

Assessing success and failure of post-communist unionism: trade unions' self-positioning during system change

Tibor T. Meszmann
Pphmet01@phd.ceu.hu

Abstract

In this paper I critically examine and operationalize the explanatory potential of the concept of trade unions' self-positioning in late communist, early postcommunist political-economic macro arena, and self-positioning in terms of internal organizational reform during the same years of system crisis and change. I differentiate thus between macro level, political-economic strategic activity of the peak level unions ('unions' participation in the transition game'), and internal organizational self-positioning ('bridging the storm of reforms'). Both macro level and organizational self-positioning(s) are processes which happen simultaneously. Successful self-positioning in the macro arena denotes meaningful participation in/contribution to (successful) political and economic reforms in a late communist, newly democratizing-marketizing country, which has a reactive effect on the authority of the peak level trade union organization. On the other hand, internal self-positioning denotes a duality of organizational change and reform: revival of (democratic) union activism on the plant and/or professional level and designing a (democratic), influential (centralized) movement by the peak level organization. The critical issue for internal self-positioning is whether and if so, where do the principles of plant level activism and centralization of the movement for the new needs meet.

Trade union self-positioning is applied within a framework of a critical juncture argument, to explain diverging fates of post-communist unions. I hypothesize that the more active role in macro arena, and more successful reforms, the higher the authority of the union movement will be. Second, reconciliation of the dual logic of internal change is more important for the consolidation of the organizational authority of the union movement, than internal reforms, and revival of union activism. In a form of a summary, the conceptual frame is applied to three cases.

1. A country which went through successful political and economic reforms, positively affecting the authority of the unions, while peak level and plant level reforms were synchronized: *Slovenia* in 1988-1992
2. A country which went through successful political but harsh (ex-post successful) economic reforms, ambiguously affecting the authority of the trade unions; while reforms and peak level and plant level activism were conflictual: *Poland* in 1988-1993
3. A country which went through unsuccessful political and economic reforms, negatively affecting the authority of the unions, while organizational conflict between peak level and plant level unions was not resolved: *Serbia* in 1988-1992.

The second step in the critical junction argument posits that the organizational authority stemming from self-positioning in times of system crisis explains the varying strength of contemporary unions in contemporary post-communist settings.