Chapter 26
Slovenia: From strong trade union movement to uneven de-unionization
Miroslav Stanojević, Andreja Poje and Živa Broder

During the past 30 years the development of industrial relations in Slovenia has been marked by two important turning points: first, the change of political system in the early 1990s and, second, Slovenia joining the EU in 2004. The huge change in the political system was followed by the formation of neo-corporatist industrial relations (Bohle and Greskovits 2007, 2012; Feldmann 2006); while the second turning point, EU accession, triggered the partial dismantling or liberalization of this system (Feldman 2016; Guardiancich 2016).

This chapter shows that, following the first turning point all processes seemed to be helping to shape and stabilize the strength of trade unions. In this period during the 1990s, trade union density in Slovenia stabilized at 40 per cent. After the second turning point, however, the trends of the 1990s went into reverse, leading to a sharp decline in union density.

Only at first glance is the intensity of this latest significant change reminiscent of the change seen during the late 1980s and early 1990s. While a massive decline in union membership characterized both turning points, the first (new political system) led to a huge drop in union density, from nearly complete unionization during the socialist period to 50 per cent in the decade 1985–1995. The second turning point pushed the density rate further down, from just above 40 to 20 per cent in a little more than a decade (2003–2015) (see Table 26.1). Direct comparison of these two contractions suggests that the decline in union membership in Slovenia following the first turning point was much sharper. This chapter shows, however, that a direct comparison of quantitative data is misleading and that indeed the decline after the second point in time was much
more intense (and dramatic) than the drop observed during the early 1990s. The chapter argues that the fall in union membership in the early 1990s was not accompanied by the weakening of trade unions. In fact, the situation was then precisely the opposite: new, autonomous trade unions were established, boasting large-scale membership and considerable mobilization potential. Following the second turning point when Slovenia joined the EU in 2004 and Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in 2007 and during the pre-crisis period of the economic boom (2004–2008), independent trade unions in Slovenia started to lose members and mobilizing potential. The first juncture was followed by a period of stabilizing the institutional framework for social partnership within which powerful trade unions exercised strong influence over public policies. After the second turning point, however, their influence within that same institutional framework has constantly diminished, despite occasional strikes and mass protests. Thus, the key questions addressed in this chapter are: what explains the considerable power held by trade unions in Slovenia during the 1990s and why have unions incurred such dramatic losses in the past fifteen years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 26.1 Principal characteristics of trade unionism in Slovenia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total trade union membership (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women as a proportion of total membership</td>
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<td>Gross union density</td>
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<td>Net union density</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of confederations</td>
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<td>Number of affiliated unions (federations)</td>
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<td>Number of independent unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective bargaining coverage</td>
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<td>Principal level of collective bargaining</td>
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<tr>
<td>Days not worked due to industrial action per 1,000 workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: (1) Share of labour force based on density rates calculated from public opinion surveys. Labour force in 1993: 931,000; 2000: 963,000; and 2019: 1,032,000.

Slovenia: From strong unionism to uneven de-unionization

Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system

Similar to other ‘real-socialist’ countries at the time, trade unions in the former Yugoslavia were subordinated to the communist party. But Yugoslav socialism had a special feature that distinguished it from other ‘real socialisms’, the legally protected institution of workers’ councils. Workers elected as representatives on these councils competed with official trade unions, frequently taking over traditional trade union roles in companies that the official unions were unable to fulfil. The most critical issue was work stoppages. Members of workers’ councils were usually more in favour of strikes than union representatives (Arzenšek 1984).

In the early stages of the transition to a ‘market economy’, when new legislation began to limit the power of the workers’ councils, the trade unions took over the functions the councils previously performed. This was an early stage in the emergence of autonomous trade unions. In fact, the decline in trade union density (which had dropped to 70 per cent in the late 1980s) was counterbalanced by an increase – not a decline – in unions’ (mobilizing) power. Within companies, union organizations were transformed into the main employee representation bodies. Simultaneously, the workers’ councils survived as works councils, a ‘new old body’ that referred closely to the German model (see Chapter 12). The result was a dual system of interest representation in which unions had a leading role.

The emergence of autonomous trade unions coincided with the pluralization of the trade union scene, which forced unions to compete with each other for members. By adopting workers’ councils (and councillors), as well as the infrastructural and organizational resources inherited from socialism, trade unions were able to adjust their policies relatively efficiently to meet workers’ demands. Accordingly, trade unions preserved their massive memberships even between 1990 and 1992, when the transformation depression in Slovenia was at its deepest.

Trade union power was concentrated in manufacturing industry, especially in its export sector. At the time, blue-collar workers prevailed among union members, mainly in the affiliates of the ‘old’, reformed confederation of trade unions, the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS, Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije).
During the 1990s, the robust export sector chiefly relied on Western markets, much like today. This key aspect of the Slovenian economy was shaped in the decades after the Second World War, within the framework of the comparably open and reform-oriented Yugoslav socialism. The export sector was also a stronghold of the long-standing market-oriented reformist coalitions of export company managers and a reformist faction of the political elite. These inherited coalitions crucially impacted the first stage of Slovenia’s transition during the 1990s.

Throughout the process that led to the country’s independence in 1991 and in the immediate post-independence period in the early 1990s, Slovenia experienced a transformation depression because it had lost the Yugoslav market. In 1991, GDP fell by 9 per cent and then by a further 5.5 per cent in 1992; the unemployment rate rose from a low level to 9 per cent between 1992 and 1994. By 1992, the annual inflation rate had reached 200 per cent (Silva-Jauregui 2004: 116, 119, 125). It was in these circumstances that, in spring 1992, the first, centre-right coalition government announced a wage freeze. The goal was to curb skyrocketing inflation. The trade unions were resolutely opposed, organizing a general, several-hours-long warning strike. This impressive manifestation of union power led to the intended wage freeze being called off. The centre-right coalition government soon collapsed.

In December 1992, the centre-left party Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS in Slovenian) won the elections. It remained in power for the next twelve years, leading generally unstable and weak coalition governments during the entire EU accession process. As early as 1993, during the term of the first LDS government, Slovenia started to grow economically by successfully replacing the Yugoslav with a European market based on a successful export sector. This growth continued more or less unabated until 2009, when the global economic crisis struck.

With regard to economic growth, the first LDS government also had to confront the dual problems of high inflation and rising unemployment, which the government could not resolve without the support of strong unions. Including the trade unions in policymaking was therefore imperative. This inclusion was institutionalized when the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Slovenia (ESS, Ekonomsko-socialni svet) was established in 1994. At the time, Slovenian workers’ and employers’ organizations were highly centralized. On the union side, most industrial trade unions were included in the ‘old, reformed’ ZSSS. On the employer side, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GZS, Gospodarska
zbornica Slovenije), membership of which was compulsory, was the most important interest organization. In 1990, these social partners concluded two collective agreements, one for the ‘private’ and the other for the public sector. Because of the Chamber’s obligatory membership and key role as representative of the employers in collective bargaining, bargaining coverage was almost 100 per cent at the time.

