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**West-East European Labor Transnationalism(s):
Rivalry or Joint Mobilization?**

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines two instances of cross-border union activism in the enlarged EU: joint mobilization against the draft services Directive and plant-level union exchanges at GM/ Opel. The positions of unions from new and old EU member states coincided on the Directive issue, but often diverged in the latter case, even though the organizing effort was much higher at GM/Opel than during the anti-Directive campaign. The paper accounts for the observed variety by evaluating differences in workers' exposure to competitive pressure across the two cases. It argues that intra-firm benchmarking and the resulting direct competition between national workforces within multinational companies makes East-West European union coordination at the plant level more difficult to implement than one-shot transnational campaigns on general political economic issues.

KEYWORDS: cross-border union cooperation, competitive pressure, reciprocal exchange, social standards

Introduction

Contrary to pessimistic predictions (Meardi 2002; Vaughan-Whitehead 2003; Marginson 2006), cross-border union cooperation is emerging in the enlarged EU. Central-Eastern European (CEE)ⁱ labor representatives socialize with their Western European colleagues during European Works Councils' meetings (Meardi 2004; Kotthoff 2005). There is also evidence indicating that plant-level labor organizations from new and old EU member states coordinate their strategies during investment site selection processes and transnational restructuring (Bernaciak 2008). Joint

initiatives take place at the sectoral level, from construction to the metal industry (Kahmann 2007; Kahancova 2008). The participation of CEE unionists in recent EU-wide protests against the unfettered liberalization of EU service markets shows that there exists a consensus among European labor over the desired shape of a ‘social Europe’ (Gajewska 2008).

Already this short overview of initiatives indicates that ‘transnational labor cooperation’ is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of union interactions. Upon closer examination, however, it emerges that cross-border initiatives are not only implemented at different organizational levels, but also bear distinctive features in terms of the character of commitments, level of resource mobilization and membership engagement. It is thus important to distinguish between different types of cross-border union interactions in the context of the enlarged EU and to outline their possibilities and limits. In this respect, it can be expected that East-West union relations will be generically different from contacts among unions from old EU member states; persistent wage differentials across the enlarged EU can spur interest in cross-border liaisoning but might well raise new barriers to labor transnationalism.

This study examines two instances of East-West European union activism: joint mobilization against the EU draft services Directive and plant-level union exchanges at GM/Opel. While the position of Polish unionists coincided with the stance of their Western European counterparts on the Directive issue, it often diverged in the latter case, even though the mobilizing effort was much higher at GM/Opel than during the anti-Directive campaign. Given that unions from the same country were involved in both interactions (cf. Erne 2008), it is interesting to ask what accounts for the variation in their stance across the two cases? At a more general level, when Western European and CEE unions are likely to cooperate and what forms such cooperation can take?

The paper explains the above variation by pointing to differing levels of workers' exposure to competitive pressure across the two cases. The degree to which union constituencies compete with each other, in turn, determines the mode of union interactions, time horizon of their actions and the degree of membership involvement in cross-border ventures. At GM/Opel, direct competition between plant workforces over future investments can be modeled as a zero-sum game. It made the Polish union adopt a short-term perspective and engage in cross-border interactions with the Westerners only when a scope for reciprocal exchange emerged. These cross-border exchanges involved significant resources and remained conditional upon rank and file consent. In contrast, the services Directive issue did not involve direct competition between CEE and Western European union constituencies. Liberalization of EU service markets in line with the country of origin principle would benefit only migrant workers, 'outsiders' from the viewpoint of the Polish unions. Rather than supporting social dumping, the Polish organizations adopted a long-term perspective and advocated the upholding of social standards in the West. The high standards constituted a public good that could be enjoyed in the future by both Western and CEE union members; due to the long-term horizon and a public good character of the issue the anti-Directive campaign featured little rank and file engagement. The paper further argues that although plant-level interactions are conflict ridden and the scope for agreement between individual union representations is relatively narrow, cooperation at this level involves concrete commitments, and, thanks to the legitimization given by union constituencies, represents an instance of labor's Euro-democratic strategy (Erne 2008). In contrast, CEE unions' participation in campaigns on board political economic issues at the EU-level remains a leadership-driven, Euro-technocratic initiative, unlikely to serve as a platform for sustained East-West exchanges.

