

Tibor T. Meszmann,
PhD Candidate in Political Science,
Central European University

Transformation of organized labor in Serbia, Slovenia and Poland: the Decisive Years (1988-1992/3)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to assess and compare the main features of the transformation of organized labor from workers self-management socialisms of Poland and two successor states of former socialist Yugoslavia, Serbia and Slovenia in the period of systemic change (1988-1992/3). The paper is a part of my broader argument according to which the years of systemic change (1988-1992/3) were decisive for the redefinition and construction of the role of organized labor in the new post-socialist polities, that determined also its' new institutional role in these countries.

The reform of old, 'transmission belt' trade unions and emergence or legalization of new ones in this period is analyzed and compared relying on an agency centered theoretical model. The focus is on main trade unions' ways and ability to adapt to the changed context, in the emerging new political and new economic environment in Poland and two successor states of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Slovenia, and to develop a new identity. I specifically focus here on the interaction between trade unions and different political parties, trade union relationships and the interaction of trade unions with governmental bodies of the new polity. I show also how different internal choices and re-conceptualizations of the role of trade unions were made.

As data for analysis I use secondary sources (analyses by local observers), articles in the local media and reports from conferences and meetings of trade unions, and interviews with trade union leaders.

Introduction

Within former socialist states, Poland and SFR Yugoslavia comprise a distinctive subgroup of states that were based on the systems of workers' self-management systems, with supposedly the most positive labor related institutional and ideological settings. Moreover, Poland and SFR Yugoslavia experienced a failure of similar, import-led socialist developmental strategies, accompanied with highly fragmented and weak communist party, and deep economic crisis in the last decade of socialism. The deep economic and political crisis was characterized by outburst of labor protests through 1980s, what made these two states exceptional compared to other Eastern European socialist countries. (Walton & Ragin, 1990)

Yet, for labor, the trajectories from socialism to market capitalism in Poland and among the successor states of Yugoslavia have differed significantly. In Slovenia, a robust social democratic system developed, whereas in Serbia labor quiescence and populism prevailed, while Poland experienced a neoliberal turn, at the workers' expense. Defining systemic change as abandonment of the old socialist and establishment of the new post-socialist institutional setting, I argue that the years of systemic change (1988-1992/3), from labor protests in 1988 until second free parliamentary elections, were decisive for the redefinition and construction of the role of organized labor in the new post-socialist polities, that determined also its' new institutional role in these countries. As a central part of this argument, in this paper I assess and compare the main features of trade union transformation in Poland, Serbia and Slovenia.

My theoretical model is constructed on the assumption that periods of systemic crises are actor- and ideology centered. More specifically, I posit that period of transition witnessed intense struggles over boundaries and content of economic and political institutions and organizations, including different new and reformed old actors and institutions of the emerging new economy and the state. (Campbell & Pedersen 1996: 210) My particular theoretical concern is was how much autonomy different institutions, specifically trade unions, could have achieved under law, what were their constructed new relationship with other actors and how their roles and responsibilities were defined.

In this paper I focus on main trade unions' ways and ability to adapt and to develop a new identity, in the emerging new political and new economic environment and its' new actors in Poland and two successor states of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Slovenia. I specifically focus here on the interaction between trade unions and different political parties, trade union relationships and the interaction of trade unions with governmental bodies of the new polity. I show also how different internal choices and re-conceptualizations of the role of trade unions were made.

I start with a short overview of the organized labor and trade union scene in the late 1980s in Poland and Yugoslavia. Second, I present the main attempts for redefinition of trade unionism in 1989-90 in all Poland, Serbia and Slovenia, in the context of preparation for the systemic transformation. In the third part, for the period 1990/1-1992/3 I develop a dynamic model of interaction among organized (protesting) labor, trade unions, political parties, governments and other agencies. In the final part I conclude.

1. Trade unions and organized labor in late 1980s

Before 1988 trade unions in socialist countries are generally characterized as ‘transmission belts.’ However, this is an oversimplification, since variety of forms of structural roles existed. Functionally, trade unions indeed may be seen as intermediate state actors, with the main duty of increasing productivity and overall successful industrialization and catching-up with the West; from the viewpoint of its’ members, they had distributive functions.

In Yugoslavia, trade unions were never an important player on the enterprise level¹. The top occupation of Yugoslav trade unions on the plant level was provision of food and consumer goods to workers; to a significantly lesser extent it was social protection, electoral activities, recreation and organization of excursions. (Marković: 1989: 86) On the national level, trade unions were to preserve and foster a constitutionally and ideologically pre-assumed non-conflicting, agreement-based (consensual) socialist system and society. With the economic crisis, they were eventually caught up in the web of adapting to different decision making bodies from local, national (republican) and federal communist parties, institutions of the enterprise management and the community. Rather than having any authentic voice – in the sense of creation of initiatives or taking up actions for the defense of ‘workers’, the trade unions rather had ‘operational-technical function’ in concluding a formal agreement of already decided ‘self-managing’ decisions – made by the management bodies or the political elite (Marković, 1989: 89). Until late 1980s industrial conflicts, ‘work stoppages’ in Yugoslavia happened only at the plant level. Trade unions were not conflict generating but a pacifying body – where the striking workers often confronted the trade unions together with management structures. (Arzenšek, 1984)

In post-martial law Poland, the reintroduced trade unions at the enterprise level were mostly engaged in recruiting members, resolving formal organizational issues, while constantly coping with originally very scarce resources. They had to cooperate with both the management (director) and self-management bodies on personnel matters; furthermore raising the professional qualifications of employees, raising the productivity level, and supervising safety and hygiene

¹ It was rather the work council which had some influence on micro level decision-making

standards. (Mason 1987: 496) With very limited available resources and seen as orchestrated by the majority of society, they enjoyed very limited prestige. In terms of resources the local new trade unions depended on directors, while in many factories they competed and clashed with self-management bodies. (Mason 1987: 499) On the national level, organized in OPZZ, a loose, hierarchically dysfunctional structure, the new trade unions were offered the task to raise voice in legislative matters affecting the workers' interests, consultation on new economic plans and price increase proposals, pointing out and raising workers' dissatisfactions, even criticizing some governmental policies. (Mason 1987: 500) In this sense, the OPZZ started its activity lobbying for increases in pensions, tax-system modifications, loan and holiday funds and other economic ('non-political') issues. In 1985 they demanded decision-binding, rather than consultative powers (e.g. concerning housing and the allocation of social funds) yet they got only paid leave for activists and modestly stronger consultative powers (Kolankiewicz 1987: 65).

OPZZ changed a strategy by nominating candidates directly to the Sejm. There were eventually 56 (out of 460) deputies in the new Sejm recommended by the trade union. However after being mobilized to influence legislature according to the interests of their members, it proved to be meaningless. As a minority fraction they lost highly unwanted and in advance designed battles of the stronger part – in the sensitive areas of (increasing) working hours, working conditions losing competencies to management and ministerial bodies. Most paradoxically, they even lost the right to strike during negotiations or disputes over agreements. (Kolankiewicz 1987: 66)

The protest events in spring and autumn 1988 brought new labor representatives to the arena. In Poland, the strikes in autumn 1988 revitalized Solidarity, which on its' part took up the role of participating in overall reforms. On the micro level, by means of divided labor, former Solidarity leaders returned to take over the leadership of 'problematic' industrial workforce, and in this way, controlled labor unrest. The power of control over the workforce initially increased Solidarity's weight in the decision making arena. Other, alternative trade unions, usually splinter trade unions from Solidarity were marginalized.