The key actors in this system had opposing or at least different priorities. The government and the employers focused primarily on curbing inflation and making the national economy more competitive. The trade unions’ priority was protecting workers’ interests by regulating wages, preserving jobs, finding solutions to the problem of redundant workers and defending the worker-friendly pension system: in short, the preservation of the welfare state. The one priority shared by all these actors, which partly enabled the integration of their diverse interests, was the EU accession process.

During the mid-1990s and in the context of revived economic growth, the first LDS government boosted growth and competitiveness even further by gradually curbing inflation through wage restraint, in combination with an incremental currency devaluation. The highly centralized collective bargaining system, with its high coverage rate, offered an opportunity to implement the demanded wage (restraint) policies. The government, however, still needed the consent of the trade unions to introduce such policies. The cost of this consent was to accept the unions’ systematic influence on employment relations and the wider system of social protection, which was aimed at retaining the main traits of the welfare system. The result of this (political) exchange was ten years of the Slovenian ‘success story’. The robust economic growth seen in the 1990s was accompanied by the gradual marketization of the economy, but without undermining the foundations of the welfare system.

During the first decade of the 2000s, Slovenia experienced several important changes. In 2004, the country joined the EU, which meant that the one common priority of all industrial relations actors literally vanished overnight. In the same year, a centre-right coalition came to power, bringing the twelve-year rule of the centre-left to an end. The new government immediately launched neoliberal reforms, intending to introduce a flat-rate tax. Massive resistance on the part of the trade unions in autumn 2005, however, forced the government to shelve the plan. The second key aspect of the government’s planned systemic changes was to launch a new privatization wave. This soon turned into a large and
convoluted process, strongly supported by an influx of cheap money into
the new EU member states. Many company managers took over their
respective companies using cheap loans that, unfortunately, were paid
back from the privatized companies’ resources, to the detriment of their
employees. During the economic crisis in 2009–2013, privatization made
possible another form of ownership, as a series of bankruptcies ushered
in the rapid internationalization of the Slovenian economy. These devel-
opments further exacerbated changes in the industrial relations regime.

Before the abovementioned changes, Slovenia had accelerated prepara-
tions for joining EMU. Accordingly, before the formal introduction of
the euro in 2007 it was embedded in a ‘hard currency regime’. From then
on, the policy of incremental currency devaluation, which in combina-
tion with the centralized wage restraint policy had made the Slovenian
economy more competitive, could no longer be pursued. The incremen-
tal devaluation was instantly substituted by pressures for ‘internal deval-
uation’ (Streeck 2014), increasing labour market flexibility and cutting
public spending. Because of the inherited institutions of social partner-
ship and trade union opposition, any immediate flexibilization of the
labour market and austerity measures were not (yet) possible. The first
palpable form of ‘internal devaluation’ (rather, the first functional sub-
stitute for more labour market flexibility and the austerity measures that
were introduced later) was the introduction of stricter working regimes,
leading to an intensification of work (see European Foundation for the
Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2007 and subsequent
EFWC studies).

In 2009, only two years after formally entering the euro zone, the
Slovenian economy was hit by the global financial crisis. The sharp drop
in European market demand drastically affected the export sector; next
came the collapse of the construction industry, which had experienced
extreme investment activity before the crisis. The first wave of the crisis
was followed by a lull, before it turned into a fairly serious financial and

The pre-crisis pressure for ‘internal devaluation’, to which (over-
de indebted) companies responded by intensifying work, was complemented
by increasingly radical austerity policies to cope with the deepening crisis
in 2009–2013. The government tried to implement these policies with
various forms of short-term interventions and more long-term-oriented
structural reforms, which focused primarily on the pension system and
the liberalization and deregulation of the labour market. The evidence
presented below shows that this environment was extremely detrimental to the trade unions.

**Structure of trade unions and union democracy**

The pluralization of the political system which started in the late 1980s reached a qualitative turning point in 1990, when the first multi-party parliamentary elections were held. This huge systemic change showed that the Slovenian electorate was equally divided between a conservative camp and a liberal and social-democratic camp (Fink-Hafner and Krašovec 2004: 15).

This early ideological and political split framed the abrupt reorganization and pluralization of the trade union scene. At the beginning of the process, trade unions were influenced by powerful political polarization, peaking in the political conflict between ZSSS and the Confederation of New Trade Unions – Independence (KNSS-Neodvisnost, Konfederacija novih sindikatov Slovenije). KNSS-Neodvisnost was closely related to the new, anti-communist Social Democratic Party (SDS, Social demokratska stranka, later renamed the Slovenian Democratic Party), which positioned itself as a centre-right party. The opposite pole was occupied by the ‘reformed old ZSSS’ associated with the United List of Social Democrats (ZLSD, Združena lista socialnih demokratov), the reformed communists (today the SD, Social Democrats). Because both ZSSS and KNSS-Neodvisnost were strong trade unions, their respective affiliations with various competing political camps accentuated powerful ideological and political splits within the trade union movement.

During the decade dominated by the centre-left coalitions (1992–2004), when the trade unions concentrated on collective bargaining and co-shaping the industrial relations system in line with the model of a social market economy, the previous ideological splits (especially between ZSSS and KNSS-Neodvisnost) virtually disappeared. The interest-based differences among various segments of the labour force increasingly replaced the former ideological conflicts and personal grudges. As a result, the interest-based fragmentation, until then obscured by ideological and political splits, became a distinct characteristic of the trade union movement. Regarding important systemic issues, such as the reform of health care, the pension system and the labour market, the trade unions cooperated and opposed the privatization and/or dismantling of well-functioning systems.
Today, there are seven trade union confederations: the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS), the Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions (KSJS, Konfederacija sindikatov javnega sektorja), the Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovenia PERGAM (KSS PERGAM, Konfederacija sindikatov Slovenije PERGAM), the Confederation of New Trade Unions of Slovenia Neodvisnost (KNSS-Neodvisnost), the Confederation of Trade Unions 90 of Slovenia (KS-90, Konfederacija sindikatov 90 Slovenije), the Slovenian Association of Trade Unions Alternativa, and the Association of Workers Unions of Slovenia Solidarnost. ZSSS, KNSS-Neodvisnost, PERGAM and KS-90 were formed at the beginning of the transition, while Alternativa, Solidarnost and the KSJS appeared later, after 2000.

ZSSS and KSJS, and two smaller organizations (KSS Pergam and KNSS Neodvisnost) represent almost 90 per cent of all union members in Slovenia. The remaining, less than 10 per cent of union members (around 24,000 workers) are mainly members of autonomous company trade unions and/or smaller autonomous industrial or occupational unions of white-collar workers, such as FIDES, the trade union of medical doctors, and two smaller confederations (Alternativa and Solidarnost).