The paper is structured as follows. Section one presents the stances of Polish unions on the services Directive and during plant-level union exchanges at GM /Opel. Section two reviews the literature on factors underlining cross-border union activism. Section three shows how the differing extent of competitive pressure across the two cases shaped the mode of union interaction and a number of secondary characteristics of transnational union exchanges. Section four discusses broader implications of the two initiatives in the light of Erne's (2008) dichotomy between Euro-democratic and Euro-technocratic strategies. Brief conclusions follow.

1. *Stop Bolkestein!* and 'solidarity from below'ⁱⁱ at GM/Opel: an overview of initiatives

This section reconstructs the positions of Polish trade unionists on the draft services Directive and during plant-level union exchanges at GM/Opel, thus preparing ground for the analysis of the two cases. It is based on primary sources: press releases, union publications and archival materials, as well as on 17 personal interviews conducted by the author between 2006 and 2008 with Polish and German unionists at the plant, sectoral and confederal level.

1.1. Union mobilization against the draft services Directive

In January 2004, the European Commission issued a draft version of the Directive on services in the Internal Market, which aimed at liberalizing service flows within the EU. The draft legislation introduced the so-called country of origin rule, stipulating that an individual or a company would be allowed to provide services on the territory of another member state on the basis of laws and regulations of his/her country of origin or the country of establishment, and

was not obliged to abide by a set of rules existing in the host state. As argued by the supporters of the legislation - the European Commission, European employers' associations and a number of European governmentsⁱⁱⁱ, the planned act would greatly enhance the free movement of services within the EU and boost economic growth, thanks to the abolishment of administrative restrictions existing in individual member states. It was also expected to boost competitiveness and productivity of European service providers in line with the Lisbon Agenda. The opponents of the Directive, however, criticized its ultraliberal character and its supposedly anti-social dimension. According to trade unions, the introduction of the country of origin principle would lead to a pan-European 'race to the bottom' in the sphere of wages and working conditions, prompted by 'letter-box companies' that would relocate their headquarters to states offering the lowest social conditions and subsequently expand their operations onto the whole EU territory (EMCEF 2004).

Importantly, the objections to the liberal version of the Directive were voiced not only by Western European unions, threatened by the specter of 'Polish plumbers' offering their services at dumping prices in Berlin, Paris or Brussels, but also by CEE labor organizations. Although the two biggest Polish union confederations, *Solidarność* and *OPZZ* welcomed the removal of administrative barriers impeding service providers' mobility, they resolutely opposed the adoption the country of origin principle. As for *Solidarność* President, the Polish unions did not want their country workers to introduce unfair competition and prompt social dumping in old EU member states (Śniadek in EPSU 2006). If they backed the liberal version of the act, they would be associated with 'stealing bread from others' (Niemiec in *Bankier* 2006) and accused of 'undermining the achievements of several decades of social dialogue in [Western] Europe' (*Solidarność* and *OPZZ* 2006).

A closer look at the Poles' rhetoric suggests that their concern about the persistence of the European Social Model did not stem exclusively from solidarity with the West. Both organizations asserted that the dissolution of social standards and collective bargaining systems in old EU member states would close the prospects for upward convergence of working conditions across the enlarged EU. They further argued that the country of origin principle would pose a threat even to current Polish standards if countries with lower wage and inferior working conditions joined the EU. Finally, they warned against legal chaos that would emerge after the adoption of the country of origin principle; if services on the territory of a single member state were provided in accordance to 27 different legal orders, wage monitoring and health and safety inspections would be virtually impossible.

Both *Solidarność* and *OPZZ* communicated their anti-dumping position at the EU level. *Solidarność* President presented his confederation's stance during a conference organized by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) in order to 'challenge the supposed East-West divide' related to the service liberalization issue that could emerge in popular perception since the Polish government was a zealous supporter of the country of origin principle (EPSU 2006). Before the European Parliament's debate on the Directive, a group of *OPZZ* unionists presented their case to Polish socialist MEPs, urging the latter to vote against the liberal provisions of the act. Around 200 unionists from each union took part EU-wide demonstration against the initial Directive version in Strasbourg in February 2006.

All in all, the positions of *Solidarność* and *OPZZ* on the Directive issue were fully congruent with the stance of their Western counterparts. Both Polish organizations openly rejected wage dumping and called for 'upward, not downward convergence' of social standards in the enlarged EU (*OPZZ* 2006). Even the rhetoric of CEE and Western European unions bears

striking similarities: *Solidarność*'s plea for 'equal access, equal conditions, equal protection for all [...]' service providers and consumers in the Single Market (Solidarność 2006) essentially repeats the German construction union IG BAU's demand for 'equal pay for equal work in the same place'(cf. Eichhorst 2005).

