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School of Social and Political Sciences

WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO TRADE UNIONS'  
PROTECTION OF SOCIAL RIGHTS IN SLOVAKIA?

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation addresses the following research question: What are the obstacles to trade unions' successful protection of social rights in Slovakia? In order to answer this question, the dissertation is separated into two parts. Firstly, the literature review analyses obstacles to the successful working of trade unions in the post-communist region impacting their ability to protect social rights. This chapter concludes that a shift in trade unionists' perception on their role in the market is necessary if they are to successfully protect social rights. Secondly, the empirical chapter investigates the perceptions of trade unionists in Slovakia in order to evaluate their role in social rights protection and determines what trade unions could do to enhance social rights as recommended by academic experts and third sector activists in this field in Slovakia. The empirical findings from qualitative interviews refute the main hypothesis, that it is the trade unionists' own unchanged perception on their role which impedes them from protecting social rights. Instead, the findings support more recent scholarship into the topic claiming there is a new period of declining workforce tolerance for poor working conditions and low wages in the region. This points to a possible increase of the importance of and potential revival of trade unionism in post-communist Eastern Europe.



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Aims, Objectives, and Research Question**

Slovakia successfully integrated into the European Union (EU) together with its post-communist Central East European (CEE) neighbours in 2004. However, countries in this region still have comparatively worse working conditions compared to the rest of the EU as will be shown later on. Trade unions as a part of civic society represent an interest organisation overseeing the protection of social rights of workers<sup>1</sup>. However, the trade unions and workers in this region have been rather quiescent with considerably lower levels of civic participation in protests or strikes to advance the issue of greater social rights protection compared to Western European countries.

More broadly, this dissertation aims to investigate the reasons behind this trade unions' weakness in post-communist Eastern Europe and to evaluate to what extent trade unions can better the social situation and protect social rights of workers in this region. More specifically, the dissertation aims to bring forward a primary evidence of a certain trade union revival from a case study country, Slovakia, in which trade unions have belonged to the least trusted institutions (Butorová 2017: 80; Eurobarometer 2004: 14) and declined radically among other countries in the region (European Commission 2015a: 20). Doing so, the research brings more light into the

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<sup>1</sup> The dissertation will use a broader term 'social rights' instead of a more specific term workers' or labour rights in order to correspond to the infringements of social rights of the European Social Charter by a case study country, Slovakia (Department of the European Social Charter 2016). Moreover, this broader term is more descriptive as trade unions target not only the rights of the workers but they also embark on the problems of the people in non-standard employment such as agency workers.

phenomenon of trade union weakness and their potential revival in the post-communist region.

The research takes a social constructivist approach to a qualitative case study of trade unionism in Slovakia since its post-communist transition after 1989 and specifically after its independence in 1993. The literature review looks at the obstacles to trade unionism since the post-communist transition in order to explore their current weakness. Subsequently, the empirical part will explore the current obstacles of trade unions impeding social rights protection and their new challenges and opportunities for the future. The specific objectives of this dissertation are following:

1. To analyse the reasons of weakness of the trade unions in the post-communist region through looking at different obstacles to their successful working.
2. To present an argument that a change of perception of the trade unionists on their role in the market in the post-communist region is necessary if they are to fulfil their role in enhancing social rights. The importance of this objective lies in the fact that during the post-communist period the trade unionists were due to own adverse understanding of their role within the new market economy the very reason of their weakening.
3. To investigate the attitudes of trade unionists in Slovakia in order to evaluate whether they have changed their perceptions on their role.
4. To determine what trade unions could do to enhance social rights as recommended by Slovak academic experts (sociologists, a political scientist, and an economist) and third sector activists (from two main initiatives working on social rights issues).

Specifically, the dissertation will try to answer following research question: What are the obstacles to trade unions' successful protection of social rights in Slovakia? Trying to do so, the dissertation will work with a set of independent variables, which could influence the dependent variable at hand: the trade unions' ability to protect social rights. The three chosen independent variables will be discussed in the separate sections of the literature review chapter. The first independent variable, an external obstacle to trade unionism, will look at how the political economy of post-communist

transition and globalisation weakens the power of the unions in the region. It will conclude that even though this external variable worked against trade unions, it cannot fully explain the trade unionists' own role in this weakening. The second independent variable, structural obstacle to trade unionism, will analyse the neo-corporatist structure of social dialogue in the region and contends that it is the unions' own choice of strategies within this structure which weakened them the most.

On these two independent variables will be demonstrated how the external and structural obstacles played a detrimental role in working of trade unionism. Nevertheless, the third independent variable, the internal obstacles in form of trade unions' own adverse idea of their role in the new democratic capitalist society will be argued to have played a key role in trade unions' weakening and therefore as the main influence on the dependent variable. As Crowley (2004: 399) writes, it is difficult and too simplistic to try to pick one reason, since they are all interdependent. However, the unionists own adverse perception of their role in the new market economy made them unable and unprepared to counter and react to the existing external and structural obstacles. Nevertheless, there are signs of this changing. More recent developments in the region (such as June 2017 first historical strike in Volkswagen in Bratislava) but also the most recent scholarship debate (Delteil and Kirov 2017; Kahancová 2017) indicate a possible union revival in the region. The empirical chapter provides some evidence of this from Slovak trade unionism.

For more thorough understanding of the research, the main research question is unpacked into three subquestions:

- What are the obstacles to the working of trade unions in the post-communist region? The literature review discusses the main scholarship debate on the reasons impeding trade unions from successfully advancing social rights ranging from the post-communist political economy, neo-corporatist structure of the social dialogue, to the own perceptions of the trade unionists.
- What are the trade unionists' perceptions of their role? The literature review will discuss scholarship debate into why a change of perception of the trade unionists in the post-communist region is necessary, but also provides some very recent

debates on this already happening in some countries (Delteil and Kirov 2017; Kahancová 2017). The empirical part, thematic analysis of qualitative elite interviews, will offer evidence of a certain gradual shift in perspective among the elite trade unionists towards more confident and active players in social rights protection in Slovakia. In spite of this potential positive change, the interview data also showed some other existing limitations and challenges.

- What can trade unions do to promote social rights? With the literature review on obstacles to trade unionism as a background, the empirical chapter will discuss the themes from the elite interviews with experts and initiatives in the field in Slovakia as well as the critique by the trade unionists themselves. Therefore, the issue at hand will be examined further by evaluating both academic literature as well as respondent views on what they consider the trade unions could do better in the current context.

The research is motivated by the continuous gap in social protections, incomes and working standards between Western EU members and the ‘new’ EU member states, the post-communist countries which joined the EU since 2004. Furthermore, the research was inspired by the surprising quiescence of trade unions and workers in the region in face of the severe reforms of the post-communist transition in the 1990s and their continuing weakness after 2004 EU integration and continuing economic boom (albeit interrupted by the 2008 financial crisis).

Even though the research is of qualitative nature, quantitative data is considered to be complementary and will be used to support the underlying arguments. Statistical data from academic literature, Eurostat and Eurobarometer will provide a bigger picture of the problem, such as rapidly declining trade union membership, low numbers of strikes, demonstrations, and protests, or data on Eastern European wages lagging behind those in Western Europe. Secondary sources of evidence are gathered from relevant academic literature on the topic and the additional secondary sources consist of media coverage of the trade union activity in Slovakia, namely the June 2017 strike in Volkswagen in Bratislava (Dennik N June 2017). The nature of the primary sources will be discussed in more detail in the empirical chapter.

## 1.2 Trade Unions in the Post-communist Region

The post-communist transition to democracy and market economy, and subsequent integration to the European Union (EU) was a huge success for the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, especially when compared to the countries of the post-Soviet region (see World Bank 2000 and 2005). However, there has also been an increasing amount of critical voices. Scholars have stressed the importance of negative side-effects of the transition into free market economy, which were considered to be inevitable at the time, such as rising poverty and inequality in the post-communist region (Heyns 2005; Milanovic 1999). World Bank (2005: 65) found that better distribution of social protection and continuous growth countered these trends in the CEE countries. Similarly, Orenstein (2012: 77) reminds, that thanks to democratic accountability of the new governments in the CEE countries, the societies managed to benefit from rather positive social outcomes.

The CEE countries have been gradually converging their standards of living to that of the Western countries. The most successful post-communist countries, Visegrad (Czech republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary) together with Slovenia, 'had larger GDP in 2000 than in 1989' (Heyns 2005: 164). This catching up process meant that these countries are now growing richer and gradually converge their GDP to that of the 'old' EU-15 member states. However, the picture is not whole if we look solely on the levels of GDP. The Eastern European members, or the 'new' EU-10, still have relatively worse work conditions compared to the 'old' EU-15. Bohle and Greskovits add, that the 'unemployment is persistently higher, working times are longer, and wages are lower in the East than in the West' (2004: 25). Later on, Meardi found a gap in terms of 'social welfare, social order, and employee voice' (2012: 3) and even more recently, Delteil and Kirov conclude that 'CEE still show marked differences with the rest of Europe in the field of labour, work and industrial relations' (2017: 34).

While relative inequality (difference between the lowest and the highest earning income groups) is much lower in CEE countries (European Commission 2015b: 67), as much as third to a half of the Eastern Europeans live below the subsistence minimum pointing to existing absolute poverty in the region (Pogátsa 2013: para. 9).



The Eastern European countries tend to live in greater material deprivation compared to the West, as Graph 1 shows.

Therefore, instead of observing GDP convergence, a much greater attention should be paid to convergence in incomes and low wages in the region (Pogátsa 2013: para. 3). As can be seen in Graph 2, earnings are much lower in Eastern Europe compared to the 'old' EU-15. Pogátsa analysed Eurostat data on incomes and found that the middle class incomes in the Eastern European region were 'equal to the bottom 10 percent of wages in Western Europe [meaning that] their living standard in fact corresponds to the Western European underclass' (2013: para. 10). This gap in income levels is gradually adjusting to the EU average, however only very slowly. Zahradnik (2017: para. 9) summarises this on the example of the Czech economy, which converged its GDP per capita to 89% of the EU, its price levels to 77% of the EU. However, the income levels were as low as 50% of the EU average (Zahradnik 2017: para. 9). For an even better overview of this divide in wages, Eurostat (2014) offers a map of the EU overviewing the member states according to their mean gross hourly earning in euros. The Eastern European member states stand out, not reaching above 7.5 euros an hour (the lowest category in the legend).

The income and social protection convergence within as well as between member states is crucial not only due to stable liberal democratic order but also further EU integration (Offe 2009: 264). Through uniting workers into employee associations or trade unions, the society could balance the employers' power in bargaining for better working conditions (Saini 2003: 287). Most importantly, unions were indispensable in the process of creation of advanced capitalist democracies thanks to their ability to achieve social cohesion by offering a platform for workers' complaints and channelling them into a social dialogue (Crowley and Ost 2001: 4). However, in case of democratisation of Eastern Europe, the unionisation rapidly decreased at the time of economic turmoil of the post-communist transition when trade unions' voice in improving social and working conditions was much needed.

Some authors go further to argue, that trade unions' continuing weakness could potentially threaten the liberal democratic order. For example, Crowley and Ost (2001:5) write that in cases where there are no functioning unions effectively

structuring the workers' anger and grievances into a constructive dialogue or pressure, these feelings might get hijacked into illiberal solutions. Recent developments in the CEE region mirror this dynamic, as the illiberal populist forces have been capitalising on this anger, such as the national conservative Fidesz party of Viktor Orban in Hungary, Kaczyński's conservative PiS party in Poland, or far-right nationalistic Kotleba's LSNS in Slovakia<sup>2</sup> (INEKO 2017).