ZSSS is the largest and most influential trade union confederation. It consists of twenty-two affiliates representing members in the private and public sectors. ZSSS is the only confederation with a regionally organized structure. It was founded in Ljubljana on 7 April 1990 and is the successor to the former Association of the Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSS, Zveza sindikatov Slovenije). Before the founding congress, the former association had to cope with a serious internal crisis after the secession of certain regional and industrial affiliates that formed independent organizations. This secession was partly because of internal splits over interests within the old ZSS, compounded by interpersonal conflicts among prospective leaders of the emerging ZSSS.

During the 1990s, ZSSS accounted for more than 50 per cent of union membership in Slovenia. Like most other trade unions, ZSSS has experienced a loss in membership in the past fifteen years. Data suggest that ZSSS has been losing members more rapidly than other trade union organizations, especially public sector unions, meaning its share in total union membership has gradually decreased in the past decade and a half. According to a public opinion survey conducted in 2009, ZSSS had 155,000 members. The largest affiliate is the Trade Union of Metal and Electrical Workers of Slovenia (SKEI, Sindikat kovinske in
In 2009, SKEI had almost 40,000 members (Interview with Jerkič, the President of SKEI), accounting for around one-quarter of the entire ZSSS membership. Recent estimations of ZSSS in 2019 put its membership at some 130,000; membership had begun to rise again following the 2008–2013 crisis (Nared 2019). In 2015, ZSSS was still the biggest confederation, representing approximately 40 per cent of all trade union members in Slovenia (opinion survey data).

In the early stages of the transition, ZSSS had a significant head start over new trade unions because of its inherited organizational infrastructure and other resources shaped or accumulated during the ‘real-socialist’ regime. Although significant, this advantage could not in itself guarantee survival. The key factor in ZSSS’ endurance was its early focus on worker protection. This was in part an intrinsic goal and in part triggered by growing trade union competition. During this period practically the entire workforce was affected by the lost Yugoslav market, but ZSSS’ endeavours to safeguard workers’ protection and limit unemployment successfully transformed the uncertainty that had engulfed the labour force into a truly impressive mobilizing power. The real extent of this power was first shown to the political elite in early spring 1992, when ZSSS organized a country-wide strike against the salary freeze announced by the government.

KSJS (Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions of Slovenia) is the second-largest trade union confederation. In 2008–2009, it had approximately 60–70,000 members spread across seven national industrial trade unions (public opinion survey 2008; data from KSJS head office 2009). This means that it represented almost a quarter of all trade union members (Broder 2016: 46–47). The largest affiliates were the Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia (SVIZ, Sindikat vzgoje, izobraževanja, znanosti in culture Slovenije) and the Trade Union of Health and Social Services of Slovenia (ZSVS, Sindikat zdravstva in socialnega varstva Slovenije). With almost 40,000 members, SVIZ was comparable to SKEI, the key industrial trade union within ZSSS. ZSVS then had 18,000 members (SJM 2008; KSJS 2009).

KSJS was established in early 2006 when SVIZ joined with some other (smaller) public sector trade unions and formed a new confederation. This most important union merger since 1990 came just a few months after a huge union protest in Ljubljana in 2005 when all trade unions came together to oppose the neoliberal reforms planned by the then centre-right government. At that time, the government also announced
the formation of a new, unified payment system for employees in the public sector. This announcement precipitated the establishment of the new public sector confederation.

The third-largest trade union confederation, with approximately 20,000 members, is KSS Pergam. It was established in June 1991; before then, it was part of ZSSS.

Table 26.2 Key trade union associations, main affiliates, and number of members, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association</th>
<th>Number of affiliates</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
<th>Regional structure</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZSSS</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>150,000–160,000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>SKEI – TU of Metal and Electrical Workers of Slovenia</td>
<td></td>
<td>38,000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNG</td>
<td></td>
<td>11,000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>KSJS</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>60,000–70,000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>SVIZ – Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia</td>
<td></td>
<td>40,000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ZSVS – Trade Union of Health and Social Services of Slovenia</td>
<td></td>
<td>18,000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>KSS PERGAM</td>
<td></td>
<td>20,000&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>No</td>
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Notes: <sup>a</sup>The data on membership distribution across the main trade union confederations are based on data collected through public opinion surveys in 2008, before the global financial crisis struck.

<sup>b</sup>Data based on their own reporting.

While ZSSS remains anchored in traditional industries and is still an organization of blue-collar workers, KSJS advocates a powerful role for the public sector in society and the protection of public sector employees. ZSSS includes company trade unions networked in broader sectoral and territorial organizations. ZSSS is a relatively centralized organization, but the leaders of affiliated industrial unions have strong influence within the confederation. Its leadership consists of a chair, a secretary-general, executive secretaries, and three vice-chairs (representatives of the industrial, service and public sectors). The Presidency, composed of all industrial trade unions, is the most important decision-making body.

KSJS is organized by sector. Its membership is organized formally at the level of agencies within the public sector, for example, education
and health care. Industrial organizations retain considerable autonomy; their members identify more strongly with industrial unions than with the confederation. The KSJS leadership partly overlaps with that of the Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia (SVIZ), which is by far the largest affiliate, representing approximately two-thirds of KSJS membership. The head office of KSJS is located on the premises of the SVIZ. KSJS regularly cooperates with other confederations and industrial trade unions, although tensions occasionally arise, mainly regarding representation and wage imbalances in the public sector.

While ZSSS’ sectoral trade unions are representative in almost all industries in the private sector and negotiate the majority of the twenty-six collective agreements, KSS Pergam was the sole representative union organization in the graphic, paper, publishing, newspaper and information industries. It recently expanded its operations to the public sector and other parts of the private sector. Since 2000, it has also represented workers in health care, road infrastructure, compulsory social security, centres for social work, veterinary activities, university education, air traffic, and various professionals, such as laboratory technicians, medical biochemists, pilots, pharmacists, radiologists and university teachers.

One advantage of ZSSS compared with other confederations is its region-based structure, which simplifies interaction with its members across all regions of Slovenia. At the moment, it has eight regional organizations, fifty-eight regular employees and three employees under contract. By contrast, KSJS has two regular employees; SVIZ, its largest affiliate, has twelve employees; while KSS Pergam has seven employees.

Overall, opinion survey data suggest that the expansion of confederations, which culminated in 2006 with the foundation of KSJS, was concurrent with a latent, yet indicative counter trend: interest-based fragmentation, which persisted and even strengthened under the formal trend of mergers. According to public opinion survey data from 2008, approximately 20 per cent of participants who were formally included in confederations through industrial trade unions identified primarily with their company trade unions. As regards ZSSS, in 2015 around one-quarter of its members chiefly identified with the Trade Union of Metal and Electrical Workers of Slovenia (SKEI), the biggest ZSSS affiliate (Broder 2016: 47). In short, formally speaking, trade union membership is concentrated in the two largest confederations, with blue-collar workers covered by ZSSS and white-collar workers by KSJS. Within the framework of this formal membership concentration, however, another
trend is apparent: interest-based fragmentation, combined with a number of smaller trade unions outside the large confederations.

