**Resisting the Great Recession: Social Movement Unionism in Croatia and Serbia**

**Danijela Dolenec, Daniela Širinić and Ana Balković**

**Abstract**

Addressing the debate regarding the impact of the Great Recession on changing union strategies in post-socialist Europe, our analysis shows that in Croatia and Serbia the crisis, while depressing strike numbers, was nevertheless met with substantial union resistance. Developing a paired comparison and relying on protest event data for the period 2000-2017, we argue that the differences among the two countries’ respective varieties of capitalism drive divergent union strategies described as social movement unionism. In Serbia the role of unions in protests articulating workers’ demands remained more central and unions were overall more present in the protest arena while in Croatia unions have exhibited stronger propensity to forge alliances and adopt innovative policy strategies. While taking on board scholarship that portrays social movement unionism as signaling union weakness, we arguethat strategies which increase union mobilization capacity may also be understood as increasing union resilience in changing social circumstances.

**Keywords**: social movement unionism, union strategies, strike data, protest event analysis, post-socialism

**Introduction**

The Great Recession has brought a re-emergence of labour protest, with unions emerging as prominent actors in ‘various geometries of resistance’ in which unions and social movements act as allies rather than rivals (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). Employing a paired comparison with a most similar case design, this article analyses union strategies before and after the Great Recession, focusing in particular on social movement unionism as a revitalization strategy (Frege and Kelly, 2003). The concept of social movement unionism captures dynamics whereby unions enter coalitions with social movements, as well as adopt contentious repertoires to liken themselves to social movements (Frege et al 2004; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013), and in this paper we analyse both dimensions.

Recent studies on post-socialist Europe argue that, despite hostile institutional environments, low societal support and declining membership, unions have managed to mobilize and win important concessions (Kahancova, 2015; Varga, 2015; Ivlevs and Veliziotis 2017). At the same time, we know little about what has been going on in post-Yugoslav countries. Existing studies argue in favour of persistent union mobilization capacity (Bagić, 2010; Grdešić, 2015; Novaković, 2017), but until now systematic data on union mobilization capacity in this region was lacking. Given the comparative weakness of unions in this region when compared to Western Europe, studying their mobilization capacity provides important clues into union strategies for maintaining resilience and reaching out to new members, which is why our study addresses this gap.

We consider Croatia and Serbia as critical cases, arguing that if in countries that were deeply affected by economic decline and social distress, we find evidence of union revival, then it is plausible to expect it is taking off elsewhere in Europe as well. In the literature the Great Recession marks the period starting with the financial crisis in 2008 that propelled a number of countries into economic contraction and negative growth rates (Beissinger and Sasse 2014, Greskovits 2015), and in Serbia and Croatia these negative macroeconomic trends continued until 2015 when both countries again registered modest positive growth rates¹. Between 2010 and 2016 both countries recorded very high unemployment rates of around 20 percent for Serbia, and Croatia hovering around 15 percent, while industrial production fell by 9.2 percent in Croatia and 12,1 percent in Serbia between 2008 and 2009 (Bartlett and Prica 2011).

In lieu to similarities between the pair, we also analyse how differences in their respective levels of union institutionalization translate into mobilization strategies. In other words, this article explores both within-case variation over time and variation between cases, relying on case evidence and Protest Event Analysis (PEA) data for the period 2000-2017. Our analysis shows that unions in Croatia and Serbia adopted social movement strategies during the Great Recession, and that the differences among the two cases can indeed be related to levels of union institutionalization, whereby in Croatia unions developed stronger capacities for entering alliances, while in Serbia unions have relied more on the protest arena.

**Union Strategies during the Great Recession: the Post-socialist Context**

The transition of post-socialist European countries to capitalism and democracy during the hegemony of neoliberalism created a hostile environment for unions (Greskovits, 1998, 2015; Upchurch 2006). Across the board, during the 1990s trade union density fell and unions fragmented between those with a legacy as 'official' unions and those which emerged as newly independent. Post-socialist governments undertook wide ranging privatization and downsizing of the industrial workforce, cushioning opposition by making early retirement easier and providing comprehensive severance payments but creating long term state dependency for large populations (Varga, 2015). In countries where unions maintained high membership, this usually pertained to the public sector or remaining state owned industries (Grdešić, 2015; Upchurch, 2006). Arguably this is why, despite the fact that the 1990s transition brought an economic recession with the largest peacetime contraction in world output (Beissinger and Sasse, 2014; Ost and Crowley, 2001), with post-socialist countries experiencing massive unemployment and poverty (Grdešić, 2015; Greskovits, 1998), instead of protest analysts recorded ‘quiescence’ (Ost and Crowley, 2001).