The right to collective bargaining, right to strike, and other trade union related socio-economic rights became acknowledged as fundamental rights and put down in the European Social Charter. These rights form the basis of the European Social Model, which establishes the conditions employers are required to meet towards their employees in the EU (Moreau 2005: 371). On top of that, the above-described gap in social protections has been addressed by major EU initiatives such as the European Social Fund, the Lisbon Strategy, or most recently the European Social Rights Pillar.

The transition to democracy, entering into the EU, and international human rights organisations and treaties, such as European Social Charter of Council of Europe or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations, expanded the scope for citizen mobilisation in the post-communist region. However, civic participation and voicing of dissatisfaction has been rather limited. As can be seen in Graph 3, this lower political participation is visible compared to Western Europe (Alber and Kohler 2009: 26). Also as a number of scholars argued, the post-communist countries had a largely weakened civic society and apathetic electorate (Howard 2003) even compared to other post-authoritarian regions (Kopecky 2003: 5). Protests, if any, had mostly anti-reform and anti-elite dynamic (Ekiert and Kubik 2001: 181). The trend is even more striking when we look at labour related participation. The trade union mobilisation for strikes or demonstrations has been less 'contentious' (Bohle and Greskovits 2004: 4) as can be observed in Graph 4, in which Crowley (2004: 404) showed considerable gap in strike rates (days not worked per thousand workers) between Western and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> However, this is not to suggest that economic factors are the sole explanation for rising populism, for example Inglehart and Norris (2016) showed that evidence supports cultural explanations.

Are trade unions needed in advancing social rights? As a number of comparative studies of the economic relations in the post-communist region showed, strong unions do lead to better social protection. For example, this is demonstrated by the deviant case of Slovenia which retained its relatively strong labor movement (Bohle and Greskovits 2007: 452; Cook 2010: 170). Similarly, European Commission (2015b: 81) concluded that collective bargaining for higher wages tends to lead to higher incomes compared to workers' individual agreements. A study by Trexima (2017) found that in Slovakia, companies with a collective agreement had salaries on average of 18 percent higher compared to those without. However, the importance of the work of the unions is much wider than bargaining for wages. It is, in the words of a Slovak sociologist interviewed in this research, 'about the pressure for fair and just processes, whereby the wage levels are only one part of this process' (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This dissertation brings primary evidence from interviews with social actors working in the field of trade unionism or social rights and protections in Slovakia. Since they are from different backgrounds (trade unionists, academic experts and third sector initiatives), for more clarity when referring to the specific interviewee, hence-forwards also their category and profession will be provided in the reference.

### **1.3 Summary of Chapter Contents and Main Arguments**

This introductory chapter showed the aims, objectives, and main research question of this dissertation. It also provided a short overview of the scholarship debates and relevant data on the issue of post-communist economic catching up process of the Eastern European countries, and the gaps and challenges lying ahead. The introduction serves as a context towards the subsequent analysis of trade unionism in the post-communist region in following chapters.

The second chapter, literature review, responds to the first two objectives of the dissertation. Firstly, it analyses the obstacles to the successful working of trade unions in the post-communist region. The three main areas of obstacles, the independent variables, will be analysed in three separate sections: political economy of transition, neo-corporatist structure of the social dialogue and change of unionists' perception on their role. Secondly, the chapter shows that shift of the trade unionists' perception is necessary if they are to fulfil their role in enhancing social rights.

The third, empirical, chapter describes the research design and offers arguments for the need of a bottom-up constructivist perspective, qualitative research and a chosen case study research design. The chapter provides an overview of research methodology, data collection and selection of participants. It then introduces thematic analysis for the subsequent data analysis and describes the main themes which emerged from the interviews in the findings section. The concluding discussion analyses how the findings fit in with the academic literature. Doing so, it addresses the last two objectives: it investigates the perceptions of trade unionists in Slovakia in order to evaluate their role in social rights protection and determines what trade unions could do to enhance social rights as recommended by experts and activists in this field in Slovakia.

The findings are presented in four main sections. The first is the issue of fragmentation of unions vs. activation of workers, which created a gap between trade unionists on one hand and the experts and initiatives of the other. While unionists perceived fragmentation to be threatening to their work, the other respondents felt it might be a sign of bottom-up activation of workers. The second finding is gradual

learning and the third continuing negative public image. These together point to a certain shift among trade unionists which, however, needs to be better communicated to the public. The fourth is a theme of exclusion of certain groups and topics from trade union representation which demonstrated existing limitations in successful social rights protection. The discussion concludes, that the research findings refute the main hypothesis, that it is the trade unionists' own unchanged perception of their role which impedes them from protecting social rights.

Lastly, conclusion will restate main arguments and findings of the dissertation, considers wider implications of the research, and makes short recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This literature review chapter will address the first two objectives of the dissertation. Firstly, it will analyse the obstacles trade unions face in protecting social rights in the post-communist region. Doing so, the literature review will analyse three independent variables (political economy, neo-corporatist structure, and the role of perceptions) in their impact on the dependent variable (the trade unions' ability to protect social rights). Secondly, this overview will show that that a change of perception of the trade union activists on their role in the market in the post-communist region is necessary if they are to fulfil their role in enhancing social rights.

There has been a lot of research into the weakened role of the trade unions in post-communist countries. Since there is not a single cause which could explain the phenomenon just by itself (Crowley 2004: 399), the literature review divides scholarship debate into three main sections. The first section will look at the political economy of the post-communist transition, globalisation and related processes, such as over-reliance on foreign direct investments (FDIs), and analyses how these worked to weaken the trade unions in Eastern Europe. The second section will embark on the neo-corporatist structure of the social dialogue which post-communist countries institutionalised on a Western European model, the efficiency of which remains highly contested among scholars.

These two sections together explain the structural or external obstacles the trade unions in the region have faced. In order to offer a holistic picture of the issue, the

third section will focus on an internal reason for the trade unions' weakness. It will consider how trade union's own adverse idea of their role restrained their ability as social rights protectors.

The literature review concludes that even though external and structural obstacles have worked against trade unions in the post-communist countries, it is their internal obstacles which need to change if they are to counter and respond to these in the future. In other words, most of the scholarship debates overviewed showed that a certain change of perception, or as some authors called it 'identity' (Frege 2001), is necessary.

Before discussing the above-mentioned reasons for the trade union weakness in the post-communist region, it is important to understand what is meant by weakness. Why are they considered to be weak? How is the weakness measured? How weak are they compared to other regions? The following section will shed more light on these questions.

## 2.2 Weakness of the Trade Unions in the Post-communist Region

As the introductory chapter shortly outlined, there has been a thorough academic analysis as well as plenty of supporting data demonstrating much lower civic participation in the post-communist region. Numerous value surveys have found lower support of protests or demonstrations in the region compared to the Western democracies (Piotrowski 2015: 6). Furthermore, the trade unions, as one of the forms of ‘participatory activism’ (Piotrowski 2015: 6), became one of ‘the weakest institutions of the new civil society’ (Crowley and Ost 2001: 1). Scholars described weakness of trade unions in this region widely, but most studies focused on their weakness through comparing frequency of strikes, membership base numbers, and coverage of collective bargaining to that of the Western countries<sup>4</sup> (Crowley 2004; Meardi 2012; European Commission 2009). The following paragraphs, therefore, offer a short summary of these three factors.

When looking at the frequency of strikes, scholars noted a considerable gap between Eastern and Western European countries (Bohle and Greskovits 2004; Crowley 2004; Meardi 2012). As can be seen in Graph 4, the Eastern Europeans were participating less in strikes and lost less days of work due to protest participation. While in Western European countries workers lost on average as much as 100 days per thousand workers per year, in Eastern Europe it was only 25 days (Crowley 2004: 405).

Bohle and Greskovits (2004: 4) found that the gap in strike or demonstration participation did not change between the late 1990s, when the economy in most post-communist countries was under strain due to ongoing reforms, and the early 2000s when their economies finally started to boom. This quiescence might seem surprising at the time of economic prosperity and political success ahead of EU integration and it remains even more so today after the growth re-booted after the financial crisis of 2008. However, the strike ratio remains generally unchanged. Slovakia together with the CEE countries have ‘the lowest number of working days lost through industrial action in the EU’ (Kahancová 2017: 182).

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<sup>4</sup> Crowley and Ost offer also additional indicators of unions weakness: ‘styles of management [...] nature of political alliances, union impact of public policy, material well-being of workers’ (2001: 4). Due to word limit these cannot be discussed in a greater detail.



The aftermath of the 2008 crisis saw rise in precarious non-standard work and the market became full with violations trade unions are supposed to address, which could have enhanced legitimacy of the unions (Kahancová 2017: 182). However, trade unions in Slovakia continue to belong to the least trusted institutions of civic society. Butorová (2017) provides an overview of the levels of trust-worthiness of the main civic society organisations and public institutions in Slovakia throughout last few decades. While in 2016 unions' trust-worthiness level went up to 42%, they still belong to the least trusted organisations in the country (Butorová 2017: 80).

It is important to mention that certain decline in the trade union membership numbers was logical. Since the membership covered almost 100 percent of workforce during communism, a decrease was expected to happen during the post-communist transition (Crowley 2004: 400). It was due to various reasons such as structure of the new economy and its related processes (Cziria 2010: para. 14). However, compared to the global general trend of decreasing union membership, the decline in the post-communist region has been much more severe. The union density, percentage of working population unionised, remains considerably lower compared to Western countries and is decreasing even further, as can be seen in Graph 5. Specifically in Slovakia, as Graph 6 shows, the decline in membership has been rapid and continuing from 100 percent before 1989 to as low as 13 percent after 2013.

Even if the membership numbers are lower, the union strength can be balanced by much higher coverage of collective bargaining, as is the case of France and can be seen in Graph 5. However, that is not the case in Slovakia or the Eastern European countries in general. When looking at the coverage of collective bargaining ratio (percentage of workers covered by a collective agreement), European Commission (2009: 33) notes, that collective bargaining coverage was considerably lower in Eastern (42.5%) compared to Western European countries (68.8%).

To conclude, the trade unions in CEE are weaker, experience faster decline in union density, there is lower coverage of collective bargaining for better conditions, have lower capacities for mobilisation to organise workers and challenge the management (Meardi 2012: 11; Kahancová 2015b: 27). In the following three sections, the literature review will analyse different causes of this weakness.

### **2.3 Political Economy of Post-communist Transition**

This section will look at the obstacles to trade unionism coming from the way in which the CEE countries integrated into the global economy during their post-communist transition to free market economy. The painful reforms of the transition bore fruit especially in form of the eventual European economic integration, the GDP growth of their economies, and gradual convergence to the Western European standards of living (World Bank 2000 and 2005). However, more critical scholars pointed out that the way in which these countries integrated created a detrimental relationship of dependency. The CEE economic growth has been dependent on a competitive advantage of lower wages which could attract foreign direct investments (FDIs) and multinational companies (MNCs) into the region. This relationship was defined as ‘dependent market economies’ (Nolke and Vliegenthart 2009), ‘dependent economy’ (Offe 2009) or ‘liberal dependent capitalism’ (King 2007).