**Unionization**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Slovenian trade union scene became pluralized. This change was characterized by a massive decline in membership. Both trends were comparable to those in other ‘post-communist’ countries. One feature that sets Slovenia apart, however, was the early de-politicization of the entire trade union movement and the consolidation of membership in the mid-1990s, when trade union density had stabilized at around 40 per cent.

Since 2005, public opinion surveys have recorded a new, relatively steep drop in unionization. According to a 2005 survey, the unionization rate was 37.1 per cent, but only three years later, it had decreased to 26.6 per cent and, after the crisis, in 2015 it was just 19.9 per cent (see Table 26.3).

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<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/1</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
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The public opinion survey data and conversations with representatives of the two largest confederations in 2009 lead us to conclude that, after Slovenia joined the EU and as early as during the pre-crisis period, trade unions experienced the most dramatic decline in their memberships, causing their restructuring.

To sum up, the overall membership of autonomous trade unions in Slovenia stabilized during the economic growth of the 1990s. During the period of extraordinary economic performance preceding the crisis, however, approximately fifteen years ago, they began to experience sharp drops in membership, from 43.7 per cent in 2003, the level it reached in the second half of the 1990s, to 26.6 per cent in 2008, even before the outbreak of the economic crisis. This means a decline of 17 percentage
points within only five years or, in absolute numbers, a fall from roughly 420,000 to 280,000 members. Put differently, between 2003 and 2008, Slovenian trade unions lost one-third of their membership. These aggregate figures mask important membership developments as regard gender, age, education and industry, which will be tackled in the remainder of this section.

From 1991, when Slovenia gained its independence, to 2008, trade union membership was gender-balanced, but this changed in 2009 (see Figure 26.1). The rise in the number of women coincided with the rise in the share of members with a college and university education, and the more agile trade union activity in the public sector, primarily in various areas of education.

**Figure 26.1** Gender structure of union membership, 1991–2019

![Gender structure of union membership, 1991–2019](image)


A look at the age structure shows that generational renewal slowed down during the period 2003–2007, and practically stopped at the beginning of the economic crisis. There was a continuous fall in the share of younger members between 2009 and 2015 (see Figure 26.2). In 1991, almost one-quarter of all union members were below 30 years of age, and only slightly more than 1 per cent were older than 60. If we observe these two border age groups over the years, it becomes obvious that the share of the youngest members sharply declined, so that in 2015 they accounted
for just 2 per cent of membership, while the share of older members increased to slightly over 14 per cent. Overall, the figures illustrate that the inflow of new members, especially younger ones, was (and continues to be) critically weak.

**Figure 26.2** Age structure of union membership, 1991–2019

![Graph showing age structure of union membership, 1991–2019](image)


Figure 26.3 shows the fluctuation in the proportion of members with elementary and vocational education levels, on one hand, and members with secondary, college and university education levels, on the other. During the period following Slovenia’s independence, almost 60 per cent of union members had lower educational levels; of those, half had completed elementary education. Their share dropped steadily in the subsequent period, with smaller or larger deviations, reaching its lowest point in 2017–2018. As regards those with secondary, college or university educational levels, the situation was exactly the opposite. The initial 42 per cent share gradually increased, with occasional oscillations, and accounts for well over one-half of members. The 2015 survey shows that slightly more than 30 per cent of union members were university graduates. Surveys conducted after 2015 reveal that their share increased to 40 per cent, making them the largest group. With regard to members who have completed only elementary education, smaller oscillations were observed, but over the past five years their share has been steady at around 10 per cent.
The changes in the proportion of members with elementary and university education levels are generally connected to changes in the total population: the percentage of college or university graduates has increased somewhat over the years, while the percentage of people who have only completed elementary education has decreased. These trends are not as conspicuous among the general population as they are among trade union members.

The changes in employment across sectors have been gradual. At the beginning of the transition in 1991, the industrial sector had the highest number of workers, almost half of the total workforce (45.1 per cent), but then the services sector pulled ahead. But despite the rise in employment in services, the industrial sector’s share in total employment in Slovenia remains comparatively high. Even during the period 2009–2013, when the pressure of the crisis was high, it never dropped below 30 per cent, and after the crisis it bounced back to almost the pre-crisis level (34.1 per cent). (Ignjatović 2010: 145; LFS data).

During the past three decades, trade union density in the public sector has been relatively stable; a significant decline was observed between 2005 and 2007 (after Slovenia joined the EU, when the first right-wing government was in power), and then again from 2013 to 2015, when the crisis was coming to an end. Throughout the past thirty years, trade union density...
density in the public sector has constantly exceeded the density rate in the ‘real economy’ (privately and publicly owned companies). Before the second turning point in 2003, the density rate in the public sector was 69 per cent compared with 45 per cent in the ‘real’ sector. Ten years later, in 2015, union density in the public sector had fallen to 42 per cent, and to 13 per cent in the ‘real’ sector (Slovenian public opinion surveys, 1991–2019).

Analysis of the longitudinal data collected through the CRANET research (2004, 2008 and 2015) reveals that the de-unionization trend is not uniform across all sectors and that discrepancies have grown in the past decade, covered by the study, that is, during the 2009–2013 crisis and afterwards. The gap between the industrial sector and private sector services widened significantly; de-unionization in private sector services is much more intense than in the industrial sector.

In both cases, de-unionization is related to the rising number of non-standard employment arrangements: between 1991 and 2014 the number of fixed-term and part-time jobs doubled. In 2014, the total share of employees in various flexible work arrangements was 32 per cent. Fixed-term employment, for instance, reached a historical peak with a share of approximately 14 per cent during the period of economic growth preceding the crisis (MDDSZ 2013).

In the decade 2004–2015 non-standard employment arrangements became widespread across private sector services. This sector saw extreme numerical flexibility: serious limits on the number of standard employment arrangements, on one hand, and a conspicuous wave of new, mainly non-standard employment, on the other. Full-time employees in this sector are exposed to intense double pressure: the threat of losing one’s job is compounded by the push for competitiveness generated by non-standard employment arrangements. This strong dual pressure corresponds to the low union density and/or the absence of trade unions in private sector services. In such circumstances, employees’ bargaining position is weak (Stanojević and Čehovin Zajc 2017).

During the same period, the general de-unionization trend in the industrial sector was less intense. There are only a few de-unionized organizations with 100 or more employees. In most organizations in the industrial sector, union density before the crisis was more than 50 per cent, with the rate falling after the crisis.

In 2019, employers in sectors confronted by a shortage of new employees as a result of the record low unemployment rate, low wages
and tough working conditions lobbied the government to relax the entry requirements for migrant workers, not only from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, but other countries as well. The recruitment of such employees to trade unions is harder to achieve, but some unions have still been quite successful in this regard.

