

Patterns of post-socialist unionism:

Bulgarian labour unions after 1991

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Presented at 2021 GLRC Graduate Student Symposium, York University

GLRC Working Paper Series

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Abstract

This paper looks at Bulgarian labour unions' adaption to the fundamental shift from real socialism to a more liberal-democratic model since 1991. It discusses the appearance of a multitude of labour organisations on the country's idiosyncratic path of post-socialist extrication from Soviet-style centralism. It looks at how labour unions' operations and their relationships with political parties changed in light of the mutated legal and political framework. With this background, the paper analyses the general trends characterising labour unions' activity to assess qualitatively their development since the communist party was ousted from power. The paper concludes that the changes of the early post-socialist era influenced the way trade unionism evolved up to the current day, imposing a heavy mortgage on labour unions' ability to be a relevant political actor.

Keywords: Bulgaria, post-socialism, civil society

Introduction: Rediscovering post-socialist unionism

The concept of 'civil society' (CS) has been a central trope in the study of post- and late-socialist, East Europe (Arato, 1981; Mudde, 2002; Nelson, 1996; Smolar, 1996). Generally speaking, the mainstream scholarship side-lined the study of labour unions *per se* and incorporated it within a larger research project focusing on CS (Varga, 2013). Essentially, this amalgamation of labour relations and civil society – two different fields of enquiry – was functional to Westernised definitions of CS in post-socialist Europe (Telarico, 2021, pp. 17–18). The mainstream literature defined civil society (in-line with a predominantly West-European perception) as "de facto agents of democracy" (Kamat, 2003, p. 65). Thus, the presence or absence of the development of CSOs allowed commentators to explain the relative success (as in the case of Poland) and/or failure (as in the case of Russia) of democratic consolidation in a number of post-communist countries (cf. Kubicek, 2002, p. 603).

There are two reasons why this approach is totally inadequate to describe the reality of post-socialist East Europe. The first is *conceptual*, whereas the second relates to its *practical* consequences. Conceptually, Western work on CS and its relationship to democratic transitions in Eastern Europe ignored the combination of idiosyncratic, national pre-socialist histories that combined with a shared Soviet/socialist legacy to shape the context in which post-socialist¹ CS act (Marzec & Neubacher, 2020). *Practically*, scholars took unions' increasing irrelevance in the West as a faithful indicator of their irrelevance in establishing post-socialist democracies (Kubicek, 1999). Yet unions and other forms of organised labour played a large role in the emergence of liberal-democracy in West Europe (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2019; Rueschmeyer et al., 2000/2013). Thus, the academic and political 'common sense' articulated around the idea that unions play little role in a democratic society is an inaccurate portrayal. Eventually, this common-sense Western vision depoliticised unions and contributed to a neoliberal tendency to elevate the position and views of employers at the expense of unions. As a result, the working class grew predictably disillusioned (Przeworski, 1991).

In contributing to a re-assessment of labour unions' role in post-socialist East Europe, this paper focuses on the case of Bulgaria. Most recently, political elites' disregard for liberal-democratic values and the European social-market economy has become undeniable. Meanwhile, this small, open economy on Europe's (and, since 2007, the EU's) south-eastern periphery has watered strong tides. After the post-Great recession economic recovery was delayed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, Bulgarian workers are facing the third inflationary shock of the post-socialist period after similar episodes in 1991/2 and 1996/7 (see Telarico, 2022). Despite the unceasing assault

¹ 'Post-socialism' is an approach to the study of former communist countries holding that having been ruled by communist parties is one of the dominant forces in determining these countries' current social structure.

on workers' rights in the country, the resistance of labour unions is absent. Arguably, a better examination of this crucial case study can shed a light on under-researched patterns in post-socialist unionism.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section deconstructs the Western definition of CS and its transplantation into East Europe and proves that its boundaries cannot fit post-socialist unions. The second shortly summarises labour's weakening in Bulgaria, linking this development to the peculiarities of the post-socialist transformation. In conclusion, this examination reveals that the ideology underlying the mainstream understanding of labour unions has hollowed out post-socialist democracy and paved the way for its demise.

