigns (both SKEI and NSZZ Solidarność). However, even in these cases, the outcomes of top-down strategies,

in terms of membership growth, was largely dependent on their combination with bottom-up efforts to organize workers at the company level. The comparative analysis of sectoral level trade union strategies allowed us also to confirm an earlier observation by Ost (2005) regarding the weakness of the social movement unionism model in CEE. Unlike the case of the American organising campaigns, the links with new social movements are weak due to the continuing limited relevance of such movements in the region and the reluctance of union leadership to engage in shaky coalitions which might be criticized as too political by union members.

More generally speaking, comparative analysis made it clear that some factors mentioned by earlier institutionalist literature on trade union organizing (Heery and Adler, 2004), such as decentralized collective bargaining typical of liberal market economies, do not necessarily lead to sectoral trade union efforts to organize unorganized workers. Among trade unions in two decentralized industrial relations systems, Poland and Estonia, NSZZ Solidarność in Poland was the only one which adopted a comprehensive organizing strategy. Ost (2009) and Krzywdziński (2010) argued that the turn to organizing in Poland represented a break with NSZZ Solidarność's history as an anti-communist movement. However, it can equally be argued that the lack of the collective labor mobilization tradition in Estonia is an important factor that accounts for the most profound trade union weakness in this country (Gonser 2010: 8). The Slovenian case fits well into observations of Western neo-institutionalist researchers (Baccaro et al. 2003). As long as trade unions were able to secure gains for their constituency through sectoral and national-level collective bargaining, trade union organising seemed to be an unnecessary investment. In Romania, the "state capture" theory (Clarke 2005) might be still useful to account for limited organising efforts of trade unions. Until recently, the slow pace of restructuring and the entrenchment of union elites in high-level politics made Romanian unions less susceptible to the need to develop organising strategies.

The importance of bottom-up worker activism in all the companies studied confirms the relevance of an approach centred on worker agency in understanding trade union organising in the region. Committed, new and reformed union leaders developing a systematic ("cluster") approach to organizing that went beyond a narrow company focus were crucial for successful membership acquisition and membership retention at the company level. The case studies suggest that "cluster" trade union organizing led by the unions in large MNCs can efficiently substitute top-down organizing led by underfinanced sectoral-level union organisations. However, the vital question is what comes next after the organising is completed. Although we documented local union success stories in the multinational companies in all countries, the definition of "success" has to be reconsidered to understand the actual achievements of trade unions at the local level. In the case of Slovenia, the success was largely linked to the protection of both company-level and sectoral level collective agreements. In the case of the majority of newly established trade unions in Poland, Estonia and Romania, trade union presence and activity was mostly oriented towards securing basic labour rights. In this respect, trade union renewal in Poland, Estonia and Romania resembled the model of the "pure and simple" economic unionism discussed by Ost (2005).

However, there are several internal contradictions and tensions within the company-centred approach to membership acquisition which might call into question its relevance for trade union renewal in the long run. The "islands of good practices" in and around MNCs might gradually improve working conditions, especially as stable and predictable employment relations are also in interest of multinational companies. As argued by Nölke and Vliengenhardt (2009: 684), given the role of CEE economies as "assembly platforms in complex global commodity chains makes strikes very costly, as soon as TNCs [transnational corporations] invest heavily within the region they become interested in keeping workers fairly satisfied." Yet, the company-centred approach is insufficient to solve the most urgent problems trade union face at the national level, including the expansion of precarious work arrangements, e.g. temporary work contracts in Poland and Slovenia that gradually replace permanent jobs in the automotive sector, and an increasing emigration of skilled labour force from the CEE countries (including Poland, Romania and Estonia). The best "theoretical"

alternative would be securing an encompassing and binding regulation of employment conditions at the sectoral level. However, except for Slovenia, sectoral-level collective bargaining in CEE is increasingly difficult given the disorganisation of employers (Meardi 2011). In this context, the biggest challenge for CEE trade unions is to combine an efficient workplace unionism with the strategies aimed at regaining, or retaining, their role as political actors that would be capable of protecting the vast majority of disorganised and precarious workers by influencing legislative processes and enforcing labour rights.

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