In Serbia in the last years of the 1980s, many trade unions and alternatively organized, semi-official labor bodies became a new instrument of an increasingly popular political entrepreneur, Slobodan Milosevic. Local and regional trade unions, if wanted to be 'successful' and up-to-date, became the new channels of intermediation between a promising Serbian leader and grievances of labor, addressed against third parties.² Dominating Serbia and minimizing the provincial powers of

² Usually targeting the Yugoslav federal government and some local governments and managers

Kosovo and Vojvodina by late 1988, during 1989 Milosevic could also increase his political weight on the level of Yugoslavia, originally by means of mobilizing labor.

In Slovenia a confrontational dialogue among representatives of government and spontaneously organized labor emerged, without the direct involvement of trade unions. Simultaneously new trade unions and labor initiatives mushroomed. Starting from late 1987, the official trade union realized that it urgently needs to redefine itself within the system, become representative organization of productive (first of all blue collar) labor and thus stop potential labor fragmentation by means of alternative unionization.

2. The trade union programs and congresses

In Yugoslavia, the trade unions' legitimacy was questioned only after the crisis and strikes intensified. There was a dual tendency within trade unions. In order to be successful, they had to keep up to date with political development. Links with the regional communist party, and with the increasingly powerful (new) regional state agencies was never abandoned. In Slovenia, trade unions participated in preparations for the amendments to the new Slovene constitution, and called for (larger) confederative independence. In Serbia, the leadership of SSS wholeheartedly supported centralist and nationalist political claims of the Serbian executive, having very little to do with trade unionism³. Yet, with signs of multiparty elections and decisive push for democratization, the trade unions had to redefine and reestablish themselves.

In both Slovenia and Serbia, the official trade unions held congresses in 1990, where they redefined themselves. At its renewal congress, the Trade Union Federation of Serbia (Savez sindikata Srbije - SSS) held on 15-16 January 1990 in Belgrade, adopted for the first time a program along with a new statute. Apart of the re-definition of the trade union in the new economic circumstances as a collective bargaining body, and the election of a new secretary, the reform had more a symbolic meaning than a radical break with the past. The document adopted in the congress reflected in many ways the official statements, policy and ideology of the presidium of SR Serbia on the reform of the political system. The trade union remained the representative body of all employees⁴, along with associated organizations of the pensioners.

The first congress of the Slovene 'official' trade union ZSSS was conceptualized as both a break with the past and continuation of positive legacy, expressed also in the renaming of the older

³ The trade union leader of SSS, Tomislav Milenković followed the claims of the Serbian leadership first by opposing the formation of new political parties in Serbia. Later he followed the official lines when it came to the issues of protecting Serbs in Kosovo, Croatia, condemning the Kosovo Albanians 'counter-revolution' etc.

⁴ including managers

ZSS to ZSSS⁵. The congress was carefully prepared, summarizing two years of intensive work. Documentation and critical assessment of the late 1980s work was tabled suggesting a responsive, modernized collective interest organization. After an intensive media campaign by ZSSS, the congress was held on 5-6 April 1990. The new self-positioning of trade union and the dramatic challenge to be faced was expressed by its' old – new president: 'There is no real market economy without autonomous and independent trade unions, as well as no economic democracy without political democracy and vice versa.'⁶ He drew attention to the difficult and dramatic times of change ahead and the need for response from the trade union. 'The worker is left for his/her own by everyone, the same people who yesterday put forth their claims in the name of the ruling working class although in reality the worker never ruled!' Ravnik also pointed out that the trade union should not believe that the worker is satisfied with the trade union, and that the trade union has to get rid of the responsibility for the present difficult situation⁷. The congress adopted a highly professional trade unionist program for activity ZSSS, where ZSSS was a supra-political organization, not competing directly in elections, but actively lobbying parties for goals in accordance with the programmatic statements.

The issue of renewal was shadowed by the "cadre policy" – the re-election of old cadres, widely criticized in the media⁸, and soon after also by territorial trade union organizations, anticipating further internal conflicts and splits, and legitimacy problems of the trade union.

In Poland, the trade unions, especially Solidarity, had to define their stance on issues of reform and democratization, what remained an undefined but increasingly seen as an important voice of social agreement concerning the viability of reforms. In 1989-1990, but especially from 1991, the identity and/or the very legitimacy of Solidarity became problematic for their own members too.

Without having the chance or capacity to influence (OPZZ), and/or intentionally unwilling to redefine themselves (Solidarity) as a trade union, these collective actors did not define or limit/condition their stance on the question of radical market reforms which was on the agenda by late 1989. Solidarity as a trade union on the other hand served as an important base for political maneuvering in the municipal and presidential elections by Walesa and Solidarity related parties.

The second Solidarity trade union congress was held on 19-24 April 1990, and was summoned to reestablish the trade union organization. The congress was a rather modest congress,

⁵ from Federation of Trade Unions of Slovenia to Federation of *Free* Trade Unions of Slovenia (emphasis added T.M.)

⁶ 1. kongres Zveze svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije, Ljubljana, 5. in 6. aprila 1990. Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije. Ljubljana : Enotnost, 1990: 2

⁷ Ibid. 1990: 3

⁸ 'Sindikat se je spet spotaknil', Jelena Gačič, Delo 11 April 1990.

with low public interest for the whole event by the media. The congress was to elect a new president, to accept a new statute and program. Basically, there was one demand – centralization, and organizational rather than programmatic issues were solved. Walesa's more numerous faction asked for adaptation of the program and statute of the trade union to new political circumstances, return to the natural duty of 'constructive trade unionism.' Constructive trade unionism was to be understood in the wider context. In his infamous speech, Walesa said 'We will never catch up with Europe if we build a strong trade union.' (cf. Ost, 2005)

With Walesa elected trade union president, the activity of Solidarity trade union on the national level was stifled. This was mostly due to the fact that Walesa was heavily involved in electoral competition, first in May 1990 for the municipal elections, and soon after also he ran for presidency, and became the first democratically elected president of Poland. Only from February 1991 there were the first important signs of efforts to redefine Solidarity as a trade union, as a leader in terms of potential 'neocorporatist' arrangement. Krzaklewski and majority of Solidarity's newly elected leadership opted for direct participation in the elections.

3. Labor protest, government and trade unions' responses: 1990/1-1992/3⁹

The Polish political party scene boomed in 1990. It started with the disintegration of the communist PUWP, and continued with the fragmentation of the Solidarity umbrella, especially when it became clear that presidential elections will take place¹⁰. The new leaders of Solidarity trade union decided that the trade union should seek direct places in the Sejm through elections, and influence decision-making directly. Maintaining close links with former allies, the OPZZ ran within the SLD coalition, in harmony with the earlier practice.

Both unions gained seats in the Sejm. Solidarity fared relatively poorly: it received somewhat more than 5,5% of casted votes, and 26 delegates. Altogether the Left in the parliament was small and fragmented especially on ideological lines, divided by former communist and former dissident-led parties. The Solidarity trade union felt more closer to other successor Solidarity parties. (Jackiewicz, 1994)

The strikes in the period from late 1991 up until spring 1993 had general characteristics as the strikes in the beginning of 1991, with branches of labor demanding protection of their earlier

⁹ I cover the periods between between the first and second free multi-party parliamentary elections in all three countries: in Poland from October 1991 until September 1993, in Serbia from December 1990 until October 1992, and Slovenia from April 1990 until December 1992.