More generally, in the face of declining membership, the largest trade unions set about formulating policies and initiatives aimed at recruiting new members from the ranks of young and precarious employees, and from within the industries with low union density. ZSSS, for instance, adopted guidelines for a strategy for organizing workers in trade unions (Vrhovec 2014). A task force was established that focuses exclusively on recruitment. In addition, new trade unions were established: Mladi+ (‘Young+’) and a trade union for precarious workers.1

Young activists, members of Mladi+, emphasize that the key strategy for attracting members was a personal approach because the most common answer to the question of why one was not a union member was ‘because nobody has asked or invited me’. Social media (Facebook and Instagram) activities are also significant for recruiting young members. According to ZSSS, such an active approach, both through (social) media and in person, and endeavours to improve union members’ situation at all levels (company, industry, national), has increased trust in trade unions and led to membership growth in the past two years.

**Union resources and expenditure**

The Representativeness of Trade Unions Act (U.I. RS, No. 13/93) stipulates that representative trade unions should be financed mainly from membership fees. They may also make use of donations and similar sources, such as donor funds, interest payments, sponsorship of individual campaigns and humanitarian aid.

The ZSSS statutes stipulate that it is a non-profit trade union organization, financing its activities through membership fees, project income and other revenues. ZSSS does not levy a fee but receives a certain percentage of its industrial affiliates’ membership fees. The fee that individual members pay to their industrial trade union is 1 per cent of the gross wage. As defined in the Funding Rules adopted by the presidency

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1 See: https://www.mladiplus.si/ and https://www.zsss.si/tag/sindikat-prekarcev/
of ZSSS, the industrial affiliates then pay 9 per cent of this income from membership fees to ZSSS. Similarly, the statutes of KSJS lay down that the confederation should be financed primarily from membership fees paid by affiliated trade unions. It is dependent on the number of union members. SVIZ’s rule book lays down that the monthly membership fee for employed members shall amount to 0.6 per cent of their gross wage (SVIZ 2005).

According to the latest data from ZSSS, KSJS and KSS Pergam, the overwhelming bulk of the unions’ income comes from membership fees. Operating income, which includes membership fees, services provided to industrial trade unions (13 per cent), EU funds (7 per cent), and the union’s newspaper Delavska enotnost (5 per cent) amounted to 97 per cent of ZSSS’ total income. By contrast, other income and financial income formed only a minor part (1.8 and 1 per cent) of total income. After 2017, total income increased until the Covid-19 year 2020, for which data are not yet available. Income and profits are used to implement ZSSS’ five-year programme. Staff pay accounts for most of total expenditure. In 2019, ZSSS spent 71 per cent of its operating expenses to pay staff, including regional structures. Events and union actions, such as demonstrations and referenda, are co-financed by industrial trade unions. The unions have adapted to falling membership by finding new sources of revenues (among others, through increased participation in EU and national projects), cutting material costs and the cost of unnecessary goods and services, and by not replacing employees who are not crucial for member support and implementation of programmes. They have not cut member services.

**Collective bargaining and trade unions at the workplace**

CRANET data covering the decade 2004–2014 clearly reveal a significant decline in collective employment regimes in Slovenian companies. At the start of the decade, union density in most companies exceeded 50 per cent; at the end of the period companies with density rates below 50 per cent prevailed. The decline was most intensive in the private service sector, where precarious workers with transferable skills are concentrated, and less intensive in the industrial and public sector. The result of the process was that unions in industrial companies, with workers with non-transferable skills, started to change gradually into representative bodies.
of these segments of workforce (Stanojević and Čehovin Zajc 2017). According to CRANET data from 2015, in 60.1 per cent of Slovenian companies with 100 and more employees, density rates were below 50 per cent; in 14.2 per cent of companies workers are not unionized. The share of non-unionized companies is lowest in industry (8.2 per cent) and the public sector (10.0 per cent), and highest in private sector services (30.6 per cent).

The collective representation of workers’ interests at the company level in Slovenia is usually dual: works councils are also present in most unionized companies by rule. Works councils are present in 69.2 per cent of companies in industry, and approximately in every second company or organization from market and public sector (Stanojević and Čehovin Zajc 2019: 670–671). In almost 80 per cent of Slovenian companies, unions are involved in bottom-up communication with managers; works councils are involved in this type of communication in less than 60 per cent of companies. Accordingly, unions, which are exclusive negotiators representing employees in collective bargaining at company level, are obviously the more active and relevant workers’ representation body in Slovenian companies (ibid.: 673).

During the period of Slovenia’s accession to the EU, highly centralized collective bargaining was the key instrument for ensuring wage restraint. As shown earlier, during the 1990s wage restraint was the main subject of (macro) political exchange between the social partners within the then system of (competitive) neo-corporatism (see Rhodes 1997). Upon entering the EU and the euro zone, the collective bargaining system began to change. After 2006, the previous, almost 100 per cent collective bargaining coverage decreased. In 2019, it was approximately 70 per cent (Stanojević and Poje 2019). This decline was caused by the changed membership status of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which shifted from mandatory to voluntary. It has been demonstrated above that unions also started to lose members in this period. These shifts occurred amid Slovenia’s accession to the euro zone and the associated exposure of the Slovenian economy to greater competitive pressures. Another aggravating factor was the prolonged financial and economic crisis, causing a double dip recession (2009–2013).

These far-reaching shifts, however, did not lead to a corresponding decrease in collective bargaining coverage. A crucial factor that ensured high levels of bargaining coverage was the introduction of the extension mechanism, which has operated as a functional substitute for the previous
role played by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. A temporary halt to this mechanism occurred when the global crisis struck Slovenia, but after the crisis the previous high levels of bargaining coverage were restored (Stanojević and Poje 2019: 554).

Slovenia’s EU accession triggered a decentralization of collective bargaining in the private sector. In the public sector, centralized bargaining structures were preserved, however, and indeed legally protected with the introduction of a unified payment system in 2008, just before the start of the economic crisis. Accordingly, collective bargaining for the entire public sector could take place exclusively within the parameters of this framework.

In the private sector, the centralized system of collective bargaining encountered obstacles immediately after the country joined the EU. In 2005 employers withdrew from the general collective agreement for the private sector. In the context of economic overheating and rising inflation ahead of the oncoming global crisis, there were attempts to re-centralize the system, but after the crisis central bargaining for the entire private sector was ultimately abandoned. Today, collective bargaining in the private sector takes place at the industry level.

As a consequence, there is a significant difference between the public and private sectors in terms of the level of internal, intra-sectoral coordination of collective bargaining. While coordination is relatively extensive in the public sector, in the private sector, where collective bargaining is decentralized, coordination is weaker. Furthermore, during the past fifteen years, wage-setting in the private sector has been fragmented. The common denominator of this growing fragmentation of wage models is an increase in wage flexibilization. Analysis of collective agreements suggests that there have also been deviations from legal standards with regard to the regulation of working time, particularly overtime work regulation (Stanojević and Poje 2019: 557).