The failed transplant of 'civil society'

Originally, 'civil society' indicated that sphere of society situated between private life and politics (cf. Pelczynski, 1984, pp. 197–227). Successive extensions of the concept have included non-violent conflict, self-organisation, autonomy from the State and the markets as defining features (Telarico, 2021, p. 15). However, the term was meant to describe a set of interrelated socio-political changes that took place in Western Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area (Dunn & Hann, 2004) in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Normative conceptualisations and 'neoliberal' approaches

Therefore, "most studies of civil society are mainly normative, both in their conceptualization and in their theoretical assumptions" (Kopecký & Mudde, 2003, p. 1). This simple fact has led to a number of hardships for the anthropological and sociological literature on the topic. In fact, oftentimes social scientists tend to act like Western social engineers who try to install Western-like civil society in non-Western context [...], they are often preoccupied with studying and advancing the emancipatory dimension of various forms of social mobilization and organizing, while they tend to neglect [...] the workings of non-Western equivalents of civil society (Kubik, 2005, p. 120).

Essentially, this conceptualisation of civil society as a pluralistic constellation of collective actors, each advancing its own interest determines the essence of the 'neoliberal' models of CS often found in the literature (Cellarius & Staddon, 2002). Despite the Western habit of applying this definition to any human society, the contextual elements that they unwittingly overlook or assimilate into their definitions make such notions inapplicable to diverse post-socialist contexts (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002). In this sense, it can be misleading to shackle CS to the mantra of non-violence and/or civil resistance (Bermeo & Nord, 2000; as, e.g., Calhoun, 1992; and other works written in the spirit of Habermas,

1962). In fact, the civil societies of post-socialist South-Eastern Europe (SEE) have been a cradle of several organisations that went "from voting to fighting and back" (Mochtak, 2018). Ignoring these cases makes it "easy to conclude that such tribal atavism" has no place "in an increasingly interconnected 'capitalist' world [...] transcending the antagonism and parochialism of old borders" (Mudde & Eatwell, 2002, p. x). Moreover, approaches such as Marzec's which posit "not being part of the state" (who builds on insights by Bermeo & Nord, 2000; 2018, p. 6) as a precondition of CS can be misleading. If anything, the hyper-politicisation and the spirit of real socialism (Joravsky, 2016) survives under different conditions, so that [Civil society] organizations can combine different functions such as service provision with exerting political influence, and therefore that dichotomous understandings of civil society organizations are not helpful if we are to understand local civil societies. (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017, pp. 10–11)

Misfitting post-socialist labour unions

Despite the theoretical assimilation of labour unions to CSOs, the post-socialist countries *realpolitik* told a different story. In fact, the assumptions and axioms underlying normative definitions of CS were unverifiable phantasies that overshadowed the ambiguous nature of post-socialist unionism (cf. Gordon & Temkina, 1993). In reality, anti-communist political elites antagonised the larger unions due to their ties with the ex-communist parties in Bulgaria (Yosifov, 2019), as well as Russia (Cook, 1993, p. 210ff), Poland and elsewhere (Blejer & Coricelli, 1995). In sum, political elites praised 'neoliberal' CSOs without respite while neglecting and repressing unions (Geddes, 1994; Haggard & Kaufman, 1997; Valenzuela, 1989).

Thus the 'normative' or 'neoliberal' definition of CS emphasises the coexistence of a number of traits that bear little or no resemblance to many CSOs in Bulgaria and post-socialist East Europe. Moreover, this conceptualisation is a bad fit for labour unions, whose activities are not articulated towards an abstract 'common good', but rather a very concrete 'class good'. In a way, labour unions are "not entirely 'civic' [... in the sense of] being oriented towards positions that seek to benefit the polity or the citizenry as a whole" (Kubicek, 2002, p. 605). Thus, insofar as they are intrinsically partisan, unions are closer to what Kopecký and Mudde (2003) label 'uncivil society'. Virtually, the mainstream literature overlooks the antagonistic class relations that underpin labour unions (Ost, 1993).

An alternative definition: Civil society as a process (CSP)

In order to distance the analysis from mainstream definitions from their normative and 'neoliberal' elements, the notion of 'civil society as a process' has been proposed (Telarico, 2021, pp. 15-18 ff.). This approach relies on the studies of the philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the social scientist Robert

Michels. The former theorised that elites can exert power either as consensual hegemony or as coercive domination (Gramsci, 1947, pp. 233–238). Meanwhile, the latter proved that he ‘who says organization, says oligarchy’ (Michels, 1915) according to a pattern that ‘has always reasserted itself, just as a gyroscope will always return to equilibrium, however far it is pushed one way or the other.’ (1949, p. 148) Against this background, CS appears rather as a ‘process’ (Kaldor, 2003, p. 585) than a ‘fact’ of social life characterised. Essentially, civil society as a process (CSP) consists of the consensual cooperation between individuals and the collateral acceptance of the power structure that emerges within any formal or informal group. Ultimately, CSP’s provides these collectives – in which individuals organise voluntarily – tools to contest, co-operate with, and fight against the power and standing of any institution and organisation. Contrary to neoliberal model of CS, it does not imply any democratising, non-violent, or emancipatory attribute. As such, it is much more flexible and adaptive to different contexts.