However, the Great Recession has revived the exploration of ways in which economic strains influence patterns of social resistance and political articulation (Beissinger and Sasse, 2014; Císař and Navrátil, 2016; Grasso and Giugni, 2016). Beissinger and Sasse (2014) showed that though protest overall declined during the Great Recession, economic protest remained at the same level. We revisit their findings, but from the perspective of union strategies, aiming to determine how they changed over time and between cases. More centrally, relying on comparative PEA data on strikes and protest activities organized by unions, we revisit Greskovits’ (2015) findings according to which unions in post-socialist Europe confronted the Great Recession mostly by replacing their traditional strike repertoire with mass mobilization in the public sphere and by reaching for alliances with social movements and citizens.

In periods of crisis it is important to study union strategies in relation to broad patterns of social contention rather than as isolated phenomena. Studies of the post-2008 cycle of contention in Southern Europe have shown how unions aligned with other social actors in organising mass protests so their repertoire of contention expanded, rather than contracted (Accornero and Pinto, 2015; Carvalho and Portos, 2019). Organised labour makes its voice heard through collective bargaining, but workers also express their grievances by means of protests, demonstrations or petitions (Campos Lima and Artiles, 2018), or as Mathers et al. (2018:14) argue, trade union deinstitutionalization has ‘opened up civil society as a terrain on which to remobilise trade unionism as a social movement’. As a result, the literature conceptualises social movement unionism either as a union strategy of entering coalitions with civil society organizations and social movements, or as a strategy of employing a contentious action repertoire focused on protests and marches (Frege and Kelly, 2003; Frege et al, 2004; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Mathers et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that in countries where rates of unionization are particularly low and concentrated in the public sector, unions may engage in public protests, or join civil rights organizations’ issue spaces (Kahancova, 2015; Visser, 2019). There is evidence of these kinds of developments in post-socialist Europe too, where despite the general storyline of union decline unions are resisting and shifting their strategies from membership and collective bargaining to seeking political support, transnational alliances and protest (Greskovits, 2015; Kahancova, 2015). In a recent survey of union strategies in post-socialist Europe, Greskovits (2015) highlights the deficiency of comparative data on strikes and particularly on the protest repertoire of unions. The data we have collected addresses both of these gaps and allows for a direct empirical assessment of union strategies in response to the Great Recession. The central part of our analysis concerns the two dimensions of social movement unionism: unions’ presence in the protest arena, and the extent to which unions have pursued the strategy of forging alliances with actors such as civic initiatives and social movements.

Embedding union strategies within the varieties of capitalism framework, Bohle and Greskovits (2012) forefront the origins of labour mobilization and the extent of institutional support for union action as key factors driving variation. Along these two axes, union responses in the Visegrad group, Slovenia and Croatia should predominantly rely on established negotiation channels, while unions in less institutionalised settings like Romania and Bulgaria are expected to opt for the contentious arena. Though differences between Croatia and Serbia should not be over accentuated, in the varieties of capitalism framework that Bohle and Greskovits (2012) developed to account for post-socialist diversity, Serbia is closer to the neoliberal model coupled with weak state institutions, while Croatia shares features of the embedded neoliberalism of the Visegrad group. Studies have shown that in neoliberal economies where unions are fragmented, competitive and without regular access to policy-making, they tend to rely more on protest activities and movement-like strategies (Campos Lima and Artiles, 2018; Gentile and Tarrow, 2009). In such contexts it is also more likely that workers align with social movements and choose confrontational modes of expression (Vandaele, 2016).