Before the 2009–2013 crisis, the law allowed certain deviations from the favourability principle. After the crisis, these options were legally expanded, enabling greater flexibility in wages, working hours and employment regimes. In a bid to stay competitive, companies exploited gaps in the system: that is, various options were adopted that enabled them to lower standards and ensure more flexible work and employment relations within an otherwise formally well-organized and unified system. It seems the relatively intense de-unionization and the resulting decline in union power over the past fifteen years have contributed to weaken
the regulatory capacity of the collective bargaining system. The result of the legal options allowing for deviations from the favourability principle, combined with the unions’ declining bargaining power, favoured a gradual but significant increase in concession bargaining.

As regards wages, the main union focus was on ensuring decent pay for workers, first by establishing a new payment system in the private sector and second by ensuring an adequate statutory minimum wage for low-wage earners. The later will be dealt with in detail in the section on the unions’ societal power. As regards the former, unions in the private sector, for several years, have been calling on employers’ associations to introduce a new wage model to establish a more realistic price of work and harmonize definitions across different sectors. The present system rests on a wage system dating from the 1990s, which is based on low base wages and is supplemented with various add-ons (extra payments for distribution of working time and unpleasant working conditions as well as payment for years of service). This makes it very complex and opens up possibilities for anomalies. Similarly, when negotiating collective agreements at industry level, trade unions have tried to achieve decent pay for work done and for the regular adjustment of wages with both inflation and productivity growth, following the guidelines of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) (ZSSS 2017: 18–19). During the past fifteen years, they have also worked to reduce the tax burden on wages in order to increase the net salaries of the low and middle class, and to relieve the pressures on the ‘Christmas bonus’ and other performance and vacation bonuses (ibid.: 18).

**Industrial conflict**

Data on strikes are difficult to obtain. During the past thirty years, Slovenia has faced two large strike waves. The first, which first broke out across the former Yugoslavia in 1987, occurred in the period of disassociation from the Yugoslav federation (1988–1992). In Slovenia, this wave abated in 1991, when the country was striving for independence, but resumed in 1992 once independence had been achieved as a new, sovereign state and when the transformation depression had reached its bottom. In 1992, there were almost 200 strikes with an average of 372 strikers per strike. The number of working days lost per 1,000 workers was 189 (Stanojević and Vrhovec 2001). The strike wave mainly swept over the labour-intensive economic industries: that is, industries most
affected by disintegration of the Yugoslav market. It culminated in spring 1992 with a general warning strike organized by ZSSS.

The second wave of strikes broke out when the global crisis reached Slovenia in 2009. The growing dissatisfaction of workers with poor wages and working conditions literally exploded as a large spontaneous strike at Gorenje, an industrial company which produces household appliances and was the second biggest Slovenian exporter. In November 2009, under this pressure from below, unions organized a large-scale protest demanding higher minimum wages and rejecting the government’s proposals to reform the pension system. The resistance continued and both demands were eventually met (Poje 2019; Vrhovec 2010).

In the meantime, during the second half of the 1990s, when strikes in the industrial sector had waned, another wave of less intense strikes engulfed the public sector. It was triggered by demands put forward by FIDES, the trade union of medical doctors, just before the 1996 elections.

Since the late 1990s, strikes have abated but public protests, generally organized by ZSSS, have grown in number. The most important was the large autumn rally in 2005 that attracted roughly 40,000 participants, mostly workers opposed to the government’s attempt to radicalize the already strong trend of neoliberal reforms. The largest union protest in the history of Slovenia was held in November 2007 under the slogan ‘United for higher wages’. In April 2008, the ETUC and ZSSS organized a pan-European rally under the slogan ‘European workers demand higher wages’.

**Political relations**

The unions’ relations with political actors are determined mainly by two factors: their links to political parties and their involvement in corporatist political decision-making bodies. Regarding the former, union confederations had distanced themselves from political parties by the second half of the 1990s and dropped the previous practice of mutual disqualifications based on political and ideological affiliation.

During the first period of the transition, from 1992 to 2004, diverse coalition governments led by the centre-left LDS were willing to cooperate with trade unions. Confronted by union power, on one hand, and the problems caused by inflation and the need to boost economic growth,
on the other, the LDS saw cooperation with the trade unions and their inclusion in the policymaking process as a rational solution. Accordingly, the system of political exchange was institutionalized, or put differently, neo-corporatist regulatory mechanisms were established. In exchange for supporting wage restraint policies, unions were given an opportunity to influence social policies. The result was the quite unconventional and relatively successful ‘post-communist’ variant of a social market economy during the 1990s.

The regime of neo-corporatist regulation began to change visibly some fifteen years ago, prior to the outbreak of the 2009–2013 crisis, when Slovenia was preparing to join the EU and the euro zone. Deregulation of wage policy, by shifting collective bargaining to the industry level was the first response to the new context. The political shift to the right, which had started in 2004, foreshadowed more radical neoliberal reforms. It was followed by a structural reform to ensure a permanent ‘internal devaluation’, which in the crisis period was reinforced by every government, both ‘left’ and ‘right’. These changes worsened the prospects for maintaining the previous practice of systematic political exchanges.

In the crisis period (2009–2013), three governments came to power in Slovenia, representing the centre-left, (2008–2012), the centre-right (2012–2013) and the centre. The last one operated as an approximation of the international Troika consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. At the time, unions were involved in social dialogue with centre-left as well as centre-right governments. The dialogue developed into a huge political conflict with the centre-left government, however. Later, in the context of the prolonged crisis, it was renewed on a more cooperative basis with the centre-right government. In both cases the focus of dialogue was on pension and labour market reforms, which the unions accepted (Stanojević and Krašovec, 2022).

A comparison of the political exchanges during the 1990s and those taking place in the EU context (and in the 2009–2013 crisis) shows that the main subject of exchange in both periods was the welfare system. Because Slovenia is embedded in the euro zone, it engages in competition using ‘internal devaluation’ to curb the cost of the welfare system. In this setting, the unions’ negotiating position is weak. The most they can hope to obtain in exchange for their approval of welfare cuts is a slowing down of the process. Therefore, in the new context, political exchanges, if they still exist at all, are reduced to concession bargaining.
Furthermore, the unions are formally involved in various corporatist political decision-making bodies. One of the most important is the tripartite Economic and Social Council (ESS, *Ekonomsko-socialni svet*) on which all three major confederations are represented. Following the establishment of the ESS in 1994, the ZSSS leadership regularly participated in dialogue. The embeddedness of ZSSS in the work of the ESS is an important external source of the power of its centre, despite sporadic marginalization of the ESS’s operations and role. This not only legitimates ZSSS’ role in society but induces and reinforces the internal integration and centralization of the entire confederation. Following the merger of public sector unions to form KSJS in 2006, the new confederation also became a full member of the ESS. Before then, the scattered public sector trade unions were not represented. Involvement in the ESS is important for the unions because this is where all social and economic issues are discussed and negotiated: pensions, invalidity benefits, social benefits, employment and labour relations, public finances, including taxation and prices.