1.2. Union interactions at GM/Opel

The American-based General Motors acquired Opel in 1929. The company employs 27,000 workers in Germany across four sites: car plants in Rüsselsheim, Bochum and Eisenach and a component factory in Kaiserslautern. Other GM plants in Europe are located in England, Belgium and Spain.^{iv} In Poland, GM had owned an assembly plant near Warsaw and has been using it again since 2006 to assemble Chevrolet Aveo through a Ukrainian GM joint venture AvtoZAZ. A car factory in Gliwice, established in 1998, puts out Astra, Agila and Zafira models and employs about 3000 workers, 30 per cent of who belong to *Solidarność*.^v The production process at GM Europe is organized in the form of platforms grouping locations eligible for manufacturing of a certain car class. Since the 1990s, management decisions concerning investment and capacity distribution have been preceded by a comparative assessment of costs and productivity performance of factories within each platform, which often spurred intra-plant competition (Hancké 2000).

The establishment of the Polish site in the late 1990s posed a challenge to Western European plants, as the new location with significantly lower labor costs would have a clear advantage during future site selection bids. Therefore, liaisoning with workforce representatives from Gliwice – hitherto a 'blind spot' on the map of European GM union contacts – represented

the only possibility for Western European unionists to avoid the East-West ‘coercive comparisons’. But despite the Polish presence in the GM’s European Works Council since the late 1990s, early Westerners’ efforts to coordinate strategies with *Solidarność* failed. In 2004, Gliwice entered in a competitive race over the manufacturing of the new Opel Zafira model with the German Bochum and Rüsselsheim plants. Since the lack of investment could threaten the existence of the Polish site, the plant-level *Solidarność* signed a concession agreement with local management to secure the inflow of new production, accepting a three-year-long wage freeze and lower wages for newly hired workers. Following the deal, a part of the Zafira production was relocated from Bochum to Gliwice, while production volumes assigned to Rüsselsheim remained below the plant’s standard utilization level.

Only when the Zafira investment materialized and the Polish plant was ranked the first among European GM sites on the competitiveness scale (WNP 2007) could the threat of disinvestments or closure be dismissed in the short term. Accordingly, the Poles shifted their priorities from the goal for production increases towards pay rise demands and obtained the support of their Western colleagues at local wage negotiations. During a collective dispute over pay in 2007, the Poles asked the EWC chair, simultaneously the chair of the German Opel’s general works council, to serve as a mediator in the row. He advised *Solidarność* to organize a short warning strike, which eventually made the management accept most of the union’s demands. In a similar vein, the Poles used the assistance of their Western colleagues to devise an anti-outsourcing strategy but they did not manage to prevent making their site ‘leaner’.

In parallel with the local struggles, the Polish unionists adopted a more cooperative stance *vis-à-vis* their Western European colleagues. In winter 2005, they joined the so-called Delta Group, initiated by the EWC to prevent a ‘beauty contest’ between five European factories

of the Delta platform during the new Astra site selection process. In December 2005, *Solidarność* signed the European Solidarity Pledge, promising not to lead separate talks with management before the final investment decision is taken and, after heated discussions, accepted maximum capacity utilization levels for their plant in line with the EWC proposals. The Poles also rejected flexibility requirements set forth by the management as a precondition for obtaining Astra production, even though they met most of the demands given the lean character of their site. During the European Action Day organized at all European GM sites in June 2006 in solidarity with the liquidated Portuguese plant in Azambuja, *Solidarność* held information meetings with the workforce. When the decision concerning production distribution of the new Astra excluded the Antwerp factory, the Polish unionists declared their solidarity with the Belgian colleagues but they did not participate in the European Action Day scheduled during the Polish national holiday.