How is this dependency relevant for trade unions’ role in protecting social rights? The above-defined dependent relationship of CEE economies has impeded trade unions in effectively advancing rights of workers. As Ther explained: ‘As soon as the skilled workers in Eastern Europe started demanding higher wages, investors lost the primary motive for manufacturing there’ (2016: 129). Moreover, this relationship of dependency resulted in the foreign investors and MNCs having more influence in these countries than in Western Europe (Ther 2016: 129). As a result, this might have contributed to a vicious circle of a ‘bad job’ is better than ‘no job’ which became a part of the rhetoric used by the MNCs, politicians and the media in the region. The gradual convergence to the Western European levels took place in the sphere of productivity of work, which usually determines whether the wages should be rising accordingly. However, even though CEE caught up on their levels of productivity, their wages have not been rising accordingly (see report on Slovakia in NBS 2015).

To date, the most outstanding analyses of the way in which the FDIs in the region have affected labour weakness are those of Bohle and Greskovits (2004, 2007, 2012a and 2012b). The authors (2004: 8) found that most FDIs in Eastern Europe went to ‘labor-intensive capital goods industries’ instead of ‘capital-intensive consumer goods

industries'. This meant that FDIs mostly supported economic areas, labour-intensive, which were less favourable to unionisation. In other words, while the FDIs modernised the Eastern European economies, they have not enhanced power of their unions.

To offer an example of the impact of capital-intensive FDIs on the case study country economy, Bohle and Greskovits (2004) analysed Slovak car industry. In comparison to labor-intensive FDIs, the capital-intensive FDIs are in sectors with more skilled-workers (such as car industry) and therefore trade unions usually have much better bargaining position than in the labor-intensive areas (such as clothing industry). The Slovak government provided generous tax exemptions, and low labor costs and weak unions were highly advertised in order to attract the potential foreign investors (Slovak Spectator 8 March 2004 in Bohle and Greskovits 2004: 24). Bohle and Greskovits (2004: 21) showed how these actions of attracting FDIs resulted in the economical costs being 'socialised' rather than borne by the car-industry employees. Specifically, in trying to balance the budget after offering tax exemptions the government chose to cut expenditures considered to be wasteful, such as unemployment benefits (Bohle and Greskovits 2004: 21). This resulted in the costs being shared within the society as a whole, therefore lowering social rights protections. The authors consider these measures to have disproportionately targeted the poor in Slovakia and remind of the Roma 2004 hunger protests as an example (2004: 25).

On the other side of the problem are the trade unions and workers within the car industry sector. Ther (2016: 129) reminds of a 4 percent wage cut in Slovak Volkswagen in 2004, which was met with silence from the workers, compared to what would have been unleashed for example in Austria. Ther (2016: 129) points to the high unemployment outside of Bratislava region and relatively privileged position of automobile workers (compared to other sectors they earn up to double the average wage) which could have impeded any bigger discontent. Their quiescence is even more surprising as the car industry remains one of the better unionised sectors in the economy (Cziria 2010: para. 14).

In their later analysis, Bohle and Greskovits demonstrated that in Eastern Europe, ‘even the major skill-intensive investors seem to prefer individual [...] deals with their workers and public administrations to nationally or sectorally organized interest mediation’ (2007: 462). Therefore, while the FDI’s have helped the Eastern European economies grow, the trade union influence has not. Bohle and Greskovits (2004: 1) conclude that it is because of the lacking favourable socio-economic foundations towards trade unionism in Eastern Europe. In Western Europe these were based on a historical compromise between labor and capital, enabling the creation of the European Social Model and the kind of social neo-corporatism which organised industrial relations in the West since the WWII (Bohle and Greskovits 2004: 1). The result of these lacking foundations in Eastern Europe is a disparity in social protections, in which these countries suffer of higher unemployment, longer working time, and lower wages compared to the Western economies (Bohle and Greskovits 2004: 1).

Some scholars put their hopes into the European integration which could better the labour relations in Eastern European member states. Cook’s (2010) inter-regional comparative analysis of post-communist and post-Soviet countries showed, that transition to democracy and EU integration in case of the CEE countries, made them more likely to strengthen their labour rights, compared to the countries which are not democratically accountable neither to their electorates nor to the EU institutions. However, Cook (2010: 172) concludes that ‘the decline of trade unions and limits of collective bargaining in most post-communist states undermine the effectiveness of transposed EU legislation [...] in empowering labor.’ For instance, the deviant case of Slovenia showed that strong unions can help oversight the implementation of the transposed European legislation (Cook 2010: 170). Similarly, Meardi’s (2012) extensive analysis of Eastern European working conditions concludes that the EU accession has not managed to sufficiently counter the weakening labour and trade unions. Workers’ engagement in collective actions, such as protests, strikes or demonstrations has been stymied by the ease at which factories could move to even cheaper locations as well as by the ease at which workers can ‘vote with their feet’ and move to the Western labour markets instead of fighting for a change in their home

countries (Krastev 2016; Meardi 2012). This 'exit' option can take a form of working in informal economy (Crowley 2004), finding work abroad (Meardi 2012) or leaving the job market for good, which was made easier by post-communist governments' policies designed to pre-empt workers' dissatisfaction from erupting into protests or strikes (Vanhuysse 2006).

There might be a reason to believe that the weakness of trade unions in these economies is caused by them being new to capitalism and that certain aspects of the free market regime have not had sufficient time to develop compared to Western Europe where they have been functioning for decades. However, the evidence suggests that 'the more private the economy, the less the union representation' (Crowley and Ost 2001: 226). Kubicek (2004) showed that the weakness of unions is increasing over time in the region due to reasons connected to globalisation as well as structural changes such as boom in privatisation, increasing numbers of smaller enterprises and service sector which are less likely to be unionised. As a result, the unions in the region are more concentrated in the public sector and heavy industry while the new private sector is almost completely union-free (Crowley and Ost 2001: 221; Cziria 2010: para. 14). It is to a large part because of the mind-set by the new private owners who consider unions redundant and irrelevant for private sector and often oppose their creation in the workplaces (Crowley and Ost 2001: 221). To sum up, the post-communist economies did not build on their legacies of strong workers' movements, but instead marginalised trade unions in the process and were therefore 'unable to bring about an inclusive form of capitalism' (Crowley and Ost 2001: 220).

To conclude this section, the political economy of transition, globalisation and structural changes, such as new technologies, information innovations, or increasing job precariousness work against trade unionism in the region as much as in the rest of the world (Kahancová 2017: 182). These processes contributed to weakening the unions and at the same time produced a kind of working environment, where there is an increasing need for functioning trade unions in order to respond to these trends (Kahancová 2017: 182). This unfavourable context, however, can only explain the difficult situation which trade unions have had to face. It does not explain the position

and actions of the unionists (Frege 2001; Crowley and Ost 2001; Kahancová 2017). Ost described this dynamic:

Unions became weak and quiescent in the post-communist era not because they were repressed by the new capitalist system, as many Western leftists like to believe, and not because workers were treated well by the new system, as Western conservatives like to believe, but because union leaders largely agreed with the policies aimed at weakening them. (Ost 2009: 17).

The external obstacles discussed in this section have indeed worked against trade unionism in the post-communist region and due to its relationship of dependency this influence has been even larger. Nevertheless, as Ost (2009: 17) argued above, instead of actively countering these trends, the trade unions were mostly passive in this process.

## 2.4 Neo-corporatist Structure of the Social Dialogue

This section analyses obstacles to trade unionism arising from the established neo-corporatist structure of the social dialogue. Neo-corporatism was institutionalised in post-communist countries on a Western European model, which in form of tripartite institutions facilitates social dialogue between the employers, the state and the employees (who are represented by trade unions). In Slovakia, since the 1999 Law on Economic and Social Partnership, it is legally required that the government consults social and employment policies in a tripartite body with trade unions and employer representation (Stein 2001: 73). That is why, on the national level unions are represented in tripartite dialogues by Slovak Confederation of the Trade Unions (KOZ). On the sectoral level trade unions are divided according to specific professions in bipartite dialogue with employers in the sector-wide collective agreements, such as Metalworker Unions, OZ KOVO, which belongs to the largest trade union organisations in Slovakia (worker-participation.eu 2016). On the company level, trade unions are tasked with collective bargaining with the management and monitoring their compliance with the Labour code.

Some authors acknowledged the vital role of the neo-corporatism in advancing social cohesion in post-communist countries during strenuous economic transformation. For example, Iankova (1998) writes that this is because the neo-corporatists structure is based on cooperation and consensus of the three main social actors. However, other scholars consider neo-corporatism to be only 'illusory' in the region (Ost 2000). Western European neo-corporatism came as a result of historical compromise to advance social cohesion and its functioning was therefore upheld by certain societal norms (Krastev 2016; Bohle and Greskovits 2004). However, according to many critical authors, due to these missing socio-economic foundations, neo-corporatism in Eastern Europe works only formally and does not contribute to effective trade union representation. That is because instead of strengthening the unions, neo-corporatism served as a tool 'to co-opt a potentially disruptive organised interest group whose resistance to market-generated inequalities might undermine political stability and overwhelm scarce social welfare resources' (Stein 2001: 69).

Neo-corporatism is then considered to be ‘illusory’ as instead of producing social democratic policies, the welfare contract within the tripartite institutions served as a political tool to quiescence the labor and to ease acceptance of neoliberal reforms (Ost 2000: 503). Bohle and Greskovits (2012a: 185) further argued, that this labour quiescence in the region came as a result of trade unions preferring to gain policy influence for which they agreed to refrain from actions, such as protests or strikes. This ‘illusory’ aspect goes even further, as Kahancová (2017: 181) reminds that Slovak trade unions in fact never achieved stronger policy influence and served merely as advisors to the tripartite dialogues rather than an active advocate of interests of those they represent. For example, Stein reminds of the withdrawal of KOZ from the tripartite dialogue in 1997 which coincided with increased strike activity, which Stein (2001: 73) considered to be a further evidence of neo-corporatism demobilising workers.

Closely connected to neo-corporatism is the issue of fragmentation of already established unions. Some authors believe that the neo-corporatist structure makes unions rigid and less active in competing to mobilise existing and recruit new members. Ekiert and Kubik (2001) analysed the difference in strike activity among post-communist countries and argued that ‘the higher the number of unions, the higher the probability of protest’ (in Crowley 2004: 411). In other words, in countries with more union organisations, we can expect more workers’ mobilisation. This, however, assumes that the new trade unions would become more proactive in trying to mobilise and attract new members (Crowley 2004: 411). However, that was not the case in many post-communist countries and fragmentation of established unions tends to lead to their further weakening, splitting the membership base and eroding the feeling of solidarity among activists (Crowley 2004: 411).

Stein (2001) analysed functioning of Slovak tripartite institution and his findings support Ost's (2000) hypothesis that neo-corporatism in the post-communist countries is ‘illusory’. Stein (2001: 61) finds that while KOZ worked successfully in terms of collective bargaining or addressing legal complaints to the right to strike or enforcement of law, it neglected its member mobilisation and further recruitment activities. The main argument Stein (2001: 74) offers for this neglect is a cultural one,



as the trade unionists have not yet gotten used to their new role in the capitalist economy. Stein concludes sarcastically that with the trade unionists' non-existent recruitment strategy, 'trade unionism in Slovakia risks ending up being confined to the history curriculum alone' (2001:74).