Bringing labour unions in from the cold

By widening the scope of CS’s definition and including a procedural element to its formation and activities, the proposed definition brings labour unions ‘in from the cold’. In fact, unions are essentially voluntary organisations endowed with a formal power structure that moderates and contests the exploitation of labour (Jack Fiorito et al., 1991).

As such, unions play a crucial role in fostering a liberal-democracy and the associated social-market economy. In fact, democracy depends on the existence of multiple interests and, crucially, of fair representation. And labourers represent a significant share – and, sometimes, an outright majority – of the populace in Bulgaria and most other post-socialist countries (Carlos Vacas-Soriano & Enrique Fernández-Macías, 2017). In order to foster workers’ welfare, unions oppose the exploitative dimension of the post-socialist transition to a deregulated, anti-social market economy. In practice, this meant opposing, either peacefully or aggressively, the tunnelling of State-owned assets into privatisation and the emergence of a new capitalist ‘ruling class’ in post-socialist societies (see Kubicek, 2002, p. 606). Clearly, this explains political elites’ hostility to labour unions and their marginalisation. However, unions’ dismantlement happened at a different tempo and in dissimilar ways across the region.

The marginalisation of Bulgarian labour unions

Given that the definition of CSP allows to consider labour unions as a specific instance of CSO, this paper follows approaches and theories from this latter field. However, adopting CSP as the underlying

definition of CS ensures the dose of criticalness necessary to provide an original contribution to the debate on unions' role in post-socialist East Europe.

Quantitative approach: Resource-mobilisation theory

Looking through the lenses of the resource-mobilisation theory, the key to CSOs' success is their resources and, above all, their memberships (Heery & Abbott, 2000; Manky, 2018; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Indeed, in the protests that accompanied real-socialism's fall, a great deal of symbolic resources compensated the limited membership (Pfaff & Yang, 2001). However, in the case of labour unions, members are an organisation's bread and butter: they pay the fees that support the unions' power structure, participate in strikes and so on. Moreover, in Bulgaria labour unions must register a certain number of members to be considered 'representative' nationwide and acquire legal standing vis-à-vis employers and state apparatuses (Topalov, 2013).

Significantly, labour union membership has been declining everywhere in Europe since the 1980s (Eme, 2020). And this decay has been especially evident in post-socialist countries, as Figure 1 demonstrates. Clearly, Bulgaria's workforce was already less unionised than in most other countries in the region in 1998. However, this has not spared the country from witnessing a downward trend similar to that of its neighbours.