Despite *Solidarność*'s participation in the Delta Group, the Polish stance would often diverge from the policy line of its Western European colleagues. In 2005–2006, Gliwice competed with the Spanish Zaragoza site over the manufacturing of the new Merviva model. The East-West discrepancy was also present during the debate over the so-called 'share the pain' strategy outlined by the EEF to avoid cancellation of a shift at the English site in spring 2006. *Solidarność* rejected the possibility of limiting production in Poland in order to save jobs at Western locations, arguing that Gliwice still needed additional investment to fully develop its potential. While Western European unionists expressed their concerns over growing overcapacities in CEE, *Solidarność* welcomed GM's engagement in the Warsaw factory and vowed that they would 'resolutely fight for the increase of production volumes at *competitive* [emphasis added] Polish plants' (Solidarność Opel 2006). Overall, then, in contrast to the East-

West anti-Directive mobilization case, plant-level exchanges at GM /Opel featured multiple disagreements between the Polish and Western European union representations. What accounts for the differing position of Polish unions in the two cases and the resulting variation in cooperative outcome?

2. Why going transnational?

This section reviews different theoretical approaches to labor transnationalism and assesses to what extent they can explain the variation in cooperative outcome across the two examined cases. It identifies a number of difficulties inherent in the structural and actor-centered accounts and argues for interest-based perspective to the analysis of East-West union interactions.

To begin with, a number of authors points to the importance of structural variables in assessing the prospect for transnational union action. Bieler (2005) posits that workers grouped in industries in which the production process is organized on a transnational basis have higher propensity to cooperate across borders than their counterparts from domestic sectors, such as health care and education. He substantiates his argument by claiming that workers from transnationalized branches have a longer and more intense experience of globalization; more importantly, they have lost the ability to control the capital from their national positions and are therefore 'pushed' onto the supranational action space. In a similar vein, Kotthoff's (2006) points to the importance of a separate management division responsible for all European operations, which serves as an 'interlocutor' to the EWC due to its location at the same level of corporate organization. Arrowsmith and Marginson (2004) further argue that the imposition of similar HRM practices across sites in different countries can further increase the coherence of

transnational union representation, which might then form as a unified ‘labor front’ against the management’s demands.

However, the structural theories fall short in accounting for the divergent cooperative outcome in the examined two instances of East-West union interactions. Both cases involved industries organized on a cross-border scale: while foreign direct investment (FDI) and relocation practice are the main transnationalization channels in the automotive industry, portable service sectors falling within the scope of the draft service Directive transnationalize as a result of corporate subcontracting and labor migration (Menz 2001). Despite the equally high levels of internationalization, the scope for transnational agreement between Polish and Western European union representations was much narrower at GM/Opel than during the anti-Directive campaign, which highlights the need for further investigation.

Beyond the structural theories, researchers advocate an actor-centered approach to labor transnationalism and argue that close cooperative links emerge as a result of socialization among labor representatives from different countries. Marginson *et al.* (2004) shows that the European Works Councils that have had most influence on the management decisions can be found at companies where prior contacts between unionists and active networking were in place. Similarly, in his study of workers’ responses to transnational mergers and related restructuring measures, Erne (2008) argues that only the company at labor representatives had known before the merger each other witnessed cross-border collective action. Analyzing recent cooperation initiatives at GM, Gajewska (2008) claims that ‘each successful dispute or action brought the workers together and strengthened the relationship, in turn developing into more institutionalization and socialization’ (2008: 116)

But again, the socialization arguments are not unproblematic. In the two examined instances of labor interactions, the exact opposite to what the theories predict happened: while positions of Polish and Western European unionists were congruent from the very outset during one-shot anti-Directive campaign, they continued to diverge at GM/Opel, despite the presence of institutional framework created to enhance cooperation and continuous networking efforts in the latter case.

Bridging structural and socialisation explanations, interest-based accounts outline a concrete mechanism guiding unions' cross-border cooperative efforts. Logue (1980) argues that trade unions, like other interests groups, pursue economic interests of their members. With the transnationalization of business activities, workers are increasingly subject to pressures originating beyond state boundaries; to address these concerns, unions are compelled to enter the supranational arena. Through transnational engagement, however, each union caters in the first place to the interests of its own constituency. In this respect, cross-border union cooperation can be regarded as a combined effort to service national workforces rather than an exercise in transnational solidarity.

Logue's theory can be particularly useful in accounting for the divergent cooperative outcome across the two examined cases. In line with Bieler (2005), it posits that the diminishing scope of control over the national environment serves as a 'push factor' facilitating unions' cross-border involvement, but at the same time it highlights the salience of economic interests of union constituencies in determining the organizations' readiness to 'go transnational'. Following this line of reasoning, it can be expected that the divergent positions of the Polish unions in the two examined cases is related differing levels of costs and benefits that would be incurred by unions' constituencies as a result of cross-border activism. The next section outlines the

character of pressures that CEE workers are subject to in each case and reconstructs their interests under these specific circumstances.

