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Articulation of trade union strategies on upward convergence of social standards in the enlarged EU:

Case of Slovakia

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Key findings

- This policy brief summarizes the key findings from the Slovak study within the project 'Articulation of trade union strategies on upward convergence of social standards in the enlarged EU (ARTUS-CEE)'. The project has been implemented by the Institute for Public Affairs (Poland), and project partners the Central European Labour Studies Institute (Slovakia), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences (Lithuania), Institute for Public Policy (Romania) and the Centre for Economic Development (Bulgaria).
- Slovak trade unions do perceive the internal divides of 'two worlds' within the European trade union movement. However, the divisions are perceived as dynamic and responding to particular themes and conditions, rather than being deeply rooted among 'Western' and 'Eastern' trade unions.
- Slovak trade unions succeeded to join several coalitions with unions from other CEE countries and articulate their interest jointly at the EU level (regarding the European minimum wage) and at the regional level (Vienna Memorandum)
- Barriers to a more effective articulation of union interests at the EU level derive from lack of internal capacities and weakening legitimacy of trade unions in their domestic settings in Slovakia
- Strengthening the unions' role in domestic tripartism, especially after legislative changes in 2021 that introduced a 'forced pluralization' of trade unions, would empower trade unions to better articulate their interest also at the EU level and enhance their cooperation with unions in other EU member states.

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1 Introduction of the ARTUS-CEE project and its main findings

The 2004-2007 enlargement of the EU created expectations that the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) would embark on a trajectory of upward convergence in social standards to meet the standards in Western and Nordic EU member states. This would mean, among others, that the East-West divide delineated by the Iron Curtain in the second half of the 20th century would become history. Expectations on converging social standards emerged in wages, industrial relations, public services and the quality of life. Nevertheless, in the last 15 years since the first large Eastward EU enlargement, the dissatisfaction of trade unions in the CEE member states with not meeting the initial convergence expectations were increasing. In addition, tensions were reported within the trade union movement itself: Adamczyk (2018) argued that there are two worlds within the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), reflecting different involvement and strategies of trade unions from CEE and so-called old Member States in the EU-level structures of trade unions and social dialogue (Adamczyk 2018; Czarzasty and Mrozowicki 2018). The financial crisis of 2008+ further aggravated the situation, and the shadow of uncertainty has been lengthened by the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within this context, the ARTUS-CEE project, funded by the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission (project No. VS/2019/0070), studied how is the voice of trade unions from CEE countries articulated to the EU-level interest structures and reflected in relevant EU-level debates. This analysis relates to a broader challenge,

namely, an obvious hesitation of the entire European trade union movement to take clear decisions regarding a strategy in view of a progressing economic integration: whether it is enough just to defend the embedded national systems of industrial relations, or it is necessary to strengthen the process towards their Europeanization and thus convergence.

The ARTUS-CEE project presented some limitations, for example, the view that the issues raised and investigated at the national level may be even more complex and difficult to resolve at the EU-level. Taking the European Minimum Wage into consideration, wage coordination at the EU-level appears challenging as a tool to address the wage gap between member states. At the same time, country-centred perspectives to minimum wage setting face their own limitations, and the analysis could be supplemented with sectoral perspectives (Czarzasty 2020).

2 Slovakia: Articulation of trade union strategies on upward convergence in social standards in the EU

This policy brief presents the summary of key findings and recommendations from the Slovak case study and the articulation of interests of Slovak trade unions to the EU-level trade union and social dialogue structures. The Slovak report (Sedláková 2020) was prepared as a part of the ARTUS-CEE project.

The analysis focused on whether Slovak trade unions are able to undertake effective actions towards upwards convergence of social standards in the EU in the context of different industrial relations systems

among the EU member states and weak EU-level industrial relations in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE). In particular, trade unions actions related to the following five key topics were scrutinized:

1. **The idea of a European minimum wage**
2. **Transnational Company Agreements (TCA) as a potential additional European-wide level of collective bargaining**
3. **Cross-border coordination of collective bargaining as a tool enhancing domestic-level collective bargaining**
4. **The problem of posted workers as an example of social dumping**
5. **Expectations related to EU-level social dialogue as a tool for building common EU standards.**

The findings show that the involvement of Slovak trade unions in EU-level trade union structures as insufficient, mostly because inadequate activity and involvement in actual debates as a consequence of lacking internal capacities for greater involvement. A lack of financial resources and sufficient language skills justify the current state of Slovak unions' engagement with EU-level trade unionism. Participation in EU-level trade union structures is sometimes perceived as a political step without tangible results for trade union activities.

Except this overall weak articulation of trade union interests, particular themes above yielded more successful articulation:

- The Slovak unions perceive the debate within the ETUC regarding the **European minimum wage** as a positive example of union cooperation in the Visegrad region and other CEE member states and their joint articulation towards an EU Directive on minimum wage

- **Cross-border union cooperation** is well developed in particular between Slovak and Czech, and Slovak and Austrian unions. The sectoral dimension of cross-border union cooperation is deeper and sector-specific due to the presence of multinationals and foreign companies in particular sectors (e.g., automotive, electronics, retail) in Slovakia.
- In the debate on **posting of workers**, the Slovak Confederation of the Trade Unions (KOZ SR) opposed the yellow card supported by the Slovak government and instead, joined the common position with union counterparts in Czechia and at the ETUC supporting equal rights for posted workers.