¹⁰ The two greatest parties being the ROAD (Citizens' Committee for Democratic Action) and Walesa's supporters gathered in the Centrum Center Alliance (Centrum).

privileges. The major difference was in the meaning of these strikes in the changed political and social context. (Kloc, 1993; Hausner, 1994)

From July till December 1991 the main branches of protesting workers was the copper industry and miners, who were the actual basis for the main strikers from then on. The concessions in mining led soon to demands also from steel and auto industry, of Ursus tractor plant in Warsaw and aerospace industry plant in Mielec with several thousand protesters (Kloc 1994: 146; Ekiert&Kubik 1999: 141).

From July 1992, the government even launched a hostile propaganda against the strikers. The governmental confrontation however proved to be unproductive already in the medium run. In December 1992 there was an 18 day strike in the Silesian coal mines, which at peak was involving 300000 miners in 65 out of 70 coal mines, (Kramer 1995: 102) followed by a general strike of light industry In February 1993 organized by Solidarity in the Lodz region, and a general strike in May in Lower Silesia (Ekiert & Kubik 1999: 141-2). In April-May the public sector employees held a nationwide protest, coordinated by the National Strike Committee but working closely also with the National Commission of Solidarity (KK) (Ekiert & Kubik 1999: 142-3). The strikes culminated in May, when teachers and public sector employees joined in protesting. The final outburst of labor discontent happened during the general strike in the Mazowsze region, on 20 and 21 May, with most enterprises joining in (Ekiert & Kubik 146-7). The strike was suspended due to anticipating new rounds of negotiations, and the outcome of the no-confidence vote, initiated by Solidarity. On 28 May 1993, the Suchocka government fell, and Walesa soon thereafter called for new parliamentary elections.

During the protest campaign Krzaklewski met several times with Walesa, who supported the protesters rather symbolically, but also expressed his concern with its' implications concerning political stability (Ekiert&Kubik, 1999: 143-4)

The response of trade unions to strikes in the period of late 1991 until spring 1993 was mixed. Solidarity continued to play a buffer between the government and the workers, with changing, increasingly non transparent and non-coordinated strategy. Solidarity 80 and the Miners Union was closer to the workers and were the most militant unions. Finally, the OPZZ was less militant, but with links to decision makers. Solidarity's strategy changed however from 1992, when the grass root level gained significant autonomy over the national base, establishing a parallel structure, and could not be easily controlled.

The main challenge and problem for Solidarity but also the OPZZ was its membership base in state owned enterprises (SOE), and taking stances on restructuring. As the crisis intensified, the conflict between especially the Solidarity rank and file and the government sharpened, while

OPZZ regained some of its prestige. In the eyes of its rank and file, but even among its leadership, Solidarity had an unclear position vis-à-vis the government's policy and its consequences (Hausner 1994: 30) The discontent emerged on all plant level, branch based and regional lines, blurring the trade union divisions, and demanding trade union cooperation. The rivalry between the unions was generated increasingly from the higher levels, not from below, where there were many incentives for cooperation.

There were alternative attempts for channeling labor discontent by the Solidarity leadership. The National Committee intended to carry out a nation wide referendum on enfranchising the citizens – i.e. transferring the ownership of enterprises to citizens, with the aim to direct social discontent against the old nomenklatura – the communists and their allies. (Hausner 1994: 31) On the other hand, alternative channels for expressing workers' discontent emerged within Solidarity. Following the demands of their members to confront the pro-governmental position of Solidarity, while increasing their autonomy, power and legitimacy, some local Solidarity leaders tried to find alternative patrons, or resurrected an already existing one. The leadership of the 'Siec' – "Network", especially among the largest SOEs defied on several occasions the National Committee's instructions when declaring strikes. The Siec leaders declared unconditional support for Walesa – the Polish president¹¹. Their demands¹² and the very wording suggested strong links with the presidential office - the Belweder (Hausner 1994: 31). There seemed to be a clientelistic trade off: the president's intervention for the sake of individual enterprises, increasing strength of local leaders, short term benefit for workers of individual enterprises.¹³

The trade unions grievance or resentment based strategy of bringing out workers was costly in two different ways. First it was a costly strategy vis-à-vis its rank and file who considered the protest action to be costly and not especially effective; second it has sent a grievance based signal to the government – a signal of an unconstructive threat. The fall of the Suchocka government may be seen as the fulfillment of the negative, threat-based strategy; however there was no alternative prepared¹⁴.

The trade unions were furthermore confronted by the government. The main response of governmental officials in 1991-1992 was not to try to incorporate labor, but rather to try to limit

¹¹ Borowczak J. (1993) 'Cała władza w ręce prezydenta' interview, *Gazeta Wyborcza* no. 67A, 20-21 March cf. Hausner 1994: 31

¹² e.g. the nation wide privatization recommendation according to which all citizens would receive a 300 million zloty investment voucher

¹³ Rulewski, Ian 1993 W polprzysiadzie, interview, *Gazeta Wyborcza* no. 118A, 22-23 May cf. Hausner 1994: 32

¹⁴ compare to Marciniak's description of the 'last-ditch defense trap' of union activity (Marciniak, 1993: 153-154)

its' influence as they tried 'to persuade the public that the only alternative to their program is a state run by trade unions' (Hausner, 1994; Marciniak, 1994).

The government realized quite late, in late 1992, that such a 'mess' in labor relations is more harmful than some concessions and incorporation. Therefore a corporatist 'pact on state enterprises in the process of transformation' was initiated in order to prevent the confrontation between the three (two) parties, and in order to guarantee a labor voice in restructuring and privatization (Pakt 1992 cf. Kramer 1995: 100). A tripartite commission was envisioned for wage settlements, conditional debt relief. An inducement for privatization was drafted for workers, with the clause that if workers participate in the preparation a scheme of privatization, workers will have large ownership stake and greater say in post privatization restructuring. (Kramer 1995: 100)

This draft was based on the fact that industrial conflicts were mostly about wages in 1992-3. Even an alliance of 16 national and enterprise-level joint committee was formed, concerned with the wage issue, under the common leadership of Solidarity and OPZZ. There was an increasing pressure for signing social pacts, and it seemed that the government was willing to do this too. The first pact was signed in 1993, but not passed by the parliament – creating the prerequisites for tripartism. (Pedersen et al. 1995: 745) The acts were, quite paradoxically, adopted only under the next, 'post-socialist' government.

Trade unions, fragmentation and relationship

The organized labor scene in Poland became even more fragmented in the early 1990s. The law on trade unions adopted in June 1991 not only preserved the fragmentation of trade unions, but contributed to their further increase¹⁵.