3. Implications of East-West rivalry for union relations

East-West European union relations are often portrayed as competition-driven. Significant labor cost differentials between old and new EU member states raise concerns over a ‘race to the bottom’ of wages and working conditions across the enlarged EU (cf. Vaughan-Whitehead 2003; Marginson 2005; Lindstrom 2008). However, this paper argues that the extent to which workers are engaged in the competitive race varies significantly across different contexts. *The extent to which union constituencies are subject to competitive pressure, in turn, determines the character of their organizations’ transnational engagement.*

This argument resonates closely with Kahancova’s (2008) assertion that a competitive character of union relations within MNCs precludes the development of union cooperative ventures at the plant level. Instead of linking the mode of union interactions to the particular level of trade union’s organizational structure, however, the present study focuses on the relation between the differing degree of competitive pressure and the type of cross-border union interactions. Analyzing the positions of Polish trade unions during the anti-services Directive mobilization and in the GM/Opel context, it also shows how the degree of cross-border competition shapes a number of secondary characteristics of inter-union exchanges, such as the time horizon of their activities, resource mobilization and rank and file involvement.

3.1. Competitive pressure and the mode of union interaction

At GM/Opel international benchmarking became the order of the day since the creation of an integrated European managerial unit and the introduction of parallel production strategy (Haipeter 2005). Inter-plant competition became intense, while interactions between workforces at individual production sites took a form of a zero-sum game: a gain in the form of a new investment or increased capacities at one location was associated with a loss of existing or future production elsewhere. Given that each site selection process would bring immediate benefits or losses for union constituency at the Gliwice factory, the Poles adopted a short-term perspective for their actions and often played a national card in order to obtain new investments. To justify their non-cooperative stance, they used 'developmental rhetoric', claiming that their site needs to develop higher capacities to hire as many workers as possible in the economically depressed region of Upper Silesia. Such arguments were raised in the course of inter-plant contests over the Zafira and Merviva models and before the launch of Chevrolet production at the Warsaw plant.

The zero-sum character of interaction by definition excludes cooperation. Thus, the fact that union relations took a cooperative turn after 2004 suggests that another mode of inter-union interaction became more salient at GM/Opel. By 2004, the Poles became aware of their strong competitive position among European plants; thanks to the low labor costs, they could expect that their site would not be omitted during the Delta site selection process. Consequently, they shifted their priorities from competition over production volumes towards the improvement of social conditions at their plant. This shift opened a window of opportunity for a reciprocal exchange between them and the Western unionists: while the Poles used the advocacy of their stronger Western European colleagues to enhance working conditions and/or job opportunities at their own plants, the Westerners were reassured that the Poles would not underbid them. But the

Poles continued to reject Western European initiatives that would hurt their immediate interests and it cannot be excluded that they might return to the concession bargaining policy in the future. The reciprocity-based East-West union cooperation seems to have emerged in the shadow of inter-plant rivalry, which, if temporarily contained, has not fully disappeared from the union horizon (cf. Fetzner 2008).

To the contrary, the draft-services Directive case did not feature direct competition between Western and CEE unions' constituencies. The unabridged liberalization of the EU service markets in line with the country of origin principle would in the short term be beneficial for 'outsiders' - non-unionized CEE workers wishing to take up employment in old EU member states and offering their services there at lower prices. Consequently, the latter group, and not the CEE union constituencies, posed a competitive threat to Western European laborers. The distinction between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' was clearly present in the rhetoric of CEE unions. Both Polish confederations distanced themselves from the migrant workers; *Solidarność* chair warned that the adoption of country origin principle 'opens the door to fictional employment, which in most cases amounts to social dumping' (Solidarność 2006), while the secretary of *ZZ Budowlani* construction union affiliated to *OPZZ* openly stated that the prime role of his organization is to represent its members, 'and not the ones that go to the West and are not affiliated to any union' (PB1 2006).

The short-term gain of the migrant workforce stands in sharp contrast to the long-term interests of Polish union constituency, which laid in the gradual leveling of wage and working conditions across the enlarged EU. The adoption of the liberal version of the EU services act, however, would put a considerable strain on the upward convergence scenario. The exacerbated wage competition in line with the country of origin principle could threaten social standards in

the Western European countries and thus destroy the Western European social ‘archetype’ towards which CEE countries were heading. In this respect, the preservation of high social standards in Western Europe created a sphere of common interests between labor organizations from old and new EU member states, a public good that the Polish unions’ constituency would enjoy alongside with their Western counterparts once the social gap between the East and the West narrows.