3 Main conclusions

First, Slovak trade unions agreed with the Adamczyk's (2018) claim about the two worlds within the trade union family, pointing to the fact that EU-level trade union structures represent rather a trade union family "on paper" than in real life.

Second, the situation, as perceived by the Slovak representatives, may be more dynamic than described by their Polish colleagues, suggesting that there are no static two (old vs. new trade union groups within the ETUC, sectoral committees or other EU-level structures. Trade unions from the CEE member states were able to build various coalitions across the "traditional" lines, such as the Vienna memorandum group, uniting six metalworkers' trade unions from six EU member states. Cooperation between the Visegrad 4 countries has also been cited as being successful. An example of a common statement by the CEE trade unions on European minimum wage proposal also points to the fact that the time has come to build coalitions based on the

shared values rather than shared systems of trade union density numbers.

Third, the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2016 shows that timing and personal connections bear influence on the articulation of trade unions interests from the national level to the EU-level. Several respondents explicitly mentioned that Slovakia was able to push forward the topic of wage convergence due to the fact that one of the Vice-Presidents of the ETUC was a Slovak representative.

Fourth, several barriers to more meaningful and successful participation in EU-level trade union structures persist. Among the most challenging ones is the low representation due to the poor internal capacities of trade unions, language barriers and financial constraints. Capacity barriers were identified by 65.5 percent of trade union responses from Slovakia in an earlier survey on trade unions' interest articulation from the national to the EU-level (Kahancová et al. 2019).

Fifth, acknowledging the differences of social dialogue structures across the EU member states, which contribute to the power of trade unions at the EU level, cultural differences, including differences in political culture, also play a role at the EU-level. In turn, the EU-level trade union structure, activities and power can be perceived as one comparable to civil society, where pro-active approach to problem solving still needs to be strengthened.

The report shows that trade unions in Slovakia are aware of the most important topics identified by the research team of the ARTUS-CEE project. The most salient issue for trade union representatives across the economy is **wage convergence**, where **Slovak trade unions do support the idea of a European minimum wage**. Closing the gap between the social standards in each country is another important issue,

reflected in the **Slovak unions' support to legally binding decisions at the EU-level** (including a preference for legally binding transnational company agreements), which are seen as a security net for the enforcement of workers' rights.

4 Policy recommendations

The most important recommendation for the trade unions across Europe, based on this research, is the following: trade unionists from countries with more developed structures of social dialogue and collective bargaining should recall and remember the **principle of solidarity, on which the EU is based**. At the same time, trade unionists from CEE member states should remember to build coalitions across various sectors and themes, recalling the same principle of solidarity.

Recommendation specifically related to Slovak trade unions and the articulation of their interests to the EU-level trade union structures include the following (Kahancová et al. 2019, Sedláková 2020):

Possible improvements in the **articulation of SD between Slovak and EU-level unions** derive from unions' emphasized need to improve the depth of interaction, including more negotiation instead of only information exchange (common position e.g. regarding the European minimum wage), in the type of outputs (support for binding outcomes) and in the implementation of follow up procedures at the national level. The latter relates to strengthening the voice of trade unions in Slovakia also in domestic structures, mainly in the national tripartite social dialogue.

Next, a **clearer hierarchy in domestic structures of trade unions, employers' associations and government representatives** would enhance the

articulation of unions' interests between sectoral and national level: a topic should first be discussed in sectoral bipartism before making it to national bipartism and only then to national tripartism. Currently, a number of topics are first subject to discussion in national tripartism without prior consultations at lower levels. This facilitates trade unions framing their strategies predominantly targeting national influence, without developing strong pillars of their overall strategy development informed by sector-level developments.

Next, Slovak trade unions admit that a **greater proactiveness** on their part would benefit national tripartism and articulation of their interests to EU-level trade union structures. Currently a number of topics within tripartism are proposed by the government and trade unions perceive their role in tripartism as limited to (dis)approving the government proposals. Their role has further been weakened by 2021 legislative changes fostering plurality of unions in national tripartism without setting highly transparent representativeness criteria how this plurality can be reached. Unions perceive this as a political step to weaken the influence of the single largest trade union confederation (KOZ SR) representing unions in tripartism until 2021.

Effectiveness of trade union's interest articulation can be further enhanced by **professionalization of their role in social dialogue**, e.g. through better internal debates, longer time periods available for preparation, more flexibility to actively propose topics and more internal engagement in expert analyses in order to justify their arguments presented to national tripartism and also to the formation of European trade union interests. This requires expert capacity building on the side of Slovak trade unions.

The introduction of so-called '**meta social dialogue committees**' prior to formalized plenary meetings

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would create opportunities for social partners to professionally discuss their attitudes, frame their interests, strategies and possible solutions in an informal way. In turn, unions would be better prepared for the formal social dialogue meetings to deliver outcomes in an effective way both at the national level and also in interaction with unions from the CEE region and more generally within ETUC and other EU-level structures (e.g., EU-level sectoral social dialogue committees).

5 References

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