Due to data limitations it is difficult to draw conclusive parallels regarding the extent of union institutionalization between Croatia and Serbia. Standard indicators of union institutionalisation, such as union density and collective bargaining coverage, are scarce, while available sources report divergent numbers. According to ILO, union density in Croatia is 25.8 percent (2016) and 27.9 percent in Serbia (2010). Similarly ILO reports collective bargaining coverage in Croatia at 46.7 percent (2016) and 55 percent in Serbia (2010). On the other hand, Eurofound (2012) reports a lower 35 percent collective bargaining coverage in Croatia, while Bagić (2016) reports a higher 53 percent collective bargaining coverage in Croatia. Similarly, Ladjevac (2017) reports union density in Serbia at around 20 percent, while Arandarenko (2012) estimates it higher, at around 35 percent. Furthermore, Arandarenko (2012) estimates collective bargaining coverage at slightly over 50 percent. In other words, little conclusive comparative evidence regarding institutional capacity of unions in Croatia or Serbia can be gleaned from standard aggregate indicators. One thing is rather clear though: large differences in coverage exist between the public and private sectors, it being substantially higher in the former (Arandarenko, 2012; Bagić, 2010). This distinction holds across post-socialist Europe (Kohl, 2015).

In Croatia unions have considerable influence over policy making, playing a strong consultative role in the tripartite body, while having weaker impact in terms of formal agreements (Nestić, 2012). However, though previously unions in Croatia were largely focused on the traditional repertoire of collective bargaining, litigation and industrial action, since 2010 they have initiated three citizens petitions for referenda, committing substantial resources to an innovative strategy of direct democratic mobilization (Butković, 2017). According to the author, this choice of strategy should be understood in the context of the economic crisis during which the tripartite social dialogue was suspended due to union boycotts that aimed to inform the public about the governments’ amendments of the Labour Law (Butković, 2017). Conversely, in Serbia the government remains the dominant actor in tripartite negotiations, with strong asymmetry of power both towards unions and employers associations (Arandarenko, 2012; Ladjevac, 2017). Given the level of devastation of Serbia’s economy, the state is constrained both by international financial institutions and by the imperative of privatization and attracting investments, severely restricting unions’ maneuver space and their choice of strategies. In such an institutionally weak position, unions win few policy gains, which over time leads to loss of public support, locking them into a downward spiral of influence (Stojiljković, 2020). At the same time, there is evidence of persistent union mobilization (Novaković, 2017), which our study re-confirms.

Taking everything on board, typologies of union responses as well as available evidence suggest that in Croatia unions are somewhat more strongly institutionalised than in Serbia. How do we expect this to impact union strategies and patterns of mobilization? If we understand social movement unionism along two dimensions, the first being a stronger reliance of unions on contentious politics of protest, and the second a strengthening reliance on coalitions with social movements and civil society actors, the latter seems more directly dependent on unions’ institutional embeddedness, while the former strategy of relocating conflict into the public sphere may indeed be used as an alternative to institutional effectiveness. Building on that reasoning, we expect to find a stronger reliance of unions on protest strategies in Serbia, while unions in Croatia are expected to have greater resources at their disposal for entering coalitions with new types of actors. Before we pursue these hypotheses, the next section presents our empirical strategy.

**Empirical Research Strategy**

Our research strategy is a paired comparison, which enables us to account not only for convergent trends between Croatia and Serbia, but also to pinpoint and elucidate important differences between them (Tarrow, 2010). Given that we explore trends through a paired comparison, we are able to nuance our analysis based on national trajectories. Paired comparison assumes that a number of potentially relevant factors between two cases are fairly similar, with selected cases sharing structural conditions and legacies which set the parameters for action. We treat the year 2008 as an approximate threshold between a period of relative economic stability, and the later period of economic and political crisis, usually referred to as the Great Recession.

Regarding the outcome of interest, features of social movement unionism as a revival strategy during the Great Recession, our PEA data (Dolenec et al. 2020) for the period 2000 - 2017 enables us to establish within and cross-country trends around many features of interest, such as the presence of unions in the protest arena, strike numbers, levels of mobilization, as well as the dynamics of allying with new types of actors. In addition to that, we also rely on case evidence collected from primary sources such as organizations’ websites, legislative documents, media reports from news outlets and available secondary literature.

Best described as 'a type of content analysis' (Hutter, 2014: 335), protest event analysis systematically captures properties of protest events such as frequency, timing, duration, location, claims, size and others (Koopmans and Rucht, 2002). Our protest event dataset is based on national newspapers’ reports in each country and it covers all events reported in newspapers in the period between 2000 and 2017. Notwithstanding selection and description bias inherent to media reporting (Hutter 2014; Ortiz et al. 2005), newspapers remain the best available source of data on protest dynamics for comparative studies. To tackle the issue of newspaper source bias, we selected two quality national dailies with the highest circulation and of opposite ideological stances, left-leaning and right-leaning, as data sources for each country: *Večernji list* and *Jutarnji list* in Croatia, *Politika* and *Danas* in Serbia. Our dataset is not a sample. Each printed daily newspaper issue was examined in full for reports on protest events between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2017. Given the length of time we cover, the level of detail, and the fact that it contains cross-country comparable data, our dataset substantially expands the possibilities for analyses of protest.