3.2. Resource mobilization and rank and file engagement

In the absence of prior communication with Western European unionists, *Solidarność* plant-level unit at GM /Opel devoted significant resources to transnational activities. At the leadership level, competent and experienced personnel took on the responsibility for transnational activities. Union officer representing Gliwice in the GM’s EWC speaks German, which enables him to foster closer informal contacts with the EWC chair and vice-chair. Beyond the two EWC sessions scheduled per year, he maintains regular email exchanges with Western European unionists and meets them on other occasions; cross-border meetings are also regularly attended by plant-level *Solidarność* chair. The union communicates its stances on international issues to the rank and file members. Articles devoted to transnational issues, as well as reports from EWC meetings and conferences are published in the union gazette and on the organization’s webpage. During the visits of the EWC chair and vice-chair to the plant, *Solidarność* engaged the workforce in discussions regarding the EWC activities and the role of the Polish plant in the company strategy. In 2007 and 2008, the Poles co-organized an exchange of lower-rank union members with the German Bochum plant, aimed at raising the latter’s

awareness of cross-border dependencies between the plants and winning their support for cooperative activities.

Given the limited financial and personnel resources, *Solidarność* engagement in cross-border exchanges should be viewed as significant. Not only did the unionists participate in exchanges initiated by their Western European counterparts, but they also involved rank and file members into the discussions on transnational issues. Paraphrasing Sharpf (1996), it is possible to classify the union's activities as 'positive' mobilization, understood as a conscious and sustained effort to create of a dense set of cross-border networks at the plant level.

In contrast, the involvement of the Polish unions in the anti- service Directive protests was characterized by a considerably lower level of resource and rank and file mobilization. Two sets of arguments can account for this. First, as pointed out by Oslon (1971), it is difficult to mobilize individuals on a public good issue. In the draft services Directive case, it was more rational for union members to free-ride on their confederations' opposition than to engage in protests that are costly from the individual perspective. Second, it was rather unlikely that workers would defend high standards that they will be able to enjoy only in distant future (cf. Polanyi 1944). As a result, the participation of the Polish unions in the anti-Directive campaign remained a leadership-driven initiative and thus can be considered as a 'negative' mobilization, during which the Poles used official communication channels to coordinate their responses with the Western European counterparts. This interpretation is best illustrated by the mode in which *Solidarność* stance on the service Directive was adopted. ETUC communicated its policy line to high-rank union officials; once verified by the union's lawyers and consulted with *Solidarność* member working for ETUC (Solidarność 2004), the stance was essentially taken over by the Executive Committee as the official union position.

Against the above rendering, it can be argued that both Polish unions' statements were followed by their members' participation in European-level demonstrations against the proposed act. Nevertheless, caution in interpreting the protest actions as an instance of East-West collective action is well-taken. A closer look at the composition of the Polish protesters raises serious doubts concerning their stake and personal engagement in the services' debate. At the Strasbourg manifestation in February 2006, *OPZZ* was represented by teachers and miners and *Solidarność* delegation consisted of food industry workers. While teachers might have been concerned with the liberalization of public services, the other two groups would not at all be affected by the services Directive and their participation in the protests suggests top-down delegation rather than spontaneous mobilization on a common cause.

3.3. Legitimization of trade union actions

Transnational politics of the plant-level *Solidarność* unit at GM/Opel had direct consequences for the plant's future and thus gained significant interests of the Gliwice workforce. The unionists had to legitimize their cross-border activities vis-à-vis its rank and file members in order to obtain their support during the next union elections. For this reason, *Solidarność* engagement in the Delta Group was presented primarily as a fight against the worsening of working conditions at the Polish site, staged in cooperation with the Western unionists. On numerous occasions, however, low levels of membership support precluded the union's transnational involvement. The limited engagement of the Poles in European Action Days was at least partially due to the difficulty of convincing the workforce to stage the protest (Banyuls et al. 2008). During site selection processes, the union found it extremely hard to

maneuver between Western European counterparts' pressures to set limits to newly arriving production volumes and the hopes over highest possible production inflows shared by the workforce. When the Westerners urged the Poles to step down from the competitive race over Merviva, the latter rejected the plea arguing that '[in Gliwice] there is nobody who would step against the investment in our site' (Solidarność Opel 2005).