By mid 1992 there were more than 200 nationwide federations, of which 15 were officially recognized as nationwide federations (Kramer 1995: 93). Altogether by 1993 there were around 1500 trade unions. Within one factory it often happened that its' employees were often organized in more than 10 conflicting union organizations. (Ekiert & Kubik, 1999: 105)

The trade union membership of both OPZZ and Solidarity¹⁶ was constantly falling from 1991. State sector employees, the membership base of Solidarity, from 1991 increasingly started to see Solidarity too close to government and not to themselves. Opinion polls showed a consistent decline among this group (CBOS, 1992e cf. Kramer 1995). The month – long negotiations with the government were not well received by the workers. Although many employees were

¹⁵ The law stipulated that already 10 employees may found a union and apply for registration. In an enterprise with 150 or more union members, enterprise was to finance 1 full time union position (Ekiert, Kubik, 1999: 241)

¹⁶ By 1993 Solidarity's membership was only about 1.6 million (Kramer 1995: 95)

disillusioned by trade unions, they still had high expectations as late as in 1992. (Kloc 1994: 148) In terms of membership, OPZZ started to recover from 1991, not losing many members as it was the case in earlier two years, continuing to attract manual workers. (Pankow 1994: 4)

The smaller splinter unions, most notably Solidarity 80, and the Coal Miners Union federation were far more militant in the early 1990s, especially on the local level. Experiencing increasing pressure from both its' rank and file and the competitors, Solidarity and OPZZ became more militant in 1991-92, in order to 'catch up' with militant contesters. (Kramer 1995: 96)

An emerging rivalry among competing unions was most visible during the mining strikes and light industry in the summer strikes of 1992. These strikes were however widely seen as a defeat of Solidarity: 'Solidarity cells and organs were either eliminated from the strike leadership, or, against the will of the superior organs, took part in strikes organized by others' (Hausner 1994: 24)

The strike in mining industry in winter 1992-3 was however carefully planned and organized by the Solidarity branch commission for mining. It also aimed to regain prestige among workers and take over protest initiative. Other unions which had a foot in mining, including Polish Miners Union, Solidarity 80, the Alliance of Mining Managers "Kadra" and Kontra heavily criticized this orchestrated attempt, especially claiming why government is negotiating only with Solidarity –questioning both the fairness and the legitimacy of such process (Hausner 1994: 24).

Cooperation remained on the local levels, through pressures of rank and file among unions, but cooperation could not break conflict on any higher level than that. (Hausner, 1994: 24-25) On national level OPZZ sought first to establish informal ties with Solidarity, but the 'governing' trade union was hostile to any common initiative even in the cases of emerging common interests.¹⁷

Solidarity's self-positioning and strategic choices

The identity problems of Solidarity did not end in 1991. Solidarity was still characterized by organizational crisis, fragmentation through different visions and personal ambitions. This identity crisis was not resolved even over the first half of 1993.

Organizationally, there were increasingly present centrifugal tendencies. First, apart of the national structure, there was also an entity or structure present at the highest decision making fora (in the parliament). Second, through pressures from the rank-and file to which local leaders had to adapt, local leaders increased their autonomy from the center, conducting actions independently. The attempts of the top to moderate these fragmenting 'anarchic' tendencies were only partly

¹⁷ 'Straszna proba przyjazsny' 1992 cf. Kramer 1995: 94

successful (Hausner 1994: 29; Jackiewicz, 1994) Solidarity was therefore characterized as ‘becoming a fairly explosive mixture of all kinds of interests and ambitions, which no-one is capable of controlling today’.¹⁸

Originally, the role of Solidarity in the *Sejm* was conceptualized as supervising the authorities and influencing the decision making without taking part in the government. (Jackiewicz, 1994: 6)

Even so, Solidarity deputies had two roles to play, that of trade unionist and that of politician, a delegate and representative (Jackiewicz, 1994: 5), between which one had to dominate over the other. In reality, these roles were extremely energy consuming, since, apart of the work in the legislature, it opened way to participation in different parliamentary bodies¹⁹. Moreover, the Solidarity parliamentary group in the *Sejm* was exposed to much wider conflicts, where more experienced political parties could easily penetrate the union! (Hausner 1994: 29) Politically it was impossible to be neutral, since Solidarity usually associated itself with Solidarity related parties – on different, non-trade unionist matters.

In the end relations between Solidarity and the government did not resemble a relationship between executive power and a trade union – the cabinet avoided direct negotiations, while MPs on their part could not act consistently, but were more autonomous. (Jackiewicz, 1994: 8-9) The headquarter tried unsuccessfully to discipline and control its’ members and representatives in the *Sejm*. (Jackiewicz, 1994: 10)

The strategy of Solidarity was based on a false belief that the union is capable of influencing all governmental policies and programs with unionist own expertise, while it is also capable of renegotiating solutions to specific and particular problems. (Marciniak, 1993: 152-3) The Solidarity did not have the expertise, and even more the energy and resources to act in this way – it was a false and very costly illusion. At the same time Solidarity as well as OPZZ, not to mention the smaller militant trade unions were not capable of developing their programmatic documents to which they would stick when taking any sort of action. Instead of focusing the really important wars, Solidarity, as the leader of the unionist movement, got overburdened and lost in

¹⁸ Rulewski, Ian 1993 W polprzysiadzie, interview, *Gazeta Wyborcza* no. 118A, 22-23 May cf. Hausner 1994: 32

¹⁹ Solidarity MPs had access to all permanent committees of the *Sejm*; each member of Solidarity participated at least in two (!), sometimes taking functions – as committee chairman/deputy chairman/ in ad hoc commissions, and having important positions. Solidarity MPs were also submitting large number of interpellations, queries concerned with social problems of electoral districts, related to SOE restructuring, social protection of employees. They participated also in ad hoc parliamentary committee to examine the consequences of martial law; issues of regaining the property, bill on lustration. The draft of the system of health insurance was submitted by mixed body of trade unionists and parliamentarians. They were also formulating other legislative proposals on issues of interest along with resolutions and queries. (Jackiewicz, 1994: 6-7)

the uncountable battles in different spheres- from the parliament to the specific problems of enterprises, sectors and regions. (see also Marciniak 1993: 153)

In 1993, after the fall of Suchocka government the dilemma on the future role reemerged, whether to continue with direct trade union representation in the Sejm; form a separate political party; or support parties which declare their support for their program. Finally the decision was to continue the old policy – with Solidarity taking part again in the parliamentary elections. As formulated by its' leader Krzaklewski: 'Supporting a political party would result in a limitation of trade unionists rights or even the elimination of the union'.²⁰

By mid 1993, Solidarity seemed to reestablish itself ideologically within the state-corporatist arrangement, with strong links with the Catholic Church, both ideologically, programmatically and institutionally²¹ (Krzaklewski 1993 cf. Hausner 1994: 33) However, the trade union failed to develop a comprehensive program on the most important issues: the future of a corporatist, social-democratic order, privatization and division of national property (Marciniak, 1993: 155-6). After defeat the 1993 defeat at the elections, it decided to be a lobby for workers outside the parliament.

OPZZ, on its' part, became the junior partner of the new government, having relatively low programmatic and active independence. In sum, both the OPZZ, as well as Solidarity, were incorporated at best as weak partners to the main actors governmental or official actors, without own autonomous and influential programs.

Yugoslavia

Starting from 1989, but especially from 1990, the republican trade unions were openly supporting their respective republican governments. This manifested itself in official claims which by and large, if not completely followed the policy of republican executive. The Yugoslav structure, along with the federal trade union was fading away.

Slovenia

The first free multiparty elections in Slovenia took place in April 1990. Interestingly, many political parties that successfully ran for the parliament had important statements on trade unionism, on both newly positional and oppositional sides.