In addition, ZSSS and KSJS have representatives on the National Council of the Republic of Slovenia. A critical instrument wielded by the Council is its veto on laws. In 2019, by using a veto, unions successfully prevented the adoption of a law that would have removed the allowance for work activity and endangered the most vulnerable employees. In addition to these policymaking bodies, the unions are also represented on governing and administrative bodies of welfare state institutions, such as the Administrative Boards of the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute of Slovenia (ZPIZ) and of the Health Insurance Institute of Slovenia (ZZZS), the board of the Employment Service of Slovenia, the supervisory board and the Committee of Compulsory Supplementary Pension Insurance (ODPZ), and the Economic and Social Expert Committee at the Slovenian State Holding company.

**Societal power**

In addition to their representation in various corporative political decision-making bodies, unions’ societal power also stems from their active cooperation with civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which is crucial for ZSSS and KSJS. This cooperation bore fruit, for instance, when opposing the EU-USA Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the EU-Canada Economic and
Trade Agreement (CETA), as well as in referenda on mini-jobs and the pension reform in 2013. Other areas of joint activities include issues such as the demographic fund, long-term care, violence at the workplace, equal pay for equal work and work–life balance.

One of the most successful public campaigns conducted by the unions in cooperation with civil society and NGOs are the various initiatives to turn the minimum wage into a living wage by ensuring that the statutory minimum wage reflects the minimum cost of living. The unions’ fight for an adequate minimum wage has a long history. The statutory minimum wage was re-introduced in 1995 on the unions’ initiative and based on a tripartite agreement. Since then until 2015 its definition has remained unchanged.

After the Second World War, a guaranteed personal income – the so-called guaranteed wage – was established. The critical problem with the guaranteed wage and the reason for the unions’ demand for the introduction of a statutory minimum wage was the link between social transfers and the guaranteed wage. The government did not adjust the guaranteed wage for inflation, intending to curb the costs of social transfers in times of high inflation, consequently reducing its real value dramatically. The introduction of the statutory minimum wage thus ensured a higher minimum wage at a more decent level, while at the same time, not affecting increases in social transfers, which remained tied to the guaranteed wage (Poje 2019). The unions argued that a minimum wage is payment for work and not a social transfer paid by the state to people who cannot work, and as such, it has to be set high enough to enable a decent standard of living.

The unions achieved a major breakthrough on the way to an adequate minimum wage in 2010 when, as a consequence of a large-scale campaign involving a series of protests and strikes, complemented by large demonstrations to put pressure in the government, they achieved an increase of the statutory minimum wage by 23 per cent. Furthermore, the new minimum wage law (ZminP in Slovenian) stipulated that the minimum wage should be adjusted annually at least to inflation. The next step was taken in 2015 when the unions successfully campaigned for a change to the minimum wage legislation in order to exclude from the calculation of the minimum wage payments for night, Sunday and holiday work (Poje 2019). This campaign once again involved a series of public events to raise public awareness. The unions also collected almost 30,000 signatures to demonstrate broad public support. In 2018, the aspiration to a
living wage ensuring a decent standard of living was realized with another change to the minimum wage legislation, which excluded all extra payments from the minimum wage definition by 2020 and set the statutory minimum wage at 20 per cent above the minimum cost of living from 2021 onwards (Poje 2019). The unions’ fight for a living wage illustrates how public campaigns are increasingly integrated into their repertoire of action for achieving their objectives. This also includes the increased use of modern means of communication through publications on websites, Facebook, Instagram and other media.

**Trade union policies towards the European Union**

Slovenian trade unions have always considered it essential to connect with other trade unions from Europe and the former Yugoslavia. The key is the idea of solidarity, that they will be more successful with the right information, including on best practices. International cooperation provides an advantage in negotiations with the government and employers (Vrhovec 2019).

Since 1999, ZSSS has been the only full member of the ETUC from Slovenia. Its representatives can influence the ETUC’s standpoints, policies and decisions, while its membership also carries the responsibility for implementing policies agreed at European level. The ZSSS representatives participate in the ETUC’s permanent committees, working groups and pan-European projects. They participate in negotiating groups in the context of the European social dialogue and cooperate with the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), the European trade union research centre.

ZSSS affiliates consider it important to raise the European trade union federations’ (ETUFs) awareness that trade unions from smaller EU states have fewer members and human and financial resources for international cooperation, and thus less capacity to influence EU policies. These trade unions often need the professional assistance of the European Federations in various areas such as collective bargaining, training, organizing, the exchange of experience, works councils, and labour and social protection of workers to prevent social dumping. For this purpose, it would be helpful for the affiliates of the Slovenian confederations to be regularly informed about the activities of the European federations, even if they are not members of the respective ETUFs.
ZSSS expects the ETUC to inform its members in a timely and regular manner on developments at European level. It strives for better assistance with interpreting EU directives’ provisions and greater engagement by the ETUC in introducing and implementing minimum standards at EU level. ZSSS leadership say they would like to see greater and more active inclusion in implementing projects financed by the European Commission and emphasize that the ETUC should pay more attention to individual regions’ specificities when implementing policies, for instance the Balkans. ZSSS is acutely aware of fractions within the ETUC which weaken its capacity to act and pose obstacles to enhancing workers’ and social rights because positions on specific issues are sometimes diametrically opposed, depending on the prevailing national tradition and union practices. It also points out that the ETUC is an organization of equal members, not merely accountable to the Brussels leadership.

ZSSS participates in efficient cross-border cooperation within the framework of the Interregional Trade Union Council of Friuli-Julian Province (Italy) and Slovenia. ZSSS has also established the Interregional Trade Union Council of Austrian Carinthia and Styria and Slovenian Upper Carniola, Styria and Carinthia. Members of ZSSS participate in the regional Solidarnost Council which brings together trade unions from the territories of former Yugoslavia. It works closely with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Zagreb, and its Belgrade-based regional project for labour relations and social dialogue. The cooperation of trade unions in such councils is crucial in the light of workers’ free movement, and it is useful to compare labour legislation and collective agreements, and to exchange experiences.

Moreover, ZSSS has representatives on the management board of EUROFOUND, the management board of CEDEFOP, the advisory boards of the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT), the Advisory Committee on the Free Movement of Workers (ACFMW), the Advisory Committee for Safety and Health at Work (ACSH), the European Social Fund, and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Representatives of all three trade union confederations (ZSSS, KSJS, KSS Pergam) are also members of the ECOSOC2 (European Economic and Social Committee). Furthermore, all three

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2 This is part of civil society dialogue: social partners’ interests are harmonised with NGOs’ interests. The social dialogue is a part of a wider civil dialogue.
Confederations cooperate with the ILO, drawing on its expertise and actively participating in various seminars and conferences.