A long time has passed since Stein's (2001) analysis and recently other scholars (Kahancová 2015a and 2017; Delteil and Kirov 2017) became more hopeful about unionists' ability to find new strategies and respond to new challenges. According to Delteil and Kirov (2017), after the 2008 crisis the developments in the region point to a certain emergence of 'labour awakening'. In other words, the above-discussed 'labour acquiescence' (Crowley and Ost 2001: 1), during which trade unions supported reforms weakening them, has finished. Instead, the trade unions entered a new period during which the counter-movements and new trade union activists started emerging and actively respond to the needs of their base membership. Beissinger and Sasse (2014) described this period as the 'end of patience' or a declining workforce tolerance for poor working conditions and low wages in the region.

Kahancová (2015a) also finds that in spite of declining membership and structural weaknesses, the trade unions in the CEE have moved away from traditional resources of strength and types of action. Kahancová writes of a changed dynamic in unions' activities and strategies as instead of strikes, the trade unions in the region sought 'street demonstrations, lawsuits and petitions as alternative ways of voicing their opinions' (2015b: 26). Kahancová (2017: 179) supports the 'end of patience' argument, when she argues that before the 2008 financial crisis, the Eastern European labour, including workers in Slovakia, were indeed passive, quiescent and unmobilised. However, after the crisis in 2008 there has been 'a turn away from these trends in key parts of the Slovak economy and trade union movement' (Kahancová 2017: 179).

To conclude this section, as many scholars have argued, the neo-corporatist structure worked against trade union mobilisation potential. However, more recent academic debate finds that unions started taking on a more active role and explored new strategies.

## 2.5 Change of Trade Unionists' Perceptions

This section analyses an internal obstacle to trade unionism in the post-communist region coming from the unionists' own perceptions on their role. It offers an overview of arguments made by a number of scholars, who showed that a change of perception among trade union activists in the post-communist region has been necessary for the unions to be able to fulfil their role in protecting social rights.

Krastev (2016) writes that the new EU member states were able to transfer institutions from the Western European democracies, but not the social identities which have created and supported their successful functioning. In Krastev's own words, the post-communist region had 'social democrats but not strong trade unions, and classical liberals but not much of a real business community' (2016: 94). This section, in short, will look at why that is so.

In the previous two sections, two independent variables were discussed: the external and structural obstacles detrimental to unionisation in the region. The external variable showed that while political economy has been unfavourable to the unions globally, the unions in the post-communist countries were so much weakened due to their own adverse understanding of their role and acceptance of policies which weakened them. The structural variable concluded that the neo-corporatist system in a way demobilised labour as the unionists sought to acquire a theoretical policy influence for their loyalty. Therefore, this section will look at the problem from a bottom-up internal perspective and seeks to analyse these unionists' perceptions on their own role since the post-communist transition to present-day. Doing so, the dissertation also responds to the latest developments in the region and the most recent academic debate which points to a potential trade union revival.

A wide study on workers' representation in the post-communist region by Crowley and Ost concluded, that it was the 'labour's own antiunion ideas' that weakened the unions in the post-communist period the most (2001: 7). These 'antiunion ideas' were the result of the post-communist union activists believing that market economies would work better without their involvement (Ost 2009: 16). Trade union weakness and inability to deliver social protections was not so much because they were

obstructed by the public or the new private sector from doing so, but rather because union leaders did not yet understand their new role and are not united about where their interests lie (Crowley and Ost 2001: 229). As a result, the unionism in the region declined to a large part because it lacked activists committed to it (Ost 2009: 16). In order to show that this internal obstacle affects countries throughout the post-communist region, a micro-level evidence from several CEE countries will be shortly discussed.

Frege (2001) elaborated an analysis of trade unionism in clothing industry in Hungary. Frege (2001) finds that their weakness can be attributed to the failure of the unionists to transform their identity from a communist one to a free market one. Therefore, unionists were mostly unable to live up to their changed role within the new political economy. This change of identity, according to Frege (2001), is necessary as the unions played a completely different role during communism where they were part of the communist institutional workplace structure, siding with the management and the communist Party. In comparison, in a free market capitalist economy, trade unions have to move towards 'an identity based on them-and-us feelings' in order to attract and mobilise workers and protect their rights vis-a-vis the management (Frege 2001: 300). Frege (2001: 298) finds, that it is the unions' so far untransformed identity which contributes to their inability to mobilise members, a crucial resource in determining the unions' strength. Not only do the trade unions face adverse economical and institutional circumstances (as seen in previous two sections) but, according to Frege's evidence, they also lack potential to mobilise workers due to their own identity 'as subordinate arms of management rather than as strong, independent actors' (2001: 308).

Similar evidence was found by Pollert (1997 and 2000) in her analysis of the perceptions of trade unionists in the Czech republic. The Czech unionists were found to have 'a fundamentally contradictory conception of what workplace trade unionism should now be about' (2000: 196). On the macro-level, the trade unionists faced a dilemma between supporting capitalism and fighting it in defence of workers' interests. Therefore, the unions had a double task in a certain way: while they tried to break up with the old system, they had to adapt to the new one at the same time, which

was working against them (Pollert 2000: 196). This situation made the unions 'schizophrenic' as a Czech unionist described to Pollert (1997: 23). On the micro-level, this meant that issues of work standards or salary were not considered to be a matter for the union representatives any more, but rather an individual private issue between a worker and the management (Pollert 2000: 207). Stein (2001: 70) argues that Slovak trade unions were in an even more complicated position compared to the unions in Czech republic after the dissolution of Czechoslovak republic in 1993. As the trade unions in Slovakia before its democratisation functioned mainly during totalitarian regimes, such as fascist Slovak State during WWII or under communism, Slovak trade unions always sided with those in power rather than being a bottom-up representation of workers' interests (Stein 2001: 70).

While Pollert (1997 and 2000), Frege (2001) and Stein (2001) found the problem of the trade unionists perceptions lying in them mentally siding with the management and not the workers, Meardi's (2000) constructivist study of the Polish trade unionists found, that instead of being opposed to change during post-communism, unionists in Poland in fact wanted to rapidly break off with their negative past. Doing so, however, meant that Polish unionists embraced reforms which further weakened them such as privatisation or increased work flexibility (Meardi 2000: 237). This thesis was supported by Ost (2009: 13) who claims that it is now one of the legacies of post-communism, during which unions passively accepted their own weakening, which works against the unions' revival in the current period.

Why is this argued change of unionists' perceptions necessary? As Anderson and Trentin (1996 in Meardi 2000: 237) summed up, while a factory can move its production from Western to Eastern European countries, it has to be then possible for the Eastern European workers to claim the same rights (such as rights to strike, organise, or unionise) as the Western workers do. This change of perceptions means that the unions would move away from the communist era idea of being allied to management (as argued by Frege 2001 or Pollert 1997) as well as the post-communist idea of their own redundancy in a new capitalist system (as argued by Ost 2009; Meardi 2000) and become 'real' trade unionists at heart - protecting social rights. In other words, trade unions need to understand their role within the market economy

and their new responsibilities within it such as delivering ‘higher wages, job security, better work conditions, and limitations to managerial authority’ (Crowley 2004: 420).

Due to trade unions’ own acceptance of their weakening during post-communist period, they have become viewed ‘as subordinate to newly emerging business interests and party politics’ (Kahancová 2017: 179). However, as Meardi (2012: 11) notes, after more than two decades of post-communist transition the impact of these legacies should matter less. Some scholars acknowledge that a ‘second generation’ of activists (Sava 2015 in Piotrowski 2015: 11) has been emerging with the new generation of workers entering the job market. Furthermore, this younger generation does not carry the negative idea of the communist trade unions, and also has had opportunity to experience more favourable perceptions of the unions abroad which means that it has been able to see the trade unions differently: ‘not as a dismal remnant of the past but as a possible protector in the future’ (Ost 2009: 22).

## 2.6 Conclusion

This literature review chapter responded to the first two objectives of the dissertation. Firstly, it analysed the obstacles to the successful working of trade unions in the post-communist region. Doing so, the chapter looked at three independent variables in separate sections: the first variable, political economy of transition, concluded that while these processes created detrimental and difficult situation for trade unions, they do not sufficiently explain the position taken by the unionists themselves in weakening the trade unions. Second variable, neo-corporatist structure of the social dialogue, concludes, that as many authors argued (Bohle and Greskovits 2004; Kahancová 2017; Ost 2000; Stein 2001), neo-corporatism in the post-communist region is 'illusory' and the trade unions do not yield much influence in that structure also due to their own decisions and strategies. Secondly, the chapter showed on the third variable that if the trade unionists are to fulfil their role in enhancing social rights, then a certain change of perception on their role is necessary. To summarise, trade unions in the post-communist region declined due to their own internal obstacles which caused that they were not prepared to effectively counter the external and structural obstacles.



## **Chapter 3: Data Collection and Analysis**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This empirical chapter aims to address the last two objectives of the dissertation. Firstly, it will examine the perceptions of trade unionists in Slovakia in order to evaluate their role in social rights protection. Secondly, it will determine what trade unions could do to enhance social rights as recommended by the experts and activists in this field in Slovakia. In order to do so, this part draws on primary source of evidence from qualitative semi-structured interviews with Slovak trade unionists (on national, sectoral and company level), academic experts (sociologists, a political scientist and an economist) and two initiatives (one campaign-focused and another research-focused). The chapter first presents the research design, methods of data collection and methods of data analysis used in the research. Afterwards it embarks on the findings section where main themes from thematic analysis of the interviews will be presented in separate sub-sections. The chapter concludes with a discussion analysing how the research findings fit within, challenge or support the scholarship debate, the main hypothesis, and the posed research question.

As the literature review chapter concluded, even though the processes of political economy of transition and structural obstacles of the neo-corporatist structure disadvantaged trade unionism in the post-communist region, to a large part the trade unions weakness was attributed to their own adverse idea of their role in the new conditions of capitalist economy. Number of scholars argued that, for various reasons, this adverse idea is slowly changing and that there are signs of a revival of trade



unionism in the region (Delteil and Kirov 2017; Kahancová 2015 and 2017; Ost 2009). This empirical chapter tries to analyse this change and in doing so, it undertakes a social constructivist approach to a qualitative case study of trade unions in Slovakia. The dissertation attempts to provide empirical backing for the arguments in the academic literature which inspired the main hypothesis, that it is the trade unions' own unchanged identity which weakens them and in effect impedes them from effectively protecting social rights.

### 3.2 Research Design

The research is interested in gaining perceptions of social actors, trade unionists on one hand and experts and initiatives on the other, in order to assess the main research question: What are the obstacles to trade unions' successful protection of social rights in Slovakia? Before choosing an appropriate research method, a tool for primary data collection, the research design must fit in within an established theoretical and philosophical framework. This is because, as Guba and Lincoln (1994: 105) explained, the research methods used derive from a certain philosophical paradigm.

The dissertation will draw on a social constructivist approach which considers knowledge as constructed through interactions of actors, as opposed to independently created. Therefore, social constructivism ontologically fits the objective of the research which is to analyse different perspectives of social actors. Some scholars would argue that this approach takes on a relativist position and assumes there is not one objective reality and that the reality is in fact multiple with more 'local and specific constructed realities' (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 109). However, others argued that the reality can be understood as existing independently, but can only be accessed 'through the perceptions and interpretations of individuals' (Ormston et al. 2013: 21).

In rejecting the objectivist positivist position, that reality exists independently of the individuals (Collins 2010: 38), the constructivist approach assumes epistemologically an interpretivist position. This position sees reality as knowable but 'not as separate from human subjectivity' (Porta 2008: 23), and therefore the outcomes are understood as an interpretation of meaning of the social reality (Guest 2012: 5). The social constructivist approach enables answering the posed question by analysing perceptions on the work of the trade unions through gathering views of social actors.