The first elections were won by DEMOS, a coalition of opposition parties. Among these, two quite influential coalition members, the Slovene Christian-Democrats and the

²⁰ Krzaklewski, M. 'We will not be fooled', Tygodnik Solidarnosc, 11.06.1993 cf. Jackiewicz, 1994: 10

²¹ Krzaklewski (1993) 'Nie mam kompleksu Walesy', interview *Gazeta Wyborcza no. 146A (25 June)* cf. Hausner 1994: 33

Socialdemocratic Alliance of Slovenia had programmatic statements on future free trade unionism²². On the other hand, among the reformed communist and communist related parties the Alliance of Communists of Slovenia – the Party of Democratic Renewal (ACS) and the Socialist Youth Alliance – Liberal Party (LP) also included important section of their program on trade unions²³.

The pluralist trade union scene and self-positioning in the new arena

KNSS Neodvisnost (KNSS) was registered on 30 March 1990²⁴, using partly also the social capital of the first alternative trade union – Rastko Plohl's 'Neodvisnost', with which it soon was forced to depart and modify its' name. KNSS gathered 10 trade union branches, a part from the metal industry²⁵, along with smaller branches.

Konfederacija 90 and Pergam – the trade union federation of workers in paper industry²⁶ were splinter trade unions of ZSSS, which came to being after the ZSSS congress in April 1990. Konfederacija 90 was established on 8 February 1991, gathering trade union federations from the territories of Kranj, Koper and Ptuj, along with trade unions of smaller branches. Although the trade union's own resources were probably the most modest among the four trade unions on the national level, Konfederacija 90²⁷ enjoyed the support of few intellectuals, university professors and social activists who helped its' work especially with advice.

Finally, within internal reforms ZSSS members had to re-register, after which the trade union claimed to be completely reformed, democratic organization, with approximately 400.000 members²⁸ in 1991. The reforms moreover went with organizational restructuring, when large number of trade union employees lost their jobs – giving ground to criticism from other trade

²² Among the DEMOS coalition, it was only in the program of the Slovene Democratic Alliance that trade unions appeared in a negative connotation – as organizations of the past. While the Slovene Christian-Democrats program only declares support for free trade unions, the Socialdemocratic Alliance of Slovenia (SAS) had a separate section on independent trade unions. SAS proclaimed that the old ZSS should be abandoned, and new, independent trade unions should be formed, representing the authentic interests of workers. SAS was also for introduction of branch based and professional trade unions, de-politicization of all institutions, and introduction of German co-determination system with employee participation. (Koga voliti? 1990: 22;43;53)

²³ The ACS had only a general statement on free trade unions and participation of workers in decision making within self-management and co-determination. (Koga voliti? 1990: 108) SYA LP on the other hand criticized ZSS as a hierarchical centralized institution and is not an authentic worker-representing body. Most importantly the SYA LP program states the need for trade union pluralism, the autonomous institutionalization of workers' interests, and the dominance of economy over politics. Finally, 'The SYA will support such state, where the trade unions will have all encompassing supra-political activity.' (Koga voliti? 1990: 177-8)

²⁴ With proclaimed membership of 120.000 in June 1991 (Neodvisnost no. 1: 4)

²⁵ Where it had conflicts with ZSSS: both had, and wanted to increase/maximize membership in the metal industry branch. Therefore it often happened that in the plants of metal industry there were at least two trade unions present.

²⁶ Especially the latter

²⁷ with self-estimated membership in 1991 of 30-40.000

²⁸ Or about 60% of all employees.

unions. The period was described by the most difficult for the trade union by both ZSSS present and former president.²⁹

The difficulties for the trade unions, was first in the self-positioning concerning plant-level restructuring, and the defense of their members. Their role was that of ‘fire brigades’, of providing some help and support for redundant and threatened labor. The crisis of legitimacy in the early years of post-socialism was the second problem. Initially most trade unions could not engage in any form of constructive dialogue with the government. Finally, there were the significant tensions among different, competing trade unions.

We suddenly started to lose our basis in the society. [This was dramatic] because [the trade unions] earlier position was practically guaranteed with the constitution and with laws on self-management. And when that ceased to exist, the trade union could exist only as a part of a political option. Those refused that, they found themselves on an empty ground [cistina]. Even workers did not understand that new situation, since the trade union was viewed as a remnant of the old system. And those changes which happened within the trade unions, for trade unions were self-evident, but were not evident to ordinary workers,³⁰

Two trade unions however seemed to have found their place very soon in the new arena – ZSSS and KNSS, especially due to their links to political parties and/or governmental actors. Both trade unions, especially ZSSS was prepared for internal changes. The development of their specific identities happened also through increased interaction, and as their answers to new challenges.

After completing an internal reform by mid 1991, and refreshed by a new leader, the ZSSS continued, probably more successfully with its’ strategy of creating a new trade union image. Demonstration, petitions, manifestations were all designed in order to increase the trade unions visibility and improve its’ image³¹. This was especially important since the economic situation was bleak, and workers – member becoming more and more critical.

The other trade union organization KNSS was present on the official level – its’ president was a MP in the Slovene parliament, being very active in convincing and arguing for different solutions.

Relationship among trade unions: developing a Trade unionist identity

²⁹ Authors interview with Miha Ravnik, former president of ZSSS, 25 January 2007; authors interview with Dušan Semolič, president of ZSSS, 25 January 2007

³⁰ Authors’ interview with Boris Mazalin, president of Konfederacija 90, 26 January 2007

³¹ Authors’ interview with Dušan Semolič ibid.

In 1991, but especially in the first half of 1992 the protests of workers boomed (Stanojevic & Vrhovec, 2001). On 21 March 1991 the regional branch of metal workers organized their first big strike. The strike was characterized as ‘anti-systemic’ and destructive by the new trade union federation – the KNSS Neodvisnost (KNSS).

Trade union pluralism versus unitarism was soon an accepted fact among all national trade unions, listed in their statutes, as an important element of democratization of Slovenia. All four trade unions moreover organized differently their unity of differences, where ZSSS was initially the most centralized, hierarchical federation, with a compromised structure which was more branch-based³² while KNSS was similarly more branch based but more confederative and initially less centralized structure. Konfederacija 90 was more territorial based, organized in a loose structure, while Pergam was a clear branch based, centralized trade union federation.

The relationship between ‘red’, ‘communist’ ZSSS and ‘black,’ ‘orthodox right-wing’ KNSS was very tense, if not conflictual between 1990 and 1992. The relationship was defined retrospectively as rather ‘competitive’³³ than conflictual, since the parties recognized each other. Although both ZSSS and KNSS were engaged periodically in mutual harsh criticism, even this form of communication gradually took a shape of a dialogue.

The conflict had an ideological element on the surface, yet it was mostly due to links to different political parties and options: KNSS was linked to the centre-right wing coalition DEMOS, while ZSSS had good relationship with the main inheritors of the communist party. The collision manifested itself also in main points concerning the way and pace of privatization and ownership – also in line with the political party programs. The other two confederations, much weaker and less influential – Pergam and Konfederacija 90, judging the two main trade unions as ‘politicized’ had an important role in mediating and coordinating between the conflicting parties³⁴. Additionally, the mediation of ETUC representatives proved to be also very useful in bringing closer the two main trade unions, starting with the tricky issue of division of trade union property³⁵.

In terms of programs the common denominator of all four trade unions was that they were concerned with the same big questions, and developed their distinct answers on it in their programs, mostly according to the interests of its’ members or branches.

³² the stress was on the latter

³³ Authors’ interview with Semolič *ibid.*; Štefan Skledar former deputy president of KNSS, 23 January 2007

³⁴ Authors interview with Boris Mazalin *ibid.*. See also Rebolj in ‘Pergamov Gremo’ *časopis konfederacije sindikatov Pergam*, 1992-1993. Ljubljana : Konfederacija sindikatov Pergam.