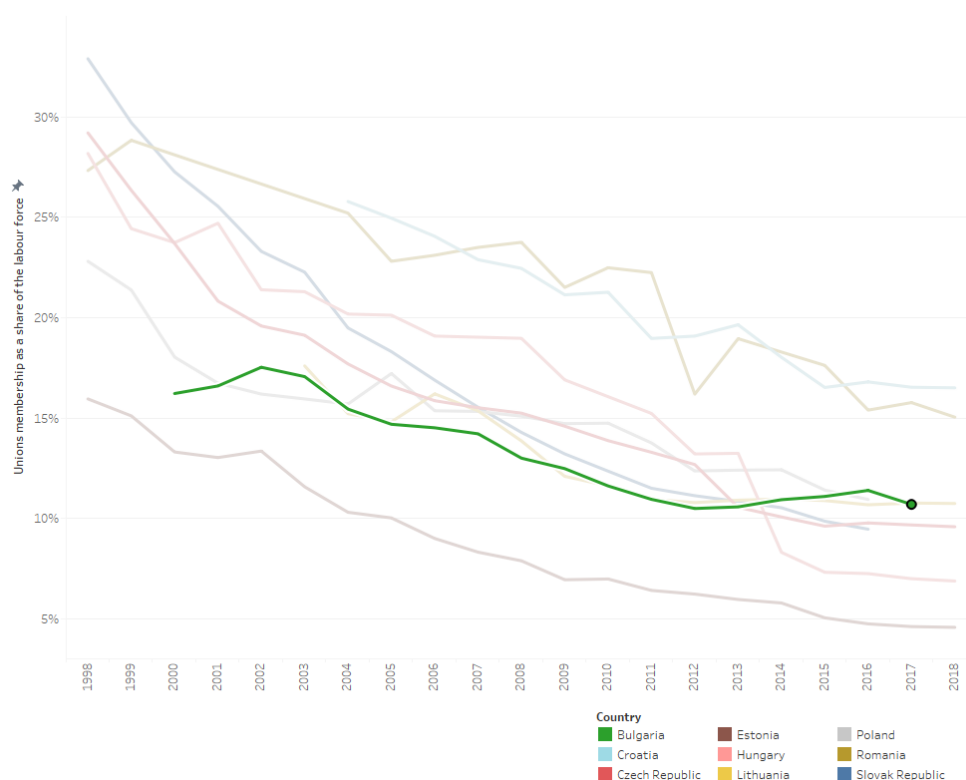


Figure 1: Unionised workers as a share of the labour force in post-socialist EU member States. (Data source: Visser, 2021)

Specifically, membership in labour unions amongst Bulgarians aged 15–59 has shrunk from 16% in 1991 to about 8% in 2018. This reduction has meant the dissolution of several smaller confederations which had emerged after the government allowed independent labour unions to emerge: *Edinstvo* ('Unity', which counted 184,000 members at its peak); the Community of Free Trade Union Organisations (70,000); and the Association of Democratic Unions (30,000). In 2017, *Promyana* ('Change'), an openly revolutionary confederation which 'came into existence in 1996 with the express purpose of overthrowing the then socialist government' (Fulton, 2021, sec. 3, chap. 3. para. 1), ceased to exist. Thus, there have been only two nationwide representative confederations in Bulgaria since then: the KNSB, which emerged from the communist union, *Prodkrepa*, and is usually considered centre-right (ETUI, 2016).

Thus, the marked pluralism which characterised the Bulgarian union movement in the early 1990s had driven some analysts to hope the best for Bulgaria's liberal democracy (Jones, 1992). But by the end of the 2010s, this landscape had transformed into the uneven KNSB-Podkrepa duopoly lacking sufficient membership and the political will to be an agent of real change.

Historical-qualitative approaches: Institutional theory

Essentially, this concentration and centralization of Bulgarian unionism is a consequence of the post-socialist transformation and the dramatic changes it brought about. From the perspective of institutional theories (March & Olsen, 1983, 1989), economic reforms and existing cultural legacies undermined labour unions' ability to protect the worker and their livelihood.

The socio-economic function of real-socialist labour unions (1945-1989)

Under real socialism, with membership being close to 100%, unions were an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1970) ensuring the Communist Party's quasi-totalitarian control over workers. In fact, the Communist Party considered unions a 'transmission belt' (Jones, 1992, pp. 453–454) for its policies and all the former's leaders had to be party members. Coherently, there were just 17 large industry-specific organisations and only one confederation, the union movement appeared monistic and highly centralised. Clearly, unions enforced the centre's commands rather than unions advancing economic demands (Dellin, 1954). After all, the Party's central-planning organs determined salaries and production quotas and strikes were not an option.

Yet, they supported their members when contesting individual managers and their practices. Moreover, the unions provided exclusive tangible benefits (e.g., vacation resorts) for an irrelevant fee equal to around 1% of gross salary.

The post-socialist institutionalisation of pluralistic unionism (Early 1990s)

Nowadays, the wider socio-political context in Bulgaria has become much more democratic. However, labour unions seem to be unable to sustain a real workers' democracy, with tripartite concertation on fiscal policy remaining irregular and rather exceptional.

Currently, the freedom to associate in labour unions is affirmed by article 49 of the Constitution (VNS-RB, 1991). However, policemen cannot enjoy this right fully because their union are barred from associating to a multi-sector confederation (Arabadzhiyski, 2008, p. 54). Furthermore, unions cannot "pursue any political objectives, nor [...] engage in any political activity"(Art. 12). Thus, in perfect agreement with the 'neo-liberal' conception of labour unions introduced above, they should refrain from creating connections with and exerting pressure on extant political parties. Therefore, it is unsurprising that both the KNSB and *Podkrepa* lack serious backing at the highest echelons of power. In fact, both unions had been cooperating with the ex-communist Socialist Party, but these bridges were burnt when strong popular contestation arose against a socialist-backed cabinet in 2007–2009. Hence, both confederations are marginalised and perpetuate a sterile criticism towards all political parties.