Theoretical motivation for this approach stems from the fact that to date, the academic literature has mostly taken the realist objectivist viewpoint of the issue. The empirical motivation comes from the recent developments within trade unionism in Slovakia, specifically there have been signs of revitalisation recently, such as workers actively creating new unions (Dennik N 24 May 2017) and successful progress in collective bargaining (Dennik N 20 February 2017).

Due to the case study design of the research, one of the potential weaknesses could be its generalisability. However, case studies discussed in the literature review showed the need for change of perception among trade unionists in other post-communist countries. The case study on Slovakia would only fill in the gap in literature and expand the previous research. Furthermore, according to Silverman (2000: 234), greater generalisability of the research can be achieved by using additional quantitative data. These were provided in the introduction and the literature review.

Some scholars tend to argue that a qualitative model cannot fully reach the scientific level of a quantitative due to the role of the researcher in interpreting the gathered data (Meardi 2000: 95). However, these two models of inquiry, the qualitative and quantitative one, are complementary rather than competing. As Meardi (2000: 95) adds, having undergone such difficult economical and societal changes since the end of communism, the qualitative model can enable to look below the surface of statistical data of the quantitative model and explore the situation in its complexity.

Most of the criticism of qualitative studies addresses the issues of their reliability and validity (Bryman 2012: 45). The issue of reliability asks whether the research could be repeated by other researchers and still be capable of finding the same conclusions. The issue of validity stems from the risk of ‘anecdotalism’ (Silverman 2000: 10). This means that a researcher could provide an overview of their findings, however, without sufficiently analysing additional or contradictory data (Silverman 2000: 10). In order to address these risks, the dissertation triangulated the primary data via combining different points of view from three different data sources (trade unionists, academic experts and social rights initiatives). Furthermore, the researcher recruited to the point of saturation of the interview data and where possible applied member-checking in order to clarify the research outcomes and increase credibility of the results. During the analysis, spreadsheets were used as a code-book to pick out the main themes arising from the analysis of the interview transcripts in order to avoid the subjective bias, the above-mentioned ‘anecdotalism’ and to increase coherence and reliability of the results (Guest 2012; Meardi 2000).

### 3.3 Data Collection

The tool for collecting data, the chosen research method, is qualitative elite semi-structured interview. This method can bring forward perspectives of the interview respondents in a practical and coherent way. This is due to the fact that their semi-structured nature avoids the rigidity of the structured interviews and therefore allows the researcher to ask follow-up question and enables the respondents to broaden their answers. Yet this method also avoids the wide span of the open-ended interviews and for this reason makes the subsequent analysis of the data more straightforward (Bryman 2012: 319).

The primary original evidence was collected during May 2017 in Bratislava, Slovakia. The respondent sampling was non-random and purposive, since the research was interested in gaining perceptions of a specific profession (trade unionists) or experience (academic experts, initiatives). The recruitment process consisted of contacting selected respondents via email to their respective institution. In order to increase validity of the research during the research process, the researcher provided transcribed interview to the respondents upon request. In order to avoid increased subjectivity during the data analysis and to increase credibility of the research, the main themes which emerged from the interview transcripts are overviewed in Table 1 which also includes the frequency at which respondents cited the specific theme in their answers. Table 1 shows themes the respondents discussed in respect to obstacles to trade unionism and social rights protection in Slovakia.

In order to increase the validity of the research, Silverman (2000) argued for the need of triangulation of the information gathered during interviews. Accordingly, the research analysed different interpretations from more sources. Therefore, the elite interviews with the trade unionists, are supported by the additional sources of information in form of interviews with academic experts (sociologists, a political scientist and an economist) as well as two initiatives (one research-focused, and one campaign-focused). The overview of the selected respondents, their profession and expertise, date, place, and type of the interview can be seen in Table 2.

The ethical considerations were expected to be maintained to minimum since the target group comprised adults and no vulnerable groups. Additionally, no sensitive issues were to be discussed. The researcher provided plain language statement with information about the research, consent form with the agreement to be recorded, quoted, and named in the outcome of the research. The interviews were conducted in person (7), via email (3), and via telephone (2). Personal and telephone interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in Slovak upon the consent of the respondents. The two initiatives and one of the experts chose to conduct interviews via email and the respondents from the two initiatives also preferred to be named only under their respective initiative.

### 3.4 Analysis

The research adopted thematic analysis to examine the data gathered from the qualitative semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis is one of the most used types of qualitative analysis (Guest 2012: 11). Bryman describes a theme as ‘a category identified by the analyst through his/her data, that relates to his/her research focus’ (2016: 584). Since this research is interested in obstacles to working of trade unions, the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts focused mainly on respondents’ views in respect to this issue.

The main themes arising from the interviews were selected using coding of the textual data from interview transcripts from the recordings or the contents of the email interviews. The main themes are summarised in separate sub-sections of the findings section.

As the literature review showed the post-communist trade unions have faced adverse external and structural circumstances. However, they also struggled due to their own adverse perception of their role in the new market economy. With respect to these arguments presented and in line with the constructivist approach of the research, the main hypothesis is that the trade unions’ unchanged identity impedes their ability to effectively protect social rights. The following sections will look into what interview data says about the possibility of a change of perception of trade unionists and their role in protecting social rights in the case study country, Slovakia.

Since the dissertation is designed as a deductive qualitative research, the discussion section will analyse the findings with respect to the main hypothesis. The thematic analysis used will analyse the respondents views on obstacles to trade unionism in general. Therefore, it also gives an additional inductive, exploratory or ‘content driven’ aspect to the research (Guest 2012: 7). In other words, using the interview data to their fullest, besides affirming or refuting the hypothesis (the unchanged identity does / does not impede the unions), the additional inductive orientation can further the answer to why that is so, what other important findings emerged, and what could be done.

### 3.5 Findings

This section outlines the main themes which emerged from the thematic analysis of the data with respect to the obstacles to the work of trade unions in Slovakia. Table 1 provides a general overview of the themes coded and in order to avoid subjective bias, the Table also shows number of participants who cited the respective theme in their interview. Due to shortage of space, following sub-sections will address four main themes which were cited by the respondents most often.

The first sub-section looks at the issue of fragmentation and creation of new unions which, as Table 1 shows, this created much tension between the elite trade unionists on one hand and the experts on the other. While the unionists perceived fragmentation to be threatening to their work, the other respondents felt it might be a sign of bottom-up activation of workers.

The second and third subsections look at the themes which were found to be of great importance to all interviewed groups: gradual learning and negative image of the unions. These themes together point out to a certain shift among trade unionists which however, needs to be better communicated to the public.

The fourth sub-section discusses a theme of exclusion of certain groups and topics from the trade union representation. This theme was missing in the interviews with the trade unionists, but which was present among both the academic experts and social rights initiatives. The findings showed that they understand their role and potential base too narrowly and thus exclude from their agenda groups of people as well as topics of social justice and fairness in more general terms.

### 3.5.1 Threatening Fragmentation or Promising Activation?

As can be seen in Table 1, there is a discrepancy between the different groups of respondents on the theme of fragmentation of the established and creation of new unions. The interviewed trade unionists considered this process to be detrimental and highly threatening to the future of the unions, decreasing unions' bargaining power, legitimacy and in effect their ability to protect social rights. This belief was unanimous across the different levels of trade union representation:

*'Just imagine that we would become even more fragmented. The Austrians have 7 trade union organisations, while we have 26. How can an organisation be functional if it has neither economic power nor membership numbers?'* (Balica 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Chairman of the Eastern Slovakia region, OZ KOVO).

*'I consider fragmentation to be a very negative trend, because unions are mostly about solidarity among the members, which is based on their collective perception, the art of compromise and so on. The problem is that these new trade unionists prefer to put their own personal interests ahead of the common interest of all employees'* (Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO).

*'There is such a culture in Slovakia that people resolve any dissatisfaction by splitting up and establishing something new ... this indeed weakens the membership base, economic resources, and bargaining power.'* (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ).

*'We, as trade unions, do not act jointly and unanimously towards the employer... it creates disunity, disagreements, and tensions.'* (Polakovič 2017, Trade unionist at Company level: Vice-chairman of ZSE Trade Unions).

On the contrary, the experts considered the role of the newly created unions as promising and a sign of a needed bottom-up activation of workers. The interviewed experts argued that this process could also enable the unions to compete for their membership and therefore become more active in rights protection (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University; Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute). The creation of Modern Trade Unions (MTU) in December



2016 was mentioned as the most important recent development. MTU was created after splitting up from the established trade unions in Volkswagen OZ KOVO, a sectoral trade unions organisation uniting metalworkers in Slovakia. MTU then entered into Volkswagen's first historical strike in June 2017 (Slovak Spectator 14 June 2017).

This fragmentation was welcomed by the experts mainly due to the threat of the established unions becoming rigid, ineffective and less radical than their newly created parts. The experts considered these new unions (such as MTU in Volkswagen) able to gain positive results (Marušiak 2017, Expert: Political scientist at the Slovak Academy of Sciences; Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University; Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute). Indeed the June 2017 strike led to successful bargaining and increase in wages and bettering of working conditions (Slovak Spectator 27 June 2017).

*'There is a certain oligarchisation of interests, whereby the elite trade unionists, the representation of employers and the politicians have stronger bonds between each other, instead of to their membership base ... the unions might then become less ardent, but the fact is that it is difficult in Slovakia to be an ardent advocate of interest and be realistic at the same time.'* (Kusá 2017, Expert: Sociologist at the Slovak Academy of Science and former head of The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network).

*'The unions are rigidly 'set in stone' in their positions through tripartite bodies, cajoled by the employers, and in case someone strives for a change, they have to go around those established unions, as it happened in Volkswagen with OZ KOVO'* (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University).

Therefore, while the unionists addressed the need to work from within their organisations, in case it is not possible, the experts perceived the fragmentation as promising. However, only if followed by activity to bring about positive developments. Despite their fragmentation, the different trade union organisations should be capable of cooperation on different topics with other unions as well as other parts of civic society. This, however, is not happening as both trade unionists (Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of

OZ KOVO) and experts (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University) acknowledged which is due to the fact that unions are not yet perceived as a legitimate part of civic society. The initiatives have mostly capitalised on this need for a bottom-up activation:

*‘Many have not yet understood that the unions are not a separate, anonymous organisation which is supposed to fight for their rights for them. ... Where the employees are passive, so are the unions or they do not even exist.’* (Pracujuca Chudoba, 2017, Campaign-focused initiative).

### 3.5.2 Learning

As can be seen in Table 1, all of the respondents agreed that there has been a positive change within Slovak trade unions, as they are becoming more active, undertake new strategies, are more networked, and argue in a more sophisticated way when compared to previous decades. For example, trade unions OZ KOVO cooperated with an NGO, The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network, which helped them to better their argumentation skills using among others EU SILC statistics in promoting higher minimum wage. OZ KOVO was then capable of bringing to public attention a fact that the minimum wage was way below the subsistence minimum (Kusá 2017, Expert: Sociologist at the Slovak Academy of Science and former head of The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network; Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ; Balica 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Chairman of the Eastern Slovakia region, OZ KOVO). OZ KOVO now cooperates with the initiative Pracujuca Chudoba (2017, Campaign-focused initiative) and pushes for further increase in minimum wage. Furthermore, another factor of learning is the gradual understanding of the unions not as an organisation providing benefits (such as cheap holidays) but as a dynamic tool for enhancing rights. The respondents have pointed to the incoming new generation of workers and trade unionists, which could bring about new mentalities and new perceptions on the unions' role:

*'The change and shift comes also with generational change, so that the members would be made out less of those remembering the communist unions, but more of those who understand the unions as part of the civic sector and would act that way as well.'* (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University).