³⁵ Authors interview with Štefan Skledar *ibid.*

The programs and big debates among trade unions were based on three main points: stances on privatization/ownership/denationalization; protection of the legal and social rights of employees, especially through implementation of collective agreements; and achieving economic restructuring through agreed social pacts and ways of protection of the most vulnerable groups. Instead of focusing on the national level and confronting the government, the KNSS based one of its main claims on democratization of workplace, and weakening the power of ‘communist’ managers.

Relationship with political parties and governmental actors

All trade unions declared to be political, collective interest organizations and declared independence from political parties. The latter part of independence was probably more difficult to fulfill, due to the threats of either isolation from political life (without significant influence) or developing stronger ties but being endangered in infiltration by political parties.

Yet the guarantee of independence among all political parties was based on programmatic statements to be cemented by trade union activity. All trade unions seem to have used the methods of influencing all political parties by establishing communication channels and informing them about the trade union stances on especially important issues for trade unions. The other strategy was lobbying. This would consist of meetings with selected (‘socially sensitive’) members of political parties and engagement in closed, half-secret negotiations³⁶.

During the 1990-92 period KNSS and ZSSS added separately to this repertoire. KNSS was strongly embedded in the governing coalition, and did have significant autonomy within it. The president of KNSS, France Tomšič was moreover MP and thus directly participated in decision-making. ZSSS on the other and, fearing general isolation, established its’ own political party – the Workers’ Party in February 1991. Overcoming isolation, it had openly good relations with the Democratic Party of Pensioners, the Socialist party of Slovenia and Socialdemocratic Union of Slovenia with which it had lobbying meetings³⁷. Both KNSS and ZSSS probably had people within the leadership who were strongly to develop stronger ties with political parties, where the political party’s interests would dominate³⁸. The threat of infiltration of political party personnel and influence was another issue, which came to the fore especially before elections, posing a constant threat to trade union autonomy. Yet, the autonomy of trade unions was secured, at least on the appearance level, through independent action, following the strict programmatic goals, in self-positioning vis-à-vis governmental actors, irrelevant from the ruling parties.

³⁶ Authors’ interviews with Boris Mazalin, Dušan Semolič *ibid*

³⁷ Spomin in opomin, 2002: 14-5

³⁸ Authors’ interview with Štefan Skledar *ibid*.

Trade unions used similar methods in influencing governmental actors, especially MPs or the government. Additionally, they would attend sessions of parliamentary working groups; forward various materials to MPs and working groups; publicly presented their opinions and statements; use personal contacts; send letters to all MPs; invite MPs to sessions where they can explain their stance; establishing contacts with administrative staff etc. (Fink-Hafner, 1994: 11)

The interaction between the potential social partners started by and large in a confrontative, unilateral manner, since during 1990 and the first half of 1991 the government usually did not take into consideration any opinion by the trade unions – especially not the ZSSS³⁹. The cooperation and generally, the interaction with the government and the parliament was judged unsatisfactory⁴⁰. This was so even though ZSSS froze its' membership in the Yugoslav Federal trade union, in order to protest against the Serbian official trade union federation SSS activity in Croatia and Kosovo, but also in order to concentrate the workload on Slovenia⁴¹.

In February 1991 the government prepared a draft of social program which was judged as unsatisfactory by ZSSS. ZSSS replied with strikes in March 1991 – especially in the Maribor, the most industrialized region, only to be labeled anti-systemic by KNSS.

The second stage however started in the summer 1991 when trade unions were asked by the Slovene Prime Minister for cooperation during the struggle for independence. Soon after, the president of the Slovene parliament invited all trade union representatives to a consultation, in the context of preparation for secession from Yugoslavia, or gaining independence and international recognition. In the context of dramatically deteriorating economy increasing unemployment, for the first time the issue of a potential social pact emerged, initiated by the government.

Originally the attitude of trade unions was uncoordinated and conflictual. The stance of trade unions however increasingly came closer, with the first meeting taking place already in August 1991. After the government unilaterally announced freezing of wages in November 1991, the trade unions all condemned the action. By that time, the common identity, and a new meaning of trade unionism became to crystallize. During late 1991, the period of defense from the Yugoslav army up until the creation of the Slovene independence in October 1991, trade unions were more silent, and raised their voice only constructively, during the formation of the Slovene constitution.

Yet from autumn the issue of legal regulations of ownership, including the ownership transformation of enterprises, denationalization and agricultural collectives emerged. The

³⁹ Miha Ravnik, the former ZSSS president explained that many governmental bodies did not even want to talk to him labeling him as 'red', thus intentionally pointing out his earlier Communist Party membership and positions. With his resignation Ravnik wanted to draw out his personal burden [razbremeniti] from the trade union. Authors interview with Miha Ravnik *ibid*.

⁴⁰ 'Uvodni govor predsednika ZSSS Mihe Ravnika' str 7. Konferencija ZSSS, Velenje, 1991

⁴¹ Authors interview with Miha Ravnik, former ZSSS president *ibid*.

standpoints between the government on one side and KNSS, versus ZSSS and other trade unions were however diametrically opposite. ZSSS argued for an evolutionary type of transition of market economy, favoring internal buyouts and large share for employees as a result of privatization. KNSS on the other hand argued for a swift restructuring, 'real owners' versus the power of 'old' directors, inflow of FDI, and greater say of management in privatized co-managed enterprises, as in Germany⁴².

At the end of 1991, the government intervened unilaterally in setting the incomes; it froze wages –thus suspended collective agreements. All trade unions were not willing to give any concessions to the government, and move further in negotiations. Although KNSS and ZSSS had positions near to different political options, the formation of a trade unionist lobby in late 1991 and early 1992 started. The trade unions strictly formulated their stance that they will not negotiate about social pact until the government does not abandon its law on wages, implement collective agreements and does not form a tripartite body.

The government also prepared in January 1992 a draft agreement for social stability, which made most trade unions furious. The unilateral and unconditional demand was to abandon wage freeze and return to collective agreements.

In terms of action, there was rather competition than coordinated cooperation. ZSSS acted first in calling for a strike, and did not invite other trade unions to co-organize the protest. Additionally the protest had a political dimension, since one oppositional party, closest to ZSSS also called workers for participation. The competitive element forced other trade unions to take different stances concerning the strike itself. Konfederacija 90 called its' members to participate although it did not take part in the organization of the strike. Pergam supported the claims but decided not to join the strike, and to act separately though lobbying in the parliament. KNSS did not support the strike action, considering it inappropriate.

The warning general strike and the strike of workers in electro-distribution was carefully prepared, and coordinated, with minimal social costs for the strikers. It included announced blockades of railroads, protest marches, work stoppages. The workers in electric industry made a 2 hour power cut thus increasing the dramatic impact. Altogether 400.000 workers participated in it⁴³.

The most important outcome of the strike was that it caused disagreement within the governing coalition, which soon thereafter, in April 1992 fell apart. An interim government until

⁴² see ZSSS 'Nas odnos do lastinjenja' in 1. Konferenca SSS, 1991: 37-39; Neodvisnost no.2 21 October 1991: 2

⁴³ ZSSS estimation: Spomin in opomin, 2002: 36

the next elections was agreed⁴⁴ which was headed by Janez Drnovsek from LDP. The conflicts over economic policy, especially concerning the wages continued with the new government also in 1993. There was a few months stalemate without real breakthrough in trade union's demands. The tripartite council was also on the agenda, and was finally formed in 1994, with the participation of all four main trade unions.