Our coding manual defines a protest as “any event which makes political claims in public, on behalf of an individual or a collective”, as well as that “a protest event is a meaningful unit, tied together by a shared objective, which means it can span across several locations and over time”. In order to further ensure validity across national contexts, the coding manual contains a list of contentious repertoires and performances illustrating this definition, such as demonstrations, marches and similar, which served as a guideline in the identification process. Other variables in our dataset are the identity of participants, identity of organizers, allies of protest, strategies and methods, demands and grievances, slogans and songs, direct targets and ultimate objects, character of intervention by authorities, casualties and damage, information on whether negotiations with authorities took place and the responses and reactions of other actors to the protest event. While we cannot claim to have identified the whole universe of protest events in the given time period, given the inherent bias of media reporting, the event dataset does enable us to identify trends, which is what we do with the data. In total our dataset records 2,870 protests in Serbia and 2,800 in Croatia.

Specifically regarding strike data, comparative research is rife with problems of incomparability of both within-country longitudinal data, and cross-country comparisons (Dribbusch & Vandaele, 2016). Considering Croatia and Serbia these problems are even more pronounced since official strike statistics are not kept, and hence not reported in relevant international databases. In this context, our comparable longitudinal data on strikes in Croatia and Serbia between 2000-2017 provide a valuable source. The PEA method of data collection, which records strikes reported in the national print media dailies, suffers from some of the same limitations as the official statistical records in that it under-records an unknown number of small-scale strikes. However, for Croatia and Serbia this data is the closest we have to determining actual strike numbers.

**Patterns of Economic Protest in the Great Recession**

Serbia and Croatia were often compared during the 1990s with respect to Milošević’s and Tuđman’s mode of rule, which were classified as competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2002). In Croatia all governments from 1990 to 2000 were majority Croatian Democratic Union governments³, and the 2000 election when CDU was removed from power, after the death of its leader Franjo Tuđman, was hailed as a democratic turning point. Serbia in the 1990s was an authoritarian regime that waged several wars outside state borders, while applying repression, intimidation and manipulation against its political rivals at home. The victory of the democratic opposition in the 2000 election that removed Slobodan Milošević from power represented a crucial pro-democratic turn in Serbia’s politics (Dolenec, 2013). Milošević’s rejection to concede defeat led the opposition coalition to the streets, invoking a mass popular uprising, with over 700,000 people in the streets of Belgrade (Bideleux and Jeffries, 2007).

From the 2000s onwards the two countries’ trajectories for a while converged in that both were governed by pro-democratic coalitions that aimed to strengthen the rule of law, comply with European Union conditionality and speed up economic reform along the lines of the neoliberal consensus of the time. In the early 2000s both countries’ governments set out to liberalise labour relations as part of loan agreements with the IMF and the World Bank (Grdešić, 2008, 2015; Upchurch and Weltman, 2008). Furthermore, between 2000 and 2008 both countries recorded positive GDP growth rates of above 5 percent, while in 2008 both countries plunged into negative growth rates, recording a rapid decline in industrial production and very high unemployment rates (Bartlett and Prica, 2011).

In order to establish trends in unions’ strategies in response to the Great Recession, we first determine patterns of economic protest in each of the cases. Protests recorded in our dataset were coded according to the type of demands articulated. Several coded categories of demands fall under the broad definition of economic protest: cuts to public services, austerity, inequality, unemployment, dismissals, redundancy procedure; workers’ rights (salary cuts, working conditions); capitalism; precarity; privatization; financial/banking system; debt; housing crisis; price increase and utilities (prices and quality of service). Summing together protests articulating these demands, Figure 1 shows the share of economic protests in the total annual number of protests (left-hand side of the graph), as well as the annual number of protest participants in economic protests (right-hand side of the graph), for Serbia and Croatia respectively.

