Trade Union Responses to Precarious Work in Central and Eastern Europe

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Why focusing on fighting precarious employment in CEE?

- **Increase in precarious employment**
  - Crisis, uncertainty, firms seeking flexibility
  - In-work poverty 9.1% in EU in 2012 (EPRS, 2014)

- **Fighting precarious work is a key challenge for unions**
  - “Europe: End Precarious Work Now! Decent Work and Equal Treatment for All” (ETUFs-ETUC, 2014)
  - precarious work – impact on individual and collective rights, undermines collective bargaining, may weaken trade unions

- **Limited knowledge and research in CEE countries**
  - No comprehensive overview of trends in precarious employment and trade union responses thereto
  - Limited cross-country comparison
Paper’s focus

• How did trade unions respond? Able to eliminate precariousness?
• Impact of institutional, structural and organizational resources on union responses to precarious work
• Extent to which these three resources account for patterns of divergence or convergence in union responses to precariousness

• Based on an EC-funded research project PRECARIR VS/2014/0534 (The Rise of the Dual Labour Market: Fighting Precariousness through Industrial Relations)

• Conceptualization of precarious forms of work in CEE
• Empirical coverage of 5 sectors across 9 countries (CZ,
A multi-dimensional approach to precarious work (Keller/Seifert 2013)

- precarious work as ‘employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker’ (Kallenberg 2009: 2).

- Income security (2/3 of median income in country)
- Job security
- Social security
- Employability (access to training, skill development)

- Other labour conditions and social rights compared to standard employment (e.g., holiday and collective benefit entitlements, the practice of paid overtime, abuse of travel reimbursements, etc.)

- benchmark for evaluating precarious work: standard employment contract (full-time, open-ended, decent income, social rights, collective rights/representation)
Sectoral focus and comparative outcomes

- **Five sectors:**
  - Metal (automotive or electronics)
  - Construction
  - Healthcare (hospitals)
  - Retail
  - Temporary agency work (emerging in CEE as a separate sector)

- Evidence for forms/incident of precarious employment in each sector (multi-dimensional approach)
- Influence of various union resources on unions’ choice of strategy
- Comparative outcomes
Trade union power resources

- **Internal - organizational**
  - Membership (Frege and Kelly, 2003; Mrozowicki, 2011)
  - Leadership, internal democracy, external links (Levesque and Murray, 2002)

- **External – institutional and structural**
  - Institutional (Dorre et al, 2009)
    - statutory and non-statutory
  - Structural (Silver, 2003)
    - strategic position within the labour market and the production process (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013; Wright 2000).
    - bargaining power contingent on workers’ scarce skills
Analytical framework

Resources inform unions’ power

Unions decide to address precariousness considering rationales

- Efficiency rationale
- Equality rationale
- Legitimacy rationale

Unions’ response formation: addressing precarious work?

No

Yes
Analytical framework

Union approaches to precarious work

- Inclusion
- Separation
- Exclusion

Expected outcomes in comparative perspective

- **Divergence** in union responses across countries under prevailing influence of institutional power resources (proposition 1)
- **Convergence** in union responses across sectors under prevailing influence of structural power resources (proposition 2)
- Both convergence and divergence in union responses possible under prevailing influence of organizational power resources (proposition 3)

Unions adopt approaches and act on precarious work

Expected outcomes
Findings

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<th>Impact of institutional resources</th>
<th>Impact of structural resources</th>
<th>Impact of organizational resources</th>
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<td>• Institutions framing the context where unions operate in CEE increasingly similar since the crisis.</td>
<td>• Sectors with greater structural resources, such as healthcare and metalworking, saw unions better equipped to fight growing precarization.</td>
<td>• Certain unions stand out for their positive impact on precarious work, even though they operate within the same institutional and structural context as other unions.</td>
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<td>• Outcomes in between two extremes: SI (new labour law in 2013 restricting the use of TAW) and LT (unions accepted employer need for flexibility, exclusion strategy towards precarious workers)</td>
<td>• Only the case for less vulnerable categories of workers, e.g. those in tight labour markets or those whose skills were in short supply</td>
<td>• BNS Union in Romania acting on behalf of precarious workers and fighting liberalization of the Labour Code</td>
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<td>• Since 2008 the role of unions in shaping, implementing and enforcing regulations which protect employees has been challenged in all the selected countries irrespective of their institutions.</td>
<td>• Surprisingly, unions were also able to protect the most vulnerable employees in sectors with the weakest structural characteristics, construction and retail.</td>
<td>• ACM Poland – 2 unions, different strategies, the one that succeeded built its strategies on family ties between workers across the ACM supply chain (foster external linkages)</td>
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<td>• Although differences in the involvement of unions in labour regulation, contingent on each country’s industrial relations system, still exist, unions offered largely similar responses across countries in terms of the rationales and approaches chosen to address precarious work.</td>
<td>• In a context of extremely poor working conditions and illegal practices unions sought the cooperation of employers’ associations who, in order to reduce unfair competition (and increase transparency in public bids), agreed to act jointly to improve legislation</td>
<td>• Unions in the same institutional context acted differently, which shows that utilising organisational resources can lead to divergence in union responses within countries</td>
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<td>• This suggests that even in countries with relatively high levels of institutional resources, unions did not use them to the advantage of vulnerable employees.</td>
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<td>• Certain unions stood out for their capacity to improve working conditions irrespective of structural characteristics. In understanding such capacity, union legitimacy, external links and union proactivity all need to be taken into account</td>
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Trif et al. (2019) Trade Union Responses to Precarious Work in CEE, TURI Conference 20.5.2019
Interplay between institutional, structural and organizational union resources

• Power that unions derive from organisational resources is unstable over time and contingent on specific (often changing) circumstances (e.g. Maxima case).

• In uncertain context, unions are more likely to invest their limited resources in addressing precarious work if their actions also strengthen their legitimacy

• **Organizational resources essential but not sufficient in addressing precarious work.** Proactivity is necessary to prioritise the interests of precarious workers, while external links and internal democracy are preconditions for action.

• By increasing variation in union responses to precarious work within countries, sectors and companies, organizational resources dilute patterns of institutional divergence and structural convergence
Concluding arguments

• In a context of weak institutions and varying structural conditions, as in CEE, organisational resources explain differences in union responses to precarious work.

• The extent to which unions in CEE can continue to exert their functions rests primarily on their capacity to recognise opportunities for actions (proactivity), and to establish alliances with other actors (external links).

• Institutional and structural weaknesses in these countries has placed a renewed premium on the importance of union power derived from organisational resources, particularly proactive leadership and external links.

• The positive impact of proactive unions is limited to a specific context which provides a unique opportunity for exploitation. Unless the outcome of this action becomes institutionalised, individual union initiatives are unlikely to make a substantial contribution to reduce or eliminate precarious work.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!
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