Conclusions

Analysis of developments during the past thirty years yields five distinct processes that have shaped the Slovenian trade union movement. First, despite the high ‘market share’ of one confederation, the composition of trade unions and relationships among various key unions have changed. After the early ideological/political splits, trade unions depoliticized their activities and became more stable. Throughout the past thirty years, the biggest organization has been ZSSS, a confederation of blue-collar workers, traditionally firmly anchored in manufacturing industry, especially its export sector. After the second turning point of industrial relations marked by EU accession in 2004, several larger public sector trade union organizations formed KSJS as the second biggest confederation in 2006. The third-largest confederation is PERGAM. The relationship between the confederations and their affiliates changed from one characterized by ideological splits to one characterized by interest-based fragmentation, a new phenomenon in Slovenian industrial relations since joining the EU.

Second, the relatively high union density of around 40 per cent in the 1990s began to plummet after Slovenia joined the EU, along with an abrupt change in the composition of union membership as regards gender, age and education. The recruitment of young people slowed down during the years of economic growth preceding the global crisis and practically came to a standstill after the beginning of the crisis. The share of union members with an elementary level of education has been declining more rapidly than the share of such individuals in the general population; at the same time, the share of members with higher/college education is increasing more rapidly than the share of such individuals in the general population. Both trends were conspicuous after the second juncture and related to the changes in relationships among union members within the ‘real economy’ and the public sector.

After the second turning point, unionization in the public sector was quite stable, while the ‘real economic sector’ witnessed de-unionization, with the trend being most pronounced in the sub-sector of private services. As regards the market sector, the de-unionization trend is most
pronounced in the catering industry, followed by retail (where to some degree it has reversed recently). In certain industries that were seriously affected by the 2009–2013 crisis, the number of union members dropped during the crisis and then stabilized. Membership within the industrial sector is stable; after the second juncture (and the crisis), in companies with 100 plus workers slightly less than half of the employees remain unionized.

Third, after EU accession, the historically highly centralized system of collective bargaining in the private sector was decentralized and transposed to the industry level, as well as partly deregulated. In the public sector, however, the high level of centralization has been preserved and revived. In the ‘real economic sector’, decentralization to the industrial level allowed, despite the high collective bargaining coverage, deviations from the favourability principle and led to a gradual decline in the regulatory capacity of the entire collective bargaining system.

Fourth, industrial relations became less conflictual. In the years preceding the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia there was a strong wave of worker strikes, which resumed in 1992, soon after the country gained its independence. The strike movement abated in the mid-1990s, renewed as a second strike wave in 2009, at the beginning of the economic crisis. In the meantime and after the second wave, strikes were substituted by massive public protests in the unions’ repertoire of action.

Fifth, during the 1990s trade unions in Slovenia had a conspicuous influence on the shaping of public policies – comparable to that seen in some Western countries after the Second World War. In the past fifteen years, namely after the second turning point, their influence has been decreasing.

In short, analysis of the trade union landscape during the past thirty years illustrates that there was a strong trade union movement during the 1990s. After Slovenia joined the EU and EMU, a crisis developed that led to a sharp drop in membership and a weakening of its social influence. The process has been uneven, moving towards dualization (Visser 2019) of the entire trade union scene. The workforce segments in the industrial and public sectors are still relatively well unionized, but weak unionization and de-unionization have occurred as the prevailing feature of private sector services.

This raises two key questions: first, what explains the strength of the trade unions in Slovenia during the 1990s? Second, why has the strong
Slovenian trade union movement suffered such dramatic membership losses in the past fifteen years? Concerning the first question, this chapter suggests that one explanation is the heritage of the former self-management regime in which workers had a voice within companies. When the changes made to the ‘market economy’ began to stifle this voice, the trade unions managed successfully to translate the voice of workers into the voice of trade unions, demanding preservation of the welfare system, protection of workers and those who lost their jobs when the Yugoslav market disintegrated. These focused policies gave rise to autonomous trade unions in the 1990s, in which the majority of members were industrial workers. The autonomous union movement of industrial workers began to take part in neo-corporatist political exchanges, which ensured economic growth in the 1990s while preserving the features of the welfare state.

After EU accession, these framework conditions changed dramatically, leading to a drop in membership. First, the decrease in the number of industrial workers reflected the shrinking of the industrial trade union base, although the intensity of this decline was greater than demographic changes. Second, once the Slovenian economy was fully integrated into the European single market, pressure on workers was systematically escalated. After joining the EMU, the export sector was left without its previous incentive (incremental devaluation), which when combined with the wage restraint policies provided a competitive edge. Because of this change, neo-corporatist exchanges immediately became less important.

The country’s joining of the euro zone triggered a need in the export sector to substitute the former incremental devaluation with an ‘internal devaluation’. In the initial period, however, the tradition of social-partnership regulation was still strong and ‘internal devaluation’ was still not on the agenda (flexibilization of the labour market, liberalization of dismissal regimes, limits on public sector expenditure and the like). Therefore, work intensification was the earliest form of ‘internal devaluation’ in Slovenia.

Before the crisis, gradual changes in work regimes were compounded by the second wave of privatization and corresponding reorganizations, including outsourcing and an increase in non-standard employment arrangements. These pressures, which during the crisis period were combined with structural reforms, resulted in abrupt de-unionization and the liberalization of the entire system of industrial relations dating from the 1990s, along with other changes.
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**Interviews**

Lidija Jerkič, President of the SKEI (9 April 2009)

Dušan Semolič, president of the ZSSS (31 March 2009)

Branimir Štrukelj, president of the KSJS and general secretary of the ESTUS (17 April 2009)

Pavle Vrhovec, executive secretary of the ZSSS (31 March 2009)

**Data sets**

Slovene Public Opinion Surveys 1991–2019, Ljubljana, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Centre.

**Abbreviations**

ESS Economic and Social Council (*Ekonomsko-socialni Svet*)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>KNSS</td>
<td>Independence, Confederation of New Slovenian Trade Unions (Konfederacija novih sindikatov Slovenije)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS-90</td>
<td>Trade Union Confederation 90 (Konfederacija sindikatov 90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KSJS</td>
<td>Public Sector Trade Unions (Konfederacija sindikatov javnega sektorja)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KSS PERGAM</td>
<td>Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovenia PERGAM (Trade unions in paper and graphic industry) (Konfederacija sindikatov Slovenije Pergam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDS</td>
<td>Liberal Democrats of Slovenia (Liberalna demokracija Slovenije)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDS</td>
<td>Social Democratic party of Slovenia, now the Slovenian Democratic Party (Socialdemokratska stranka Slovenije, now: Slovenska demokratska stranka)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKEI</td>
<td>Trade Unions in Metal and Electrical Industry (Sindikat kovinarstva in elektro industrije)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVIZ</td>
<td>Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia (Sindikat vzgoje, izobraževanja in znanosti Slovenije)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZLSD</td>
<td>Associated List of Social Democrats, now the Social Democrats (Združena lista socialnih demokratov, now: Socialni demokrati)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZSSS</td>
<td>Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZSVS</td>
<td>Trade Union of Health and Social Services of Slovenia (Sindikat zdravstva in socialnega varstva Slovenije)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>