‘Figure *1* about here’

Trends regarding economic protest during the Great Recession echoes the findings from Beissinger and Sasse (2014): while protests in general declined, economic protest remained present in both countries during the Great Recession. In Croatia in 2012 and 2015 more than half of all protests taking place articulated economic demands, while in 2008 and 2012 the number of participants in these protests even surpassed pre-crisis levels. In Serbia the share of economic protest is even more striking, remaining above 50 percent of all protests that took place between 2000 and 2015. Regarding levels of mobilization, in Serbia 2011 and 2015 recorded large numbers of protesters, though not reaching pre-crisis mass mobilization levels. These trends in economic protest suggest that, though the Great Recession overall restricted mass mobilization, the crisis was met with resistance rather than quiescence.

**Union-led Resistance to the Crisis**

What role was played by unions in shaping this mobilization, and did their role change during the Great Recession? Ost (2002: 48) argued that social movement unionism is effective only if it extends the unions’ fundamental role of representing labour’s interests in the capitalist economy, based on the ‘premise that the workplace is the terrain of conflict’. In that sense strikes should be understood as the most effective negotiating weapon that unions have at their disposal. The frequency and magnitude of strikes is a strong indicator of union strength and mobilization capacity, but in comparing strike trends we should keep in mind that they are highly regulated activities that must be analysed taking into consideration the institutional context (Warneck, 2007).

In Croatia the right to strike is regulated via the 1995 Labour Law. The Law is restrictive in three main ways. It stipulates legal reasons for strike as the nonpayment of salary or collective agreement disputes, and allows for solidarity strike but which again must pertain to nonpayments of salary or collective agreements in another company. In other words, it makes political strikes illegal, and in addition to that it does not allow for general strikes. According to Labour Law, the strike must be held against an employer or employers’ association. Finally, arbitration is mandatory for a strike to be legal and since 2003 the Sector for Social Partnership in the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy is in charge of arbitration processes. Since official strike statistics are not kept, the record of unsuccessful arbitrage processes has been used as a proxy for the number of strikes (Bagić 2010).

In Serbia the right to strike is regulated by the 1996 Law on Strike. The Law in principle allows for political and general strikes, but it is restrictive in that it stipulates the place of work as the only legal place to strike, as well as stipulating an extensive list of economic domains which have to maintain a minimum of the work process during strike. The scope of these domains is quite extensive, pertaining to network industries such as water and electricity, radio and TV, postal services, health, education and social protection, in addition to chemical, steel and metal industries, as well as defence and security domains. Similar to Croatia, since 2004 the Agency for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes keeps a record of arbitrage processes, but in the case of Serbia this record can hardly be used as a proxy indicator of the number of strikes since arbitration is mandatory only in proscribed economic domains.

In order to assess comparative trends between Croatia and Serbia over the observed period, Figure 2 shows the annual number of strikes per 100,000 citizens for each country respectively.

‘Figure *2*  about here’

Overall our data show that more strikes were taking place in Serbia (Dolenec at al. 2020). However, when observing levels of mobilization relative to population size, as in Figure 2, it becomes clear that at the start of the observed period, between 2000 and 2004, strike levels were comparable, and, during 2000, even higher in Croatia. After the early 2000s reduced strike numbers are probably in part due to the changed institutional framework, since both countries implemented arbitration procedures preceding the right to strike. Such statutory restrictions exist in other post-socialist countries too (Kohl, 2015; Warneck, 2007). At the same time, the general decline in strike numbers is in line with the overall trends in declined strike numbers across Europe (Vandaele, 2011).

Apart from information about strike numbers and numbers of participants in strike, the length of strike is another feature that helps analysts better capture the level of industrial conflict. For instance, ETUI’s Strike Map of Europe² estimates strikes based on information on days not worked per 1,000 employees. In our dataset, for Croatia length is recorded in 162 out of a total of 253 strikes and for Serbia in 264 out of 558 strikes. To assess the intensity of industrial conflict, it would be optimal to juxtapose data about the length of strikes with data about the number of participants, but media sources rarely include both numbers. Only a quarter of our events have that full set of information.