In contrast, it was not necessary to obtain rank and file legitimization of union actions in the case of anti-Directive mobilization, as the link between the unions' anti-Directive stance and the prospects for future increase in income levels with the West appeared too abstract for regular union members. Instead, it is more plausible to assume that EU-level union organizations, in particular ETUC, expected the Poles to adopt the negative stance on the Directive, and that the Polish unions would have been subject to shaming from the side of their Western counterparts had they supported the country of origin principle. This interpretation find support in the words of a Polish ETUC representative, who considers *Solidarność*'s involvement in 'the European working community' as one of the main reasons behind its participation in the anti-Directive drive (Niemiec in Bankier 2006). *OPZZ*, on the other hand, still held an ETUC candidate status at the time of the Strasbourg protests; it is difficult to imagine that it could take a different stance on the Directive issue than the organization it wished to join.

4. East-West labor transnationalism: success or failure?

The previous section showed how the differing degree of competitive pressure across the two cases influenced the cooperative outcome and shaped a number of secondary features of transnational union interactions (see also Table 1, page 22). It still remains unclear, however,

how to assess the results of unions' cooperative efforts in the two cases. In particular, against which benchmark should one measure the value, or the 'success' of cross-border union activism? Is it a mere degree of congruence between unions' stances or economic gains from the cooperative exchanges that matters? Or does the extent to which union interactions serve a platform for future cooperation also play a role?

To assess the value of East-West union interactions, it might be useful to place them in a broader spectrum of transnational union activities outlined by Erne (2008). In his recent book, the author differentiates between two broad types of strategies pursued by organized labor at the EU level. The so-called Euro-technocratization strategy rests on unions' acceptance of bureaucratic modes of EU decision-making and the deployment of formal communication channels between trade unions and EU institutions. In this respect, the bulk of ETUC activity falls within the Euro-technocratic approach: a high level of expertise of the confederation and weakly developed links with national unions' constituencies make it resemble a part of the EU 'establishment' rather than a motor for pan-European union movement. In contrast, the Euro-democratization strategy is an expression of workers' willingness to actively shape EU decision-making institutions, even against the established canons of EU lobbying. It rests on dense networking between unionists from different countries and involves collective action at the EU level in pursuit for joint union goals.

Not everything that shines is gold, however. Drawing on the evidence presented in this paper, it can be stated that not every instance of cross-border collective action can be classified as a pursuit of the Euro-democratic strategy. The case of the anti-services Directive campaign suggests that joint mobilization at the EU level might be orchestrated by union leadership and attract little attention on the side of union constituency, if the goals of the joint action and the

benefits from the common protests appear too distant for an average union member. Given the limited interests of rank and file in pan-European campaigns on broader political economic issues, also the accountability of labor organizations for such activities in front of their members is minimal. Instead, the unions commit to follow policy line of pan-European union confederations, communicated to them in a formal manner during the high-rank officials meetings. At least from the perspective of CEE unions, then, the mobilization against the EU services act should be regarded as an instance of the Euro-technocratic strategy and is unlikely to serve a platform for sustain East-West exchanges beyond the leadership level.

In contrast, cross-border interactions at GM/Opel are expressions of the Euro-democratic strategy. Union interactions involved concrete commitments, including the pledge not to engage in local negotiations during the site selection process, which is a significant achievement in view of the earlier underbidding practice. Transnational politics penetrated all levels of CEE union membership: while union leaders presented their stances during EWC meetings, low-rank union officials participated in inter-plant exchanges and rank and file provided legitimization for cross-border actions. Although multiple disagreements continue to emerge parallel to cooperative exchanges and the level of congruence between the stances of Polish union and its Western counterparts was relatively narrow, it is perhaps how far labor transnationalism can get in the era of transnational competition. The fragility of interest-driven cooperation notwithstanding, it has to be acknowledged on the positive side that such cross-border union interactions constituted a transparent exchange, legitimized by all involved actors. In this respect, it bears well for the future union contacts plant-union level.

