

Innovative union practices
in Central-Eastern Europe

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'[E]ven organisations with limited institutional power and a shrinking membership base can act strategically: through targeted and well-planned actions, they can exert a considerable impact on working conditions and policy-making outcomes in their respective countries'

Central and eastern European (CEE) labour movements have traditionally been portrayed as powerless and passive in the industrial relations literature. Since the mid-2000s, however, there has been growing evidence of worker mobilisation and the use of new tools and organising methods by CEE trade unions. These trends have become even more pronounced during the crisis, but have not yet been systematically analysed.

In a bid to address this gap, this new ETUI book examines innovative practices developed by trade unions in 11 post-socialist EU Member States since 2008. It accordingly distinguishes between different forms of innovation with regard to unions' organisational structures, the choice of strategies, and the selection of target group/ audience. The concluding chapter summarises the findings, assesses the sustainability of union innovations and discusses their impact on the countries' industrial relations systems and the established roles that the unions hold in them.

Key findings

- In countries in which unions have limited power, large-scale successes testifying to the 'rebirth' of trade unionism are relatively rare. Even in such unfavourable contexts, however, unions may implement small-scale adjustments that constitute a timely and apt response to internal or external challenges.
- CEE trade unions launched a wide array of innovative initiatives ranging from anonymous union membership to mutual financial aid schemes. They have also reached out beyond their traditional constituencies and bargained on behalf of atypical workers.
- Innovative union practices in CEE were launched mainly in response to government-imposed limitations on collective and individual employee rights, the decline in the membership rate alongside the failure of traditional union instruments, and the emergence of new forms of employment. Union agency also played an important role.
- Despite the established differences in the countries' socioeconomic setups, patterns of union innovation were very similar across the CEE region. Specifically, unions in all examined countries engaged in mass demonstrations and campaigns and made use of direct democracy tools as ways of reaching and mobilising the wider public.



European Trade Union Institute,
2017
Book
244 pages



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- Social partners in CEE are increasingly opting for legislative solutions to labour market problems, which might further weaken collective bargaining as a mode of employment regulation.
- Innovative union practices have considerable limitations. They often take a form of 'best practice', pursued at the margins of established labour movements. Moreover, there is a risk of 'projectisation', i.e. excessive dependence of the initiatives on project funding or the involvement of external actors. This is the case, for example, with the Baltic Organising Academy active in Estonia and other Baltic states, as well as with Slovenia's Migration Office.
- Despite the above limitations, union innovations in the new EU Member States can serve as inspiration for labour organisations in other EU countries. In the post-crisis reality marked by austerity and increasing precarity, experiences from the region in which the defence of basic employee rights constituted a daunting challenge long before the downturn might be particularly instructive.

Key data

Table 1. Examples of innovative trade union practices in CEE

Dimension of innovation	Examples	Countries
Organisational	<p>Anonymous membership scheme</p> <p>Creation of new unions and employee representation groups</p> <p>Improved coordination among union confederations and/ or the creation of a trade union coordination centre</p>	<p>Czechia, Lithuania</p> <p>Slovakia, Hungary, Czechia, Poland</p> <p>Lithuania, Poland</p>
Strategic	<p>Large-scale organising drive</p> <p>Electronic, interactive internet site/electronic TU platform with intranet access for union members</p> <p>New forms of protest: resignation campaigns, use of PR tools and social media</p> <p>Knowledge contests and training courses on labour law and OSH for secondary and vocational school pupils</p> <p>Use of direct democracy tools: initiating referenda on social topics combined with signature-gathering exercises</p>	<p>Estonia</p> <p>Bulgaria, Romania</p> <p>Slovakia, Hungary, Czechia</p> <p>Latvia, Bulgaria</p> <p>Croatia, Romania, Poland</p>
Target group	<p>Organising and provision of multiple services to disadvantaged groups (migrants, young people and precarious workers)</p> <p>Lobbying for stricter regulation of temporary agency work</p> <p>Recruitment drive in previously unorganised sectors (IT, waste disposal, security services)</p>	<p>Slovenia, Hungary</p> <p>Czechia, Slovakia, Poland</p> <p>Romania, Croatia, Poland</p>

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