In Croatia the average length of strikes in the covered period was 7,4 days. A minority of 35 percent (89) of these were one-day strikes, in the public and private sector. The longest recorded strike took place in Ilova factory in Split, and according to the media reports lasted for 100 days during 2000. Overall public sector strikes were shorter, mostly lasting one day. An example of a longer public sector strike took place in 2006 when over 80,000 workers participated in a three-day strike. In Serbia, the average length of strikes in the same period was significantly higher than in Croatia, at 29,23 days. This high average is mostly driven by 14 recorded strikes that lasted longer than 100 days, four of which lasted almost a year. Notwithstanding these differences, the same pattern regarding the character of strikes is observed: public-sector employees typically engaged in strike to demand better working conditions, increase in salaries and preservation of previously negotiated benefits while in the private sector strikes were provoked almost exclusively by privatization processes which led to redundancy procedures, unpaid salaries or salary cuts. They were often prolonged over a few weeks, or even months in the case of Serbia, and the strikes were combined with other protest methods such as factory occupations and demonstrations.

In October 2019 public sector unions in education staged the longest strike in schools in Croatia’s history. They striked over teachers’ salaries and working conditions, lasting for 36 working days. According to media reports, during the strike the unions organized a demonstration in Zagreb attended by around 20,000 people, showcasing strong mobilization capacity even in the absence of frequent strikes. Likewise, in Serbia in 2015 over 50,000 teachers participated in several day-long strikes, demanding salary increases, better working conditions and a new collective agreement. Since the government did not fulfil their demands, teachers’ unions striked again in 2016 and 2017, with public sector unions of the police and military joining the strike. Mostly framed as warning strikes, lasting an hour or one working day, these strikes were regularly followed by public protests in the streets of Belgrade.

Trends in strike numbers confirm other available evidence of union decline, and therefore our next focus is on the extent to which unions turned to contentious politics, adopting social movement repertoires of protests and demonstrations. Specifically, the share of union organized protests in the total number of economic protests can be taken as an indication of the presence, and indirectly, relevance of unions in the protest arena. And indeed, when these figures are compared for the two countries, according to our data, in Serbia the share of union organized economic protests remains largely the same throughout the observed period, at around 40-45 percent. In contrast to that, in Croatia unions over time decreased their role in organizing economic protests, from initially 45 percent in the early 2000s, to around 20 percent in the period after 2012.

In other words, in Croatia unions lost prominence as organizers of protest already before the Great Recession, while in Serbia unions maintained relevance over the entire observed period. Delving deeper into unions’ strategies, Figure 3 shows the number of protests they organized, as well as the number of participants in union-organized protests. The left-hand side shows the number of participants in union-organized events, while the right-hand side reports the number of union-organized protests.Taken together, these numbers provide a good indication of the extent to which unions reached out to the protest arena, adopting social movement strategies.

‘Figure *3*  about here’

Figure 3 testifies to exceptionally high levels of mobilization around social, economic and other grievances during regime change years in the early 2000s. At the turn of the millenium unions joined in broad social mobilization around issues to do with democratization and neoliberal reform, while primarily engaged in articulating economic grievances. From the mid 2000s onwards, more union-organized protests were happening in Serbia, with mass mobilizations of above 50,000 participants in 2011 and 2015. In Croatia there were on average fewer union-organized protests, but during 2008 and 2012 union-organized protests mobilized around 100,000 participants or more. After 2015 in Serbia union-organized protests started picking up again.

Serbia’s population is twice that of Croatia, and this should be kept in mind when comparing participant numbers in union organized protests. In both countries the period 2000-2003 was marked by high labour mobilization, and especially in Serbia where in 2001 the number of people mobilized by unions reached almost 1.5 million people. This was a period of accelerated pressure for labour reform, and in 2001 unions organised several warning strikes, the most massive one taking place on March 30th when around 730,000 public and private sector workers stopped working for an hour. This wave of mobilisations culminated with the general strike on October 17th, after the government published the draft of the new Labour Law. More than half a million people, or 40 percent or Serbia’s working population, participated in the strike that was organised jointly by two strongest union confederations, SSSS and the Independence Union. In Croatia union-organized protest at the turn of the millenium led to policy concessions and the establishment of a social partnership body tasked with resolving industrial disputes, while in Serbia, though there was more protest, there was no impact on the government’s course (Grdešić, 2015; Novaković 2017).