*'The younger members would not be burdened by the thinking from the past anymore. They would be more authentic, they would become members because they want to, because they share certain values and not because of a habit from the past.'* (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ).

The critique from the experts and unionists themselves addressed their negative perceptions among the public and their negative media portrayal, which will be dealt with in the following sub-section. However, as far as learning is concerned, the

interviewed unionists acknowledged the problem and showed much progress has been made in the area of using social networks to reach out to their potential members (Nemethová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Spokesperson of Confederation of the Trade Unions, KOZ; Balica 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Chairman of the Eastern Slovakia region, OZ KOVO; and Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO). Trade unionists also become active in organising discussions (Balica 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Chairman of the Eastern Slovakia region, OZ KOVO) or publishing online newspapers such as ‘Denník Práca’ project ([www.dennikpraca.sk](http://www.dennikpraca.sk)) recently launched by the youth council of Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ).

### 3.5.3 Negative Image of Trade Unions

As Table 1 shows, all respondents agreed, that there has been a certain positive change. However, despite this change within the trade unionists' perception on their role and gradual advancing of their strategies, the perception of the public still remains negative. This situation deters union membership numbers, legitimacy and subsequently their ability to protect rights.

Understandably, the themes of the main obstacles which emerged most frequently, as seen in Table 1, were the negative perception of the unions among the public, negative perception among the employers, the media, and general lack of information about the unions and their work. Therefore, the respondents acknowledged that one of the most important tasks trade unions need to address was a grave need for modern marketing strategies (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ; Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO; Balica 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Chairman of the Eastern Slovakia region of OZ KOVO). This better communication strategy is necessary if the unions are to translate their changed perceptions to the public sphere and in effect counter their low levels of trustworthiness.

The campaign of the Czech Confederation of Trade unions was cited as the example which Slovak KOZ should follow in order to provide more information about their work and increase their legitimacy and, potentially, also membership numbers (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ; Nemethová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Spokesperson of Confederation of the Trade Unions, KOZ).

*'The unions should present themselves and their work in a more interesting and attractive way ... but the problem is the absolute absence of a strong modern social marketing, so we are currently working on this within KOZ.'* (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ).

*'Trade unions have to gradually contribute to change within public thinking so that unions are perceived as a legitimate part of the civic society ... we are planning to go*

*to schools ... increase awareness and knowledge about the unions and their work.*’ (Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO).

*‘There is a certain disinformation, ignorance and prejudice about the real function of the trade unions, but we are also to blame, because we could be more assertive and effective... we have to work with the public much more, we should not be afraid of the meetings ... I will organise public discussion platforms in Eastern Slovakia and I am planning to invite people via social networks.’* (Balica 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Chairman of the Eastern Slovakia region, OZ KOVO).

### 3.5.4 The Exclusion of Topics and Groups from Representation

As can be seen in Table 1, the theme of exclusion emerged from the interviews with the experts and initiatives, while among the trade unionists it was absolutely missing. Therefore, the triangulation of sources of information during the respondent selection bore fruit for the research. The experts and the initiatives interviewed pointed out to an existing problem of the trade unionism and their social rights protection which would have otherwise not emerged from the interviews with the trade unionists.

In their interviews, the trade unionists discussed mostly problems within their membership base, and how to become more trust-worthy and attractive for the public. However, the interviewed experts and initiatives understood the role of the unions in society more broadly and identified the theme of ‘exclusion’ as one of the drawbacks of the trade unions in social rights protection.

The theme of exclusion subsumes a critique towards the unions for representing only very narrowly defined membership, rather than trying to include broader groups of workers’ and for pushing forward narrowly defined interests such as low wages, instead of addressing more general societal issues and topics. In other words, the critique of exclusion was meant in personal dimension as exclusion of people who are not standardly employed (such as agency workers, bogusly self-employed, or migrant workers) but also exclusion on topic dimension due to unions’ rigidly narrow focus on the issues of low wages and excluding other social rights-related topics.

*‘They represent their members not their role’* (Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute).

In terms of exclusion of certain topics, the criticism stems from the fact that the unions on the national level are not devoted to and do not open important topics and solely push forward only the issue of low wages (Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute; Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University). Trade unions do not address topics which are generally connected to their work such as gender issues or corporate social responsibility (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University), nor do they inform on dangers of bogus self-employment (Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute). They also do not

address the proven discrimination of Roma on the labour market (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University, for analysis on this issue see IFP 2014).

More generally, they ignore ‘the topics of justice and fairness in society’ (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University). While the interviewed trade unionists (Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO) excused this by having lack of capacity, Vašečka (2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University) pointed out to the problem of their own perception and the role of mentalities.

In terms of exclusion of groups, the experts and initiatives pointed out that there are large groups outside the unions’ reach which creates a certain rift in society to those who are eligible to having their rights protected and those who are not (Kusá 2017, Expert: Sociologist at the Slovak Academy of Science and former head of The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network). The groups considered to be out of the unions representation were the unemployed, the non-standard workers such as those in bogus self-employment, agency workers, or even migrants and Roma (Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute; Marušiak 2017, Expert: Political scientist at the Slovak Academy of Sciences; Kusá 2017, Expert: Sociologist at the Slovak Academy of Science and former head of The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network). Vašečka (2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University) also reminded that trade unions tend to ignore rights protection of those who might earn more, but work within private sector (such as banking or IT) which is unfavourable to union creation and might suffer from different problems which unions are supposed to address apart from low wages.

*‘The problem is that they represent employees in the strictest sense of the word .... and there is a number of topics which they are supposed to address but do not do so’* (Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute).



### 3.6 Discussion

This section analyses how the findings fit in with the main research question of this dissertation: What are the obstacles to trade unions' successful protection of social rights in Slovakia? Doing so, the dissertation tested the main research hypothesis, which argues that it is the trade unionists' own unchanged perception on their new role in the market which impedes them from successfully protecting social rights.

As the literature review chapter concluded, the main reason of trade unions' weakness in the post-communist region was their own inability to change their perception of their role within the new political economy. The findings from thematic analysis of interviews provide evidence of a gradual shift in the perception of trade unionists in Slovakia. The interview data shows, that the elite trade unionist are in fact prepared to take on a more active role and the academic experts and the social rights initiatives agreed that this is - even if slowly - already happening. Particularly, as the findings section showed, the trade unionists have created new unions to advance their agenda, they gradually learn to use other strategies and aim to push towards bettering their public image in order to address and respond to new challenges.

Stein (2001: 74) concluded, that weakening of the trade unions in Slovakia was happening while trade unionist themselves were mostly helpless and passive about the situation, as they were completely neglecting mobilisation and recruitment activities. On the contrary, the interviews have shown two different emerging routes of activism.

Firstly, the new generation of trade unionists (within all levels interviewed: national, sectoral and company) showed how they try to change the system from within. In the interviews the trade unionists acknowledged the problems of passivity of the workforce, unwillingness to support or enter unions, increasing individualism in society, and stigma of joining (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University; Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO). Most importantly, the interviewed unionists also acknowledged the drawbacks and self-criticised the unions. However, they also embarked on activities targeting these issues such as greater dissemination of information, better communication, and marketing strategies (using social networks,

launching own news website, organising debates). Undoubtedly, there is still a long way to go, but the course set seems to be right, as the example of the successful campaign of the unions in Czech republic showed (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ).

Secondly, another part of trade union activists opts for establishing new unions in case they perceive the old ones to be 'glued in' or co-opted by the elites maintaining status quo. Recent developments suggest that unions become more confident this way, such as the historically first strike and successful bargaining of Modern Trade Unions in Volkswagen, which fragmented from OZ KOVO (Slovak Spectator 27 June 2017). Therefore, the findings support recent academic debate into the topic (Delteil and Kirov 2017, Kahancová 2015 and 2017) which claims that the unions in fact managed to find new strategies and broaden their target groups in response to the ongoing criticism.

The above-mentioned creation of Modern Trade Unions and their subsequent mobilisation of workers' and successful strike and bargaining in Volkswagen could send a positive signal to other sectors as well (Slovak Spectator 27 June 2017). Ost (2009: 16) mentioned that one of the problems for a union revival in post-communist countries, was the complete lack of interest as well as people committed to trade unions. However, since the strike in Volkswagen in June 2017, the topic resonated within Slovak society and the media covered the strike broadly (Dennik N June 2017). Similarly, foreign media was writing about the 'end of patience' of the Eastern European workers (to use Beissinger and Sasse's 2014 phrase again), who started demanding the convergence in standards of living in the EU (Bloomberg 21 June 2017; Respekt 22 June 2017). Therefore, in comparison to Cziria's analysis of trade unionism in Slovakia, where he claimed that there had been 'no special debates dealing with trade union representation' (2010: para. 14), much has recently changed. Kahancová considers the recent ability of the unions to use different tactics, such as 'campaigns, advocacy, media debates and petitions', that they have in fact succeeded in increasing their 'visibility and [...] legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public' (2017: 198). This is essential, because, as the findings showed, any positive change within the unions has to be better presented to the public.

Anti-communist sentiments negatively impacted social movements in the post-communist countries and distorted the social scene as the leftist groups were mostly missing (Piotrowski 2015: 10). Anti-communism together with the new neoliberal thinking targeted the public perception of the trade unions the most. The unions were seen at best as a provider of cheap holidays to their members, and at worst as bolshevik remnants of the communist past (Crowley 2004: 429). During post-communist era, trade union activities were perceived to be obstacles to needed economic reforms, and ‘an outmoded defence of outmoded particular interests, the satisfaction of which would harm economy as a whole’ (Crowley and Ost 2001: 2). There was a certain belief in the region that weak unionism is what is needed for capitalism to truly flourish (Crowley and Ost 2001: 230). Meardi (2012: 11) writes that in 2000 only as little as 10 per cent of Polish managers thought that unions should belong to private companies. This means that only 10 percent agreed to something which was ratified the same year at the EU level as a fundamental right (Meardi 2012: 11). Why is this important? As identity theorists argue, people become members and join an organisation because they find meaning in doing so (Crowley and Ost 2001: 7). However, this very function was lacking in trade unions in the post-communist period (Crowley and Ost 2001: 7).

While, for example in Latin America, unions have become synonymous of civic society, the post-communist unions have been stigmatised, marginalised and perceived as something outside of civic society and the interview data shows it is still the case (Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University; Benedeková 2017, Trade unionist at Sectoral level: Vice-chairman of the council of OZ KOVO; Nemethová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Spokesperson of Confederation of the Trade Unions, KOZ). This must change in order for unions to expand their topics and be able to cooperate on social rights protection more generally with other actors within civic society, such as NGOs. Just to offer an example, this worked very well in the above-mentioned cooperation between OZ KOVO and The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network (and later on Pracujuca Chudoba initiative). Nevertheless, this cooperation was narrowly focused on the issue of wages. Similarly, a trade unionist, criticising the leadership of the established unions OZ KOVO, expressed that: ‘I think that OZ

KOVO should open up much more. Not only towards other political parties, but also towards NGOs working in social sphere' (Dennik N 24 May 2017).