The later developments did not go without conflicts with the government, especially when it came to collective agreements and wages, but the labor voice was institutionalized. Trade unions could exert significant influence on legal acts especially concerning denationalization, ownership and privatization in late 1992, while they also took part in the definition of law on co-determination, health and retirement insurance etc.

Serbia

In 1990 trade unionism in Serbia had its modest renaissance, since there was a significant need for social activism concerning the protection and empowerment of employees through the means of education on their social rights⁴⁵.

The ruling, reformed communist party demanded a support from the trade union, which was, after severe internal debates, secured, with a majority voting in favor. This caused a deep confrontation within the leadership, and was decisive for the ousting of the part of leadership within SSS⁴⁶.

Apart the Milošević led SPS⁴⁷, the more significant political parties in Serbia in their programs did not engage into detailing their relationship with trade unions, not mentioning even the issues of trade union pluralism but maybe only the social-economic rights of workers. (Marinković 1993: 143) The only exception which mentioned trade union orientation was the Democratic Party which set a rather vague description on its' intention to fight for a new constitution and laws which would guarantee the free work of trade unions. (Program of Democratic Party, 1990 cf. Marinković 1993: 143) The emerging parties thus did not concentrate on trade unions and social rights. Altogether, the Serbian political party scene was on the right, where the Serbian 'national question' was among the top issues to be solved.

On the December 1990 elections with the 45.8% of votes, the Socialist Party of Serbia gained 77.6% of seats in the Serbian parliament. A relative majority of workers voted for SPS (Arandarenko 1997: 84). SPS was originally promising gradual transition, stability of workplaces,

⁴⁴ to take place in the autumn – as it turned out in October 1992

⁴⁵ Authors interview with Nebojsa Savić, deputz president of *Nezavisnost*, 26 October 2006; authors interview with Dušan Mitrović former secretary of SSS, 27 November 2006

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Dušan Mitrović, former secretary of SSS *ibid*.

⁴⁷ which set its' goal of activity in harmony of the activity of 'the Trade Union' for protecting social rights of workers

no war according to the interests of workers, who actually felt threatened by restructuring, but were against the war and were the least risk-prone social group. (Mihajlović 1991)⁴⁸

In Serbia, after the general elections in December 1990, new trends in organized labor emerged, targeting the Serbian government. The strikes occurred in waves, with silence and sudden turmoil.

The general strike of metal, textile and leather workers of Serbia was postponed few times, probably obstructed internally by the official trade union. Due to 'higher reasons' of elections in December, problems of Serbs in Croatia and later on, the March demonstrations of the opposition, the strike was postponed a few times. Finally on 16-17 April 700.000 workers conducted a coordinated work stoppage.

Even without causing a significant social turmoil, the strikers' demands were accepted, almost equivocally in the parliament. The SSS trade union leader, Milenković was obstructing the strike up until the last moment of its emergence. The action was very soon labeled as orchestrated, and as it turned out, the gains workers won did not solve anything⁴⁹.

Simultaneously, the government's position changed considerably and became more and more confrontational against self-organized labor, especially towards some professional unions of highly skilled workers. In the cases of journalists from the Belgrade TV and pilots of the JAT plain company who posed strikes or strike threats the new regime started to use methods of threats and increasing pressure.⁵⁰

The conflict within the SSS

Tensions within two concepts of reorganization of the Serbian official trade union, the SSS intensified during 1990 and culminated in the first half of 1991, with the ousting of the members of the 'reformist' faction.

There was an increasingly observable difference among trade union leaders in their public claims and conceptual visions concerning the task of SSS. Over 1990, the more conservative faction supported the Serbian government and criticized the federal, used the old language of self-management and social ownership, expressed negative judgments against oppositional, 'nationalist' political parties, and 'extremists' in other Yugoslav republics populated also by Serbs. From the second half of 1990 they were increasingly against strikes in Serbia. The other faction,

⁴⁸ The next elections in 1992 saw a larger fragmentation, especially among blue collar workers, where approximately 1/3 was voting for SPS, 1/3 divided into radical nationalist (Šešelj's SRS) and traditionalist nationalist (SPO) factions, and a minority for the civic/urban; 1/3 abstained.

⁴⁹ Veselin Simonović 'Drama kao farsa' Borba 20-21 April 1991

⁵⁰ In the case of the Belgrade TV, the police was involved in 'interviewing' journalists after staging protests already in mid January. Gradimir Ivanić *Uzaludni zapisi*. Unpublished diary

usually labeled ‘reformist’ (Marinković, 1993; Arandarenko, 1997) was generally more silent in public, but more critical of Serbian leadership, it was more active in organizing labor, and it was decisively for modernization of the trade union. (Arandarenko, 1997: 137)

The general strike in April 1991 was supported by the ‘reformists’, during which organization an open fight within the organization began⁵¹. The reformist initiated a media campaign against the president of SSS, who was publicly perceived as an agent of the Serbian executive. The leaders of the two factions also confronted each other on the issue of strikes and especially, in the case of the striking workers of RTV Belgrade.

The settling off the score between the competing factions happened at the 11th meeting of the Council of SSS, on 29 May 1991. The result was unexpected to all: the initiative to dismiss the president of SSS proved to be successful; at the same time however no-one from the old Council was reelected – i.e. the reformists were ousted too. After a temporal stalemate, on 11 June 1991 the new president became Miodrag Vujasinović, while the new secretary became Tomislav Banović. The power of SSS was furthermore curtailed with very limited financial resources available, which further contributed to its instrumentalization. The branch based trade unions and the republican SSS finances were very poor due to structural/organizational internal conflict and skyrocketing inflation after the imposition of international sanctions to FR Yugoslavia⁵².

The SSS from the second half of 1991 became even more silent and rigid in terms of organizing workers and strike actions, while at the same time it became similarly, but probably more active in nationalist rhetoric, calling attention more on interests of Serbs than workers.

The reformist faction, first of all with journalists from RTV Belgrade, established the first alternative confederation “Nezavisnost”, with a founding meeting on 23 November 1991. In the first period it tried to gain membership, to increase its footing in as many as possible enterprises. It gathered trade unions of media, metal workers, and other, mostly white collar trade unions. However it remained a limited initiative, with moral symbolic value.⁵³

“Nezavisnost” based its’ activity on developing an alternative program of social, political and economic development of the society, supported with anti-war, pacifist campaign, development of a general rule of law, democracy, autonomy of trade unions vis-à-vis the state etc.. Organizationally it was conceptualized as a loose confederation, with branch based structure, and

⁵¹ This was reflected also in the trade union bulletin ‘Rad’, which supported the ‘reformist’ faction. (Arandarenko, 1997)

⁵² The solution to the branches and the territorially organized trade unions, the SSS leadership introduced a mechanism according to which plant level trade unions should have send a proportion of the fees to both structures. In practice however the plant level trade unions were resisting more and more to send any fees, with the resources remaining on the plant level. Compare: Arandarenko, 1997

⁵³ Authors interview with Dušan Mitrović *ibid*.

large autonomy of the branches. Without its' own assets and financed by European trade union organizations and foundations, on the national level it functioned more as a non-governmental organization, while on the local it could engage in sporadic actions.