In Croatia comparable levels of union-led mobilization occurred twice during the Great Recession - in 2008 and 2012, while in Serbia that was the case in 2011 and 2015. In 2008 in Croatia several labour unions jointly organised a mass protest and a march through Zagreb on April 12th, in which over 100,000 people demanded higher salaries, better working conditions, restrictions of fix-term contracts, and reforms of health-care and pension systems. Unions and the media characterized the protest as the most massive workers’ gathering since 1998. In 2012 unions in Croatia organised several protests and a warning strike to highlight deteriorating working conditions, low and irregular salaries, and to express their dissatisfaction with austerity politics. The biggest protest on October 11 that year was organised by the union confederation Matica sindikata Hrvatske, after the government led by the Social Democrats cancelled the existing collective agreement in the public sector.

Similarly, the strong wave of union-organized protests in Serbia in 2011 and 2015 occurred in response to rising dismay in the public sector. At the beginning of 2011 teachers initiated a strike which lasted more than 70 days. To show support for educational workers and to demand that the government respect existing collective agreements, nine unions organised a massive gathering on 25th March 2011 during which over 10,000 teachers, health-care workers, public servants, and policemen marched through the streets of Belgrade. Likewise, the aforementioned teachers’ strike in March 2015 culminated with around 10,000 teachers gathering in front of the National Assembly in Belgrade. After the Government failed to fulfill their demands, they organized another strike in October 2015, which took place in more than 200 schools. According to Grdešić (2015), in spite of massive labour activism, overall there was very little policy response from the government in Serbia. Similarly, Novaković (2017) describes how union confederations organized joint activities in 2013 and 2014 to resist labour law liberalization, holding a general warning strike on January 29, 2015 that recorded 500,000 participants, but to no avail. They also held a protest on the day that the Labour Law was ratified, again with no effect (Novaković, 2017).

Taking everything on board, though levels of union organized protests during and after the Great Recession were not at the level experienced during regime change, in both countries eventful protests and spikes in mass labour mobilization suggest that unions maintained substantial mobilization capacity, with unions in Serbia maintaining a stronger protest profile but with a lower policy impact.

**Forging Alliances with Social Movements and Civic Initiatives**

Next we probe into the capacity of unions to respond to crisis circumstances by forging alliances. The social movement unionism thesis puts quite a lot of emphasis on the capacity of unions to enter alliances with new types of actors, in terms of increasing their impact and reviving their mobilization capacity. One such noticeable initiative by unions took place in Croatia in 2014, when several civic initiatives and non-governmental NGOs aligned with unions to collect signatures for a citizens-initiated referendum aimed at stopping the government's plan to sign over the main road highway system to a private concession (Dolenec et al., 2017). Citizens’ petitions for referendum have very restrictive thresholds for success. In order for the initiative to be accepted for consideration by the government, it needs to collect signatures from 10 percent of the voting population in 15 days. Such requirements demand very high levels of mobilization and hence incentivises organizations to seek alliances. As a result of this joint initiative between unions and civil society initiatives, the government abandoned its proposal, marking an important policy success and confirming the value of such alliances.

Our dataset identifies organizations that media sources quoted as allies to union-organized protests, as well as the mirror situation when unions ally themselves with protests that they want to support. Since there are many types of organizers in the contentious arena, in order to shed light on these alliances from the perspective of the union revitalization thesis, we coded unions and political parties as traditional allies to union-organized protest, while under ‘revival’ allies we grouped precarious workers, students, youth organizations, anti-eviction organizations, ecological organizations, feminist organizations, transnational advocacy networks, international movements, and citizens initiatives. Table 1 shows the shares of these two types of alliances, approached from both perspectives, firstly when unions are organizers and secondly when they join in with others, for periods before and during the Great Recession.

‘Table *1*  about here’

Regarding union-organized protest, in both countries after 2008 unions started more often reaching out to revival allies such as social movements and civic initiatives. The prominence of these types of alliances has however been stronger in Croatia than in Serbia, though in Serbia unions started from a very closed-off situation, making marked changes during the Great Recession. When looking at types of protest organizers that unions ally themselves to, which is perhaps a better indicator of the extent to which unions are capable of leaving their traditional purview and supporting novel types of social struggles, a somewhat different picture emerges. Unions in Croatia exhibit stronger coalition capacity in the face of crisis. After 2008 they twice more often supported new types of actors and initiatives, including student protests, civic initiatives, anti-debt protests and protests articulating grievances about the education system. In contrast to that, in Serbia during the crisis unions exhibited less capacity than before to act as allies to such protest initiatives.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Addressing the impact of the Great Recession on changing union strategies in post-socialist Europe, our analysis zoomed in on Croatia and Serbia as critical cases. Without a doubt, unions in this region have for decades been operating in hostile political environments, which was reflected in dwindling strike numbers even before the Great Recession. Despite adverse circumstances, our analysis confirms a strong presence of economic protest during the Great Recession in both countries, resisting cuts to public services, dismissals and unemployment. Though compared to previous years overall levels of mass mobilization fell, the economic crisis was met with resistance rather than quiescence.