In contrast to body of academic literature examined in the literature review, the constructivist approach used in this dissertation caught unions in redefining their image, slowly gathering momentum in favourable economic, political, and social conditions in order to counteract their negative public image. To date, the unions are in a certain 'in-between' position: while they have gradually changed their perception and take on a more active role, they are still viewed negatively among the public. Nevertheless, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. As a recent survey by Butorová (2017: 75) found out, there is a great gap between past civic participation of the respondents (such as contacting an MP, voting, participating in local council, NGO initiative or demonstrations) and their wished participation in these activities. The respondents acknowledged that they would be more willing to participate in demonstrations, strikes or even in trade union activities in the future (Butorová 2017: 75). Therefore, there is some space for the unions to embark on.

In light of these findings, the author considers that the findings refute the main hypothesis and therefore, it is not the trade unionists' own unchanged identity which impedes them from successfully protecting social rights anymore. However, there are still some limitations remaining. Besides looking at whether the hypothesis is affirmed or refuted, the research also looked at the interview data inductively so that the dissertation could analyse the issue more broadly. That is why, the findings also showed, that the more active role of the unions has certain limitations, especially in form of exclusion of certain groups and topics from their representation. Therefore, the underlying question of what the obstacles to trade unions' successful protection of social rights are, depends on who they reach in their representation and on their ability to broaden their limited set of topics. While unions might have become more confident and sophisticated in arguing for increased minimum wage (as above mentioned cooperation between OZ KOVO and The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network showed), it is not enough.

In spite of the fact that the changed perception made unions more active in protecting rights of their members, in comparison to earlier studies by Pollert (1997) or Frege

(2001), the trade unions would need to embrace broader and more general understanding of their role. The importance of this lies in the fact that social cohesion after the post-communist transition's economic woes was achieved also to a great extent by marginalising the vulnerable, such as the Roma (Bohle and Greskovits 2012b: 96; Romano 2014: 133) and as the interview data showed, the unions tend to ignore this issue in their work.

There are signs that trade unions in the region have started slowly adapting to these challenges. For example, Kahancová (2015a) found trade unions in the CEE region redefining their strategies, activities as well as target groups in the post-2008 period. Not only in Slovakia, but also in other CEE countries, trade unions responded to the criticism of being too focused on their members as standard workers (Kahancová 2015a and 2017). For instance, a trade union organisation in Slovakia (the interviewed Metalworker Unions, OZ KOVO) recently embarked on the problems faced by the temporary agency workers within metalwork industries, as this became an increasingly precarious form of employment after crisis in 2008 (Kahancová 2017: 185). Doing so, OZ KOVO was then capable of widening their 'scope of interest representation through a new inclusive approach towards [temporary agency workers]' (Kahancová 2017: 185). Kahancová considers this process a possible 'attempt to revitalise trade unions' (2015b: 27).

Even though the experts acknowledged certain change within the unions, they still expressed serious doubts whether the existing structure allows them to make a difference (Kusá 2017, Expert: Sociologist at the Slovak Academy of Science and former head of The Slovak Anti-Poverty Network; Páleník 2017, Expert: Economist at the Employment Institute; Vašečka 2017, Expert: Sociologist at Masaryk University; Marušiak 2017, Expert: Political scientist at the Slovak Academy of Sciences). In line with Crowley (2004: 33) who claimed that even if trade unionists changed their perceptions to responding to their members' needs, it might not suffice as they have already organisationally declined too much to matter and would decline even further. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the new strategies and types of action, move away from bargaining towards more contentious activities such as 'public protests, strikes and (resignation) campaigns' (Kahancová 2015a) will produce more positive

outcomes in the near future. To conclude, one of the interviewed elite trade unionists remarked on the largest obstacle to union successful work:

*'It is paradoxically the internal structure within the trade unions. It might seem very negative that we ourselves might be the main obstacle in our work, but at least these problems are in our hands, we can solve them. We cannot do anything about the external negative factors, we cannot change those, we can only be prepared and be flexible when we have to face them'* (Uhlerová 2017, Trade unionist at National level: Vice-president of Confederation of Trade Unions, KOZ).



## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

This dissertation addressed a following research question: What are the obstacles to trade unions' successful protection of social rights in Slovakia? In answering this question, the dissertation was divided into two main parts: literature review and empirical chapter.

The literature review addressed the first two objectives of the dissertation. Firstly, it analysed the obstacles to the successful working of trade unions in the post-communist region which impacted their ability to protect social rights. The three main areas of obstacles, the independent variables, were analysed in the separate sections: political economy of transition, neo-corporatist structure of the social dialogue, and the perceptions of the trade unionists. Secondly, the chapter concluded that a shift in trade unionists own perception on their role is necessary if they are to fulfil their role in enhancing social rights.

The empirical chapter described the research design, methodology, methods of data collection and data analysis. The main themes which emerged from the qualitative interviews through thematic analysis were summarised in the findings section and subsequently examined for how they fit in within the academic debate in the discussion section. Doing so, this chapter addressed the last two objectives of the research: investigated the perceptions of trade unionists in Slovakia in order to evaluate their role in social rights protection and determined what trade unions do and could do to enhance social rights as recommended by academic experts and activists.



The discussion concluded, that the findings refuted the main hypothesis, that it is the trade unionists' own unchanged identity which impedes them from protecting social rights. Instead, the findings point to a certain revival of trade unionism in Slovakia, as most recent scholarship in other CEE countries also finds. Nevertheless, the trade unions have to broaden their set of topics as well as groups they represent if they are to successfully fulfil their role.

The author discovered many areas which would need to be examined and researched further. For example, since the developments cited in this dissertation are very recent such as the Volkswagen strike of June 2017, it might be interesting to look at the possible spill-over of workers' activation to other areas or sectors in Slovakia. Similarly, scholars could also look at how public discourse towards trade unions was affected by the results of this strike. Further studies could look at the regional aspect and try to find out possible links and impact of the cross-regional trade union solidarity, for example between German unionists supporting their Czech counterparts.

Most importantly, further research could find possible strategies and recommendations to what could be done so that this issue of 'end of patience' of the Eastern European workforce is not exploited by illiberal populist forces but could constructively bring forward a more inclusive form of capitalism in the region.

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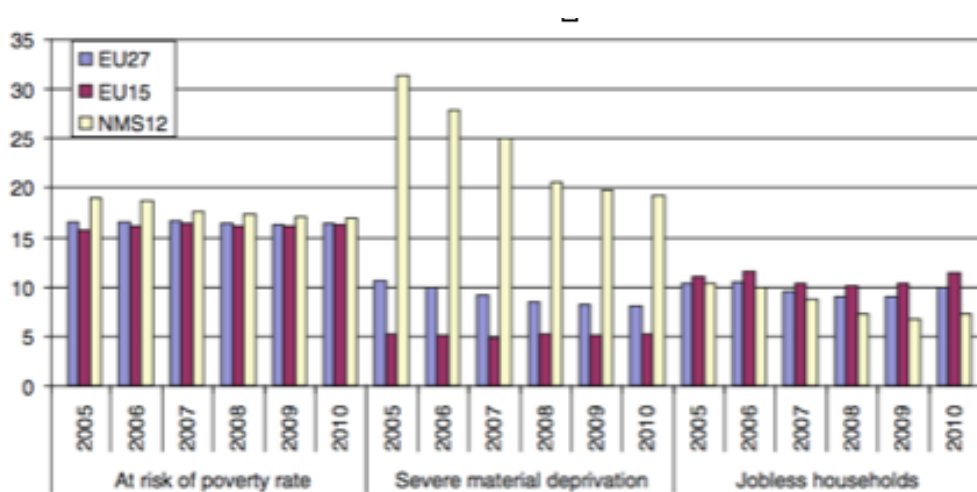
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## Appendices

### Graph 1: Poverty Rates, Material Deprivation and Unemployment

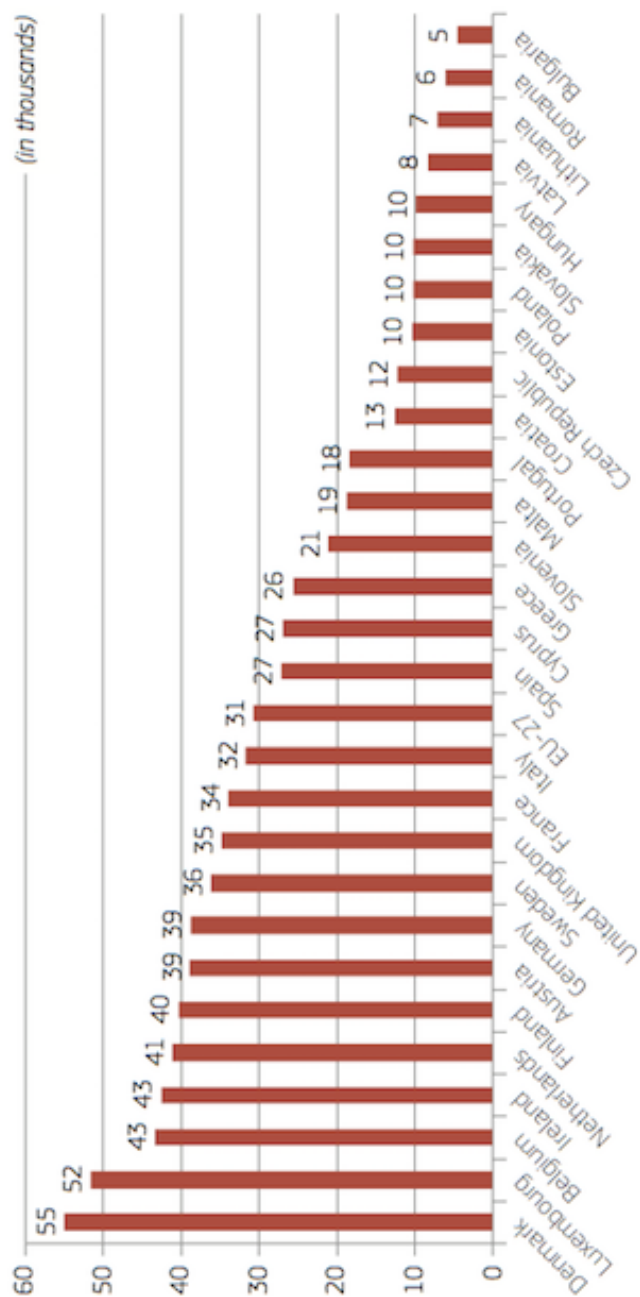
Comparison of the EU27 and the gap between the EU15 (Western European countries) and the NMS12 (new member states of the EU). Percentage of total population for 2005 - 2010 EU SILC statistics. Source: Engsted (2013: 22).