Table 1. Dimensions of union interaction: joint mobilization against the draft services Directive and union exchanges at GM/Opel

Dimensions of union interaction	Plant-level union exchanges at GM/Opel	Anti-services Directive mobilization
Competition between union constituencies	direct	indirect
Time horizon of union action	short-term	long-term
Mode of union interaction	zero-sum	public good
Cooperation mechanism	reciprocity	common interest
Resource mobilization	'positive'	'negative'
Controlling entity	rank and file	ETUC
Type of union strategy (Erne 2008)	Euro-democratic	Euro-technocratic

To go further, in the light of the evidence from the GM/Opel case, it would perhaps be too early to accept Kahancova's (2008) pessimistic conclusions and dismiss the beneficial influence of plant-level union interactions on wage and working conditions in the enlarged EU. Even in the competition-driven setting, there is a scope for reciprocal exchange between labor organizations from old and new EU member states. As a consequence of union exchanges, not only East-West underbidding can be contained, but also working conditions at a given CEE subsidiary might significantly improved as a result of Western European unions' intervention. It is difficult to envisage similar development at the sectoral level due to the weakness of sectoral

level of collective bargaining and the limited resources of sectoral union organizations in CEE. In the light of these two limitations, ‘bottom-up’ drives aiming at improving social standards across the region have much higher potential than sectoral-level initiatives.

Conclusions

This paper set out to analyze two instances of cross-border interactions between Polish and Western European unions: joint mobilization against the draft services Directive and union relations at GM/Opel. It showed that the two initiatives differed in many important aspects, such as the mode of union interaction, time perspective of union action, as well as the level of resource mobilization and rank and file engagement. The paper argued that these systematic differences stemmed from the degree of competitive pressure that union constituencies were subject across the two settings. By documenting this variety, the study opened the ‘cross-border labor cooperation’ blackbox and advanced the scholarly understanding of different forms of labor transnationalism in the enlarged EU.

But the inquiry did not stop at delineating the differences between the two initiatives. The second step involved the assessment of cross-border efforts from the perspective of prospects for sustained interactions that they have opened. Drawing on Erne’s (2008) dichotomy between Euro-technocratic and Euro-democratic strategies, the paper argued that despite a seemingly higher level of congruence between union stances on the services Directive issue, union cooperation on the issue remains relatively ‘empty’, as it did not involve contacts between union members from different countries beyond higher union officials. In contrast, union interactions at GM/Opel, if not conflict-free, were related to concrete commitments on the union side, engaged

unionists at different level of organizational hierarchy and thus bore well for future engagement in similar cross-border actions. By bringing this dimension to the analysis, the paper outlined alternative ways at looking at ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of labor transnationalism reaching beyond a mere degree of congruence between unions’ positions.

Finally, the study corroborated Kahancova’s (2008) finding that plant-level union interaction tend to be competition-driven. However, it also showed that company-level union relations are not doomed to remain adversarial and that unionists can develop cooperative links based on reciprocal exchange. The paper posited that such cross-border exchanges might contribute to the improvement of working conditions in the postcommunist region through direct intervention of Western European unionists, but also thanks to the support offered by the latter to CEE unions; they can revitalize shop floor union movement in new EU member states despite the weakness of sectoral and national structures, thus creating ‘islands of union prosperity’ at MNCs’ subsidiaries across the region.

More research is needed to analyze different types of union interactions in the East-West European context and to establish to what extent these relations differ from the ones observed in homogenous Western European setting. It would be also interesting to explore how changing economic conditions, in particular the recent crisis, have influenced transnational union relations.

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NOTES

ⁱ The terms ‘Central-Eastern European states’ (CEE) and ‘new EU member states’ refer to the 10 postcommunist countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Old EU member states are Western European countries that were EU members before the 2004 EU enlargement.

ⁱⁱ I borrowed the term from the project named ‘*Arbeitnehmersolidarität von unten*’, implemented by Institut für Kirche und Gesellschaft in Westphalia in 2007-2008. It involved repeated exchanges between middle-rank unionists and shop stewards at Opel plants in Bochum , Germany and Gliwice and aimed at acquainting labor activists with living and working conditions of their colleagues at the other plant and thus at developing a sense of common fate between GM workers across the two sites. I briefly refer to it in section 3.2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Poland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Hungary, Czech Republic and Spain supported the initial version of the service Directive.

^{iv} In February 2009 the Swedish SAAB belonging to GM was filed for bankruptcy.

^v *Solidarność* in this subsection and in subsequent subsections devoted to union interactions at GM/Opel refers to the plant-level union representation at the Opel factory in Gliwice.