Long term strike trends in Croatia and Serbia follow the same pattern of general decline evidenced elsewhere in Europe, but our analysis shows high levels of strike activity in the early 2000s, when both countries were liberalizing labour relations in the context of loan agreements with international financial institutions. Strikes generally fell into two groups, with on the one hand private sector strikes on average lasting longer and often accompanied with factory occupations and demonstrations, but attracting less public attention, while on the other hand public sector strikes, generally lasted shorter, but mobilized tens of thousands of people and attracted a lot of public attention. This is in line with previous research which suggests that amid general union decline and concentration of union membership in the public sector, unions shift from collective bargaining towards protesting and seeking political support (Greskovits, 2015; Visser 2019).

Furthermore, our analysis shows that unions in Croatia and Serbia are adapting to changed circumstances by adopting social movement strategies. In Serbia the role of unions in protests articulating workers’ demands remained more central and unions were overall more present in the protest arena. At the same time, in Croatia unions have exhibited stronger propensity to become allies to protests organized by social movements, and since 2010 they have on several occasions successfully employed citizen petitions for referenda to prevent legislative changes that would have harmed labour interests. Such policy victories have likely been feeding back both into their mobilization capacity and their transaction capacity of entering alliances. Overall, our analysis suggests substantial innovation in contemporary union strategies in Croatia. We relate these differences in union strategies to the countries’ respective varieties of capitalism (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Serbia resembles the neoliberal model coupled with weak state institutions, while Croatia is closer to the embedded neoliberalism of the Visegrad group. The paired comparison suggests that the weaker the institutional framework, the stronger becomes the reliance of unions on protest.

Chartering avenues for further research, it is important to stress that social movement unionism is, at least according to some interpretations, an outcome of weakened links between unions and left parties. By adopting social movement repertoires and seeking new alliances in the contentious arena, unions may be creating opportunities for developing novel political alliances, like has been observed in Spain or Greece. However, though the relationship between unions and left parties has particular, and burdensome, trajectories in the post-socialist context, comparative investigation into these relationships and how they impact union strategies is sorely lacking. We see this as something well worth pursuing in future research. Finally, though our findings confirm Greskovits’ (2015) argument that unions are making a shift from bargaining and striking in the workplace, to mobilizing in public spaces and seeking alliances, we suggest that, rather than simply signaling malfunctioning of capitalist democracies in the EU periphery, strategies which increase union mobilization capacity may also be understood as increasing union resilience in changing social circumstances. Current debates about social movement unionism perhaps provide a good setting to remind us about the relevance unions have historically had in the formation of welfare states in Western Europe, and the comparative lessons that could be drawn for democratization of post-socialist Europe. Our findings therefore reinforce the need to study labour mobilization and union strategies by integrating perspectives from industrial relations with those of social movements and comparative politics.

**Endnotes**

1 Available here:<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=HR-RS>. Last accessed March 30th 2021

2 Available here<https://www.etui.org/strikes-map>. Last accessed November 22, 2020

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**Figures**

Figure 1: Share of economic protest and protest participants



Figure 2: Annual number of strikes in Croatia and Serbia per 100,000 citizens



Figure 3: Annual number of union organized protests, and protest participants

 

Table 1: Unions and Protest Alliances with Traditional and Revival Actors

|  |
| --- |
| Allies to protests organized by unions |
|   | Serbia | Croatia |
|   | traditional | revival | traditional | revival |
| 2000-2007 | 82.2% | 17.8% | 68.8% | 31.2% |
| 2008-2017 | 64.7% | 35.3% | 58.8% | 41.2% |
| Protests that unions ally themselves with  |
| 2000-2007 | 92.5% | 7.5% | 80.5% | 19.5% |
| 2008-2017 | 96.5% | 3.5% | 62.5% | 37.5% |