## Graph 2: Average Annual Gross Earnings

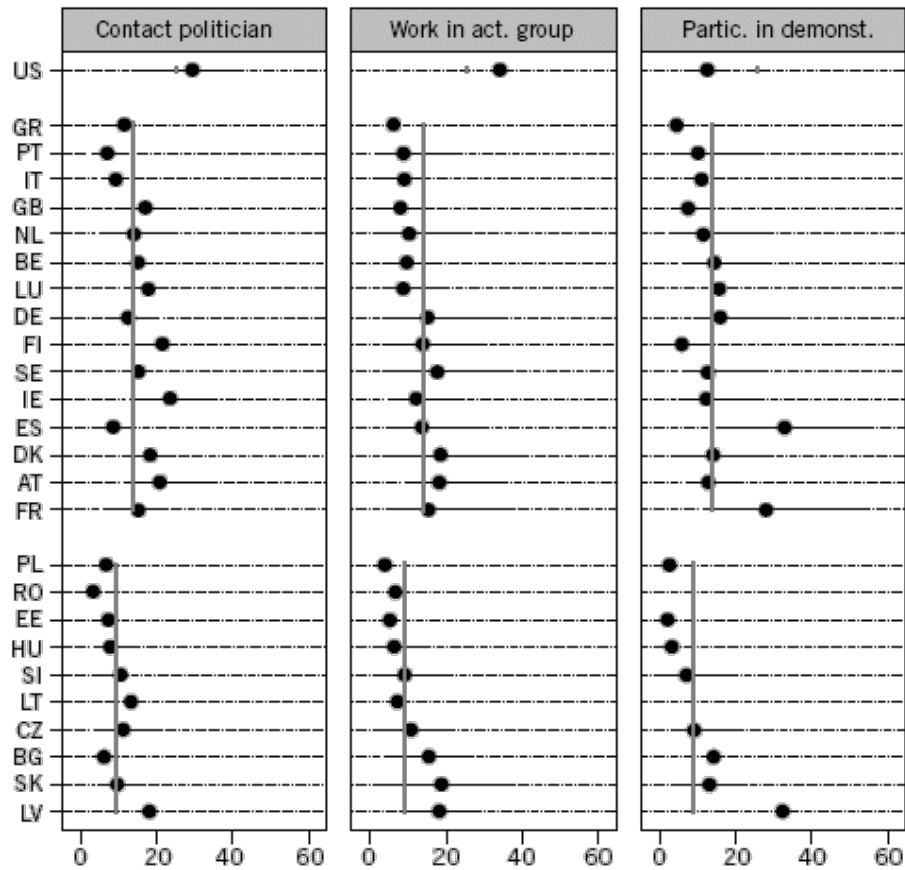
Eastern European countries (right) Western (middle and left), 2010 Eurostat Data.

Source: European Commission (2015b: 61).



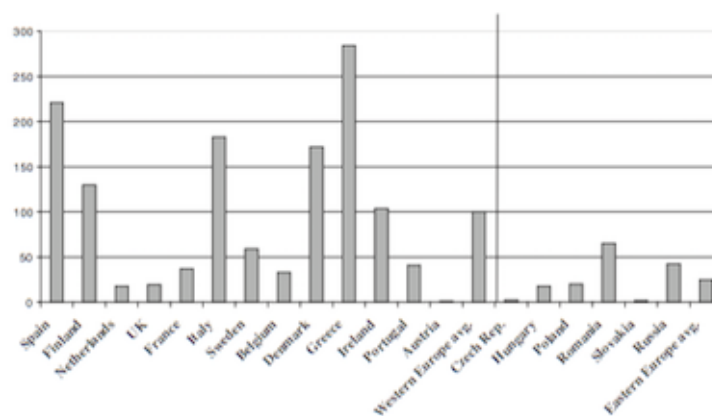
### Graph 3: Civic participation in Western and Eastern European Countries

Percentage of population engaging in activity, Western European countries (top) and Eastern European countries (bottom). Source: J. Alber & U. Kohler (2009: 26).



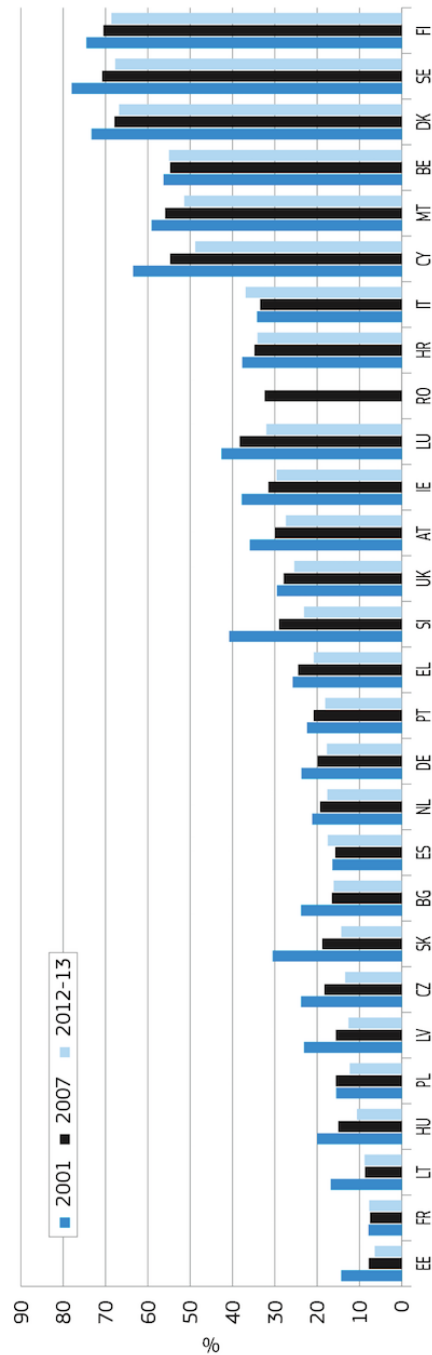
### Graph 4: Strike Rates Comparison

Comparison of strike rates (days not worked per thousand workers) between Western (left) and Eastern (right) European countries. Source: Crowley (2004: 404)



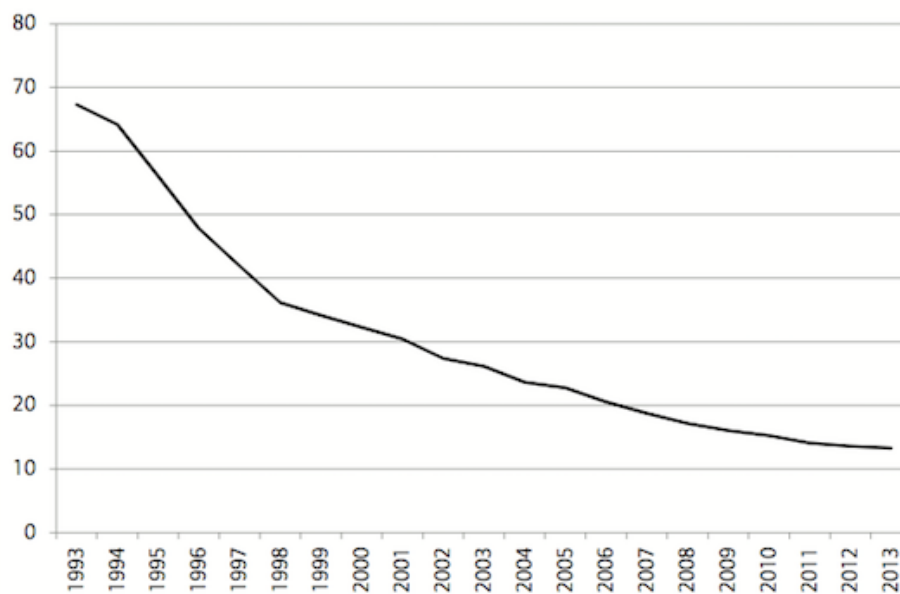
### Graph 5: Union Density in EU Member States

Comparison of union density (percentage of workforce unionised) in the EU for 2001, 2007 and 2012/2013. Source: European Commission (2015a: 20).



### Graph 6: Trade Union Density in Slovakia

Note: Net union membership as a proportion of wage and salary earners in employment in percent in Slovakia, for 1993 - 2013. Source: Visser (2016 in Kahancová 2017: 182)





**Table 1: Overview of the Themes Discussed by the Interviewees**

The themes the respondents discussed in respect to obstacles of trade unions and social rights protection in Slovakia including their frequency (how many respondents cited the specific theme in their answers). Created by the author.

| Findings sub-section                  | Themes on obstacles to trade unionism in Slovakia      | Number of respondents | Trade unionists at company level: ZSE TU |      | Trade unionists at sectoral level: OZ KOVO TU |      | Trade unionists at national level: KOZ SR |      | Experts |      |      |      | Initiatives |     |
|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|--|------|---|------|---|------|---------|------|------|------|-------------|-----|
|                                       |  |                       | S.S.                                     | R.P. | J.B.  | M.B. | M.U.                                      | M.N. | M.V.    | M.P. | Z.K. | J.M. | P.CH.       | K.  |
| Fragmentation vs bottom-up activation | Fragmentation of the unions                            | 6                     | YES                                      | YES  | YES   | YES  | YES                                       | YES  |         |      |      |      |             |     |
|                                       | Rigid structure of established unions                  | 5                     |  |      |   |      |   |      | YES     | YES  | YES  |      |             | YES |
|                                       | Need of bottom-up activity                             | 10                    | YES                                      | YES  | YES   | YES  | YES                                       | YES  | YES     |      | YES  | YES  | YES         | YES |
| Negative perception of the TUs        | The lack of information and negative public perception | 12                    | YES                                      | YES  | YES   | YES  | YES                                       | YES  | YES     | YES  | YES  | YES  | YES         | YES |
|                                       | Negatively portrayed in the media                      | 11                    | YES                                      | YES  | YES   | YES  | YES                                       | YES  | YES     | YES  | YES  | YES  | YES         | YES |
|                                       | Negatively perceived by the employers                  | 10                    | YES                                      | YES  | YES   | YES  | YES                                       | YES  |         |      | YES  | YES  | YES         | YES |
| Gradual learning                      | Gaps in marketing strategies                           | 12                    | YES                                      | YES  | YES   | YES  | YES                                       | YES  | YES     | YES  | YES  | YES  | YES         | YES |
| Exclusion                             | Exclusion of certain groups and topics                 | 5                     |  |      |   |      |   |      | YES     | YES  | YES  | YES  | YES         | YES |

**Table 2: Overview of the Interview Respondents**

The type and profession, with date, place and type of the interview. Created by the author.

| Name of the interviewee | Category       | Profession   | Date and place of the interview | Type of interview |
|-------------------------|----------------|--|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Silvia Šmatralová       | Trade unionist | Company level:<br>Chairman of ZSE Trade Unions                           | 19 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Róbert Polakovič        | Trade unionist | Company level:<br>Vice-Chairman of ZSE Trade Unions                      | 19 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Jozef Balica            | Trade unionist | Sectoral level:<br>Chairman of Eastern Slovakia region, OZ KOVO          | 15 May 2017                     | telephone         |
| Monika Benedeková       | Trade unionist | Sectoral level: OZ KOVO  | 26 May 2017                     | telephone         |
| Monika Uhlerová         | Trade unionist | National level:<br>Vice-President of Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) | 17 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Martina Nemethová       | Trade unionist | National level:<br>Spokesperson of Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ)   | 17 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Zuzana Kusá             | Expert         | Sociologist,<br>former head of Slovak network against poverty            | 12 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Michal Páleník          | Expert         | Economist,<br>Institute of employment                                    | 16 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Michal Vašečka          | Expert         | Sociologist,<br>Masaryk University                                       | 19 May 2017,<br>Bratislava      | personal          |
| Juraj Marušiak          | Expert         | Political scientist,<br>Slovak Academy of Science                        | 06 May 2017                     | email             |
| Karmina                 | Initiative     | Research-focused initiative on workers' strikes and protests             | 22 May 2017                     | email             |
| Pracujuca chudoba       | Initiative     | Campaign-focused initiative on low wages                                 | 28 May 2017                     | email             |