“Nezavisnost” was not recognized by the officials as a legitimate representative organization of workers, but it was also put under pressure and surrounded by hostile propaganda, often labeled as the ‘traitors of national interests.’ Therefore it could have only a relatively modest impact when it came to defending workers rights, not to mention representing their interests on higher levels.⁵⁴

Apart of a short episode when it entered the oppositional party coalition ‘DEPOS’ before the elections in 1992, Nezavisnost did not establish formal ties with any political parties. Informal ties were however formed with smaller parties, the Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS) and later, with the minor Socialdemocratic Union (SD). (Arandarenko, 1997: 145)

The relationship between Nezavisnost and the SSS was hostile, and common initiatives even on the local level had to wait until the second half of 1990s. The SSS did not recognize Nezavisnost even as a trade union, labeling it instead as a ‘quasi’ trade union with ‘phantom’ membership. Representatives of Nezavisnost on the other hand ridiculed the role of SSS in its’ negotiations with the government and the general way how it represented the workers (Arandarenko 1997: 149). The nationalist pro-governmental, and pacifist-libertarian trade union ideology represented the main line, and irreconcilable division up until 1996.

The trade union scene in early 1990s became fragmented. There were few thousand of new trade unions registered in the period 1990-94. (Arandarenko 1997: 146) Among these, the most important is probably the trade union of employees of Electric Industry of Serbia, with more than 60000 members, maintaining a semi-autonomous status. According to most plausible explanation, it was established based on an insider-coalition with the management (Arandarenko, 1997: 148) The imposition of international sanctions against the third Yugoslavia in June 1992 curtailed further the position of trade unions. With the introduction of the Serbian Law on wages, the main parts of the collective agreements were annihilated. The trade union abandoned its’ rights of setting tariffs’ while a concession was made that no employee will lose his or her job during the sanctions. With sky-rocketing inflation the living standards however soon plummeted. The SSS announced a few times general strikes during 1993 – only to call them off very soon after. (Arandarenko 138-9)

⁵⁴ The trade union actually could hardly protect its own leadership from harassment, while having a much more modest influence when protecting its members. Author’s interview with Dušan Mitrovic *ibid.*; Milan Nikolic, 26 October 2006; *Tek smo poceli*, 2006

Serbia became a reconfigured (semi)-authoritarian state where the respect of human and social rights and the rule of law were taken very flexibly. Starting from late 1991, worker activists and trade union leaders were illegally fired, or later, during the sanctions sent to 'prinudni odmor' never to return to their workplaces. Less surprisingly, in state administration everyone was fired who did not belong to the ruling party⁵⁵. The firing of journalist at RTV Belgrade started with public calls against their 'unpatriotic' work by radical party leader Vojislav Šešelj, forbidding the work of their independently organized trade union, and finally with a creation of lists of employees to be fired. The actual firing (čistka) took place in January 1993.

Trade unionism in Serbia was both marginalized and instrumentalized. Trade unions were institutionally co-opted and instrumentalized by a 'strong' semi-authoritarian state. The transition of trade unionism was half-way, characterized by labor voice directed to external 'patriotic' issues, while not resolving its' institutional position and organizational autonomy in the polity. Second, alternative attempts for reform were crushed by both state actors, and further hampered by harsh economic conditions, making it highly dependent from political, and to lesser extent, managerial bodies.⁵⁶

4. Conclusion

Trade unions in all Poland, Serbia and Slovenia fared qualitatively differently in the three transforming polities in the years of systemic turmoil. I showed in this chapter/paper that initial choices, capacities for reform of trade unions mattered for different outcomes. I also showed that trade unions are rather weak actors, dependent from 'stronger' political actors and their programmatic choices of the new polity. The only cure for this weakness seemed to be larger room for maneuvering, and taking the right decisions in right times.

The Polish main trade unions, OPZZ and Solidarity, failed to develop a stronger organization with larger autonomy from other state actors. Trade unions either accepted or were incapable to redefine themselves of being at best a 'junior partner' of the government, bearing the constant costs of social trust resulting in declining popularity and legitimacy.

In Yugoslavia trade unions in the late 1980s refused to take up the role of bearers of the social costs of transformation. This caused a stalemate and created incentives for the reformulation of the role of the trade union vis-à-vis the state, especially on the level of constituent republics.

⁵⁵ Interview with Dušan Mitrović, *Vecernje novosti*, X January 1991

⁵⁶ 'The fact that the trade unions in contemporary conditions in Serbia do not have practically any influence on the strategy of socio-economic development is just another proof [...] about the small social power of trade unions and their marginalization in actual social developments' (Marinković 1993: 141)

This was due to large and changing pressure from both new labor unions and strikes, but on the other hand, alternative ways of channeling the workers discontent by key political actors.

In Serbia, after crushing the attempts for internal reform, especially in 1990, and securing a higher organizational autonomy, the official, main trade union, SSS remained largely an unreformed organization, a semi-official junior partner of the government, co-opted by a semi-authoritarian regime. Simultaneously, autonomously emerging labor movements and trade unions were crushed. The later emerging new trade union federation was both weak and marginalized in politically and economically extremely unfavorable circumstances.

In the cross-fire of criticism from both the federal and other Yugoslav trade unions and alternative Slovene labor movements, the Slovene 'old' trade union, ZSSS started a comprehensive internal reform in 1988/89, which culminated in the 1990 reform congress. In Slovenia, conflictual trade union pluralism emerged in 1990, which gradually and rather swiftly evolved into competitive trade unionism. Slovene trade unions based their activity and defended their autonomy on established programs. In this way, trade unions soon became senior partners of the government to market reforms. Slovene trade unions started from similar legitimacy crisis, yet they could capitalize some autonomy from their participation in redefinition of the Slovene state, and the need of the governing elite on labor support.

Apart of trying to answer the main questions on the main features of trade union transformation in Poland, Serbia and Slovenia, this chapter/paper also highlighted some important features of the process of transformation from the perspective of organized labor.

First, it showed the similar main characteristics of unionization in late 1980s and early 1990s in all three countries. Specifically, with democratization and marketization there are two observable tendencies for fragmentation of organized labor: fragmentation on both economic, sectoral lines and political/ideological cleavages within labor.

Second, labor militancy in the end of communist, and first years of transformation years was more a continuation with the old than transformation. The main question of the transforming polities and economies was who will defend the weakest social category, the industrial workers, the main victims of economic restructuring – the basis of legitimacy of the communist regimes.

Third, I showed the internal dynamics of intermediate collective representative organizations during reforms. Different factors, the interests of trade union 'bureaucracy' in line with the iron law of oligarchy to remain in the top leadership, internal struggles all played an important role.

Fourth, the issue of labor representation came to the fore, especially who claims, and who is recognized as labor representative in the end. I could not answer fully this question in this paper⁵⁷.

Finally, but equally importantly I came closer in understanding the importance of the industrial power base for both political parties, governments and their alignment with the 'old' or 'new' managerial strata. My conclusion here is rather tentative, but the basic collected data suggest that the position of the 'old' managerial strata was very important also for trade union strategies, and their eventual success. Insider coalitions were formed especially in Slovenia, but also in Serbia, in the latter case when management wanted to increase its' autonomy from the new parties in power. Trade unions benefited from such coalitions in the successor states of Yugoslavia, whereas in Poland the management did not have the trade unions', especially Solidarity's support, but just the opposite.

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⁵⁷ See my forthcoming paper on labor ideology

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