An ineffective right to strike

Workers' right to strike "in defence of their collective economic and social interests" is also guaranteed constitutionally (Art. 50). However, its regulation is deferred to ordinary law, which imposes a number of minor restrictions and excludes policemen (Arabadzhiyski, 2008, p. 54). Moreover, this right cannot be exercised entirely under the current confederal duopoly. And this was shown clearly in October 2017 when the KNSB's protests to demand for higher salaries failed miserably because of *Podkrepa*'s refusal to join forces (Metanov, 2017; Vasileva, 2017).

The key to unions' marginalisation: Collective bargaining in post-socialist Bulgaria

However, the de-institutionalisation of unions is the most evident in the case of collective bargaining and the progressive demise of the 'neocorporatism' in favour of neoliberal industrial relations (cf. Bohle & Greskovits, 2012).² In 2010–2012, Bulgaria experimented with some degree of salary-setting coordination with unions whereby public sector salaries and the minimum wage set a benchmark for

² Usually, industrial-relation systems in post-socialist Europe are classified in three categories: neoliberal, embedded neoliberal, and neocorporatist. Usually, the Baltic states, lagging behind in industrial policy and social welfare institutions, are considered examples of the neoliberal type. Countries with complex, export-oriented industrial sectors and relatively more advanced welfares – like Poland – fall in the embedded-neoliberal category. Finally, neocorporatist regimes tend to feature binding employer–labour arrangements and collective agreements that are enforceable by the State.

all sectors. Moreover, the government begun setting up a nationwide framework for tripartite consultation, conflict resolution and dispute settlement. However, these neocorporatist reforms were eventually rolled back. Hence, currently there is no state intervention in collective bargaining.

Consequently, forums for state-mediated employer-union dialogue have lost much of their importance in several sectors leading to fewer industry-level and more firm-level collective agreements (Fulton, 2021, sec. 3, chap. 3, para. 2). Given the low level of industry-level coordination, company agreements can derogate from sectorial ones in everything but the minimum wage and are signed by unions who are not apart and therefore not accountable to the national confederation. Often, derogation takes the form of *opening clauses* which allow to 'bypass' sector-level arrangements by weakening working standards and provisionally deferring specific parts in case of a crisis.

National confederations' basic inability to guarantee decent working conditions to their members has arguably been the main reasons why the share of workers abiding by a binding collective contract on the total number of workers entitled to do so has declined from 40% in 2006 to 22.9% in 2016.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these brief remarks show the need to bring the study of post-socialist unionism out of the normative field of mainstream studies on CS. Surely, the spreading of less stable contractual forms, de-regulation, the shift towards a service-oriented economy and other *structural* factors greatly affect labour unions in Bulgaria as in many other European countries (Eme, 2020; Ost, 2009). Growing scores of people are disenchanted or even fed up with established means of political activism (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Petrova, 2018) And, labour unions are in the crosshair together with traditional parties. Moreover, due to the system's relative imperviousness to the gig economy and other unstable forms of work (Eurofund, 2020), there is little demand for a *new* sort of unionism. Thus, without 'any strong societal force' it is impossible 'to dislodge the oligarchs and push for fundamental changes' (Kubicek, 2002, p. 621) in Bulgaria or across the region.

Regardless of the dominant discourse on CS, one of the distinguishing features of post-socialism is the de-legitimation of all CSOs that do not abide by the 'neoliberal' mode (Telarico, 2021, pp. 17–18). And, amongst them, unions have taken the worst hit. In Bulgaria this mechanism has operated most visibly through the constitutional banishment of unions from politics and an anti-labour fiscal policy (Draganov, 2018; Filipova & Draganov, 2021a) that let inequalities grow uncontrollably (Filipova & Draganov, 2021b; KNSB, 2021). But the fate of labour unions has not been dissimilar in other post-socialist countries.

Obviously, many questions remain open regarding the specific causes of post-socialist unions' weakness in each country, the relation to democratic backsliding and the need to redefine CS. However, it was high time to start asking them.

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