

Ideological underpinnings of the development of social dialogue and industrial relations in the Baltic States

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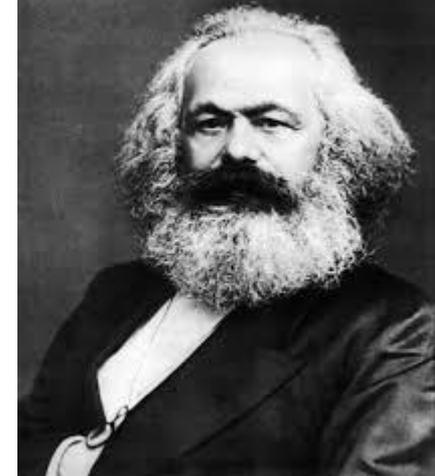
The dilemma of IR in the Baltics

- On the one hand, the IR situation can be characterised as backward and stagnated
- On the other, there is a continuous expectation of change for the better in terms of union power





Some ideas/ideologies to be considered



- 'One-nation' and 'getting-rid-of-communism' political-ideological principles
- The Russian 'question', which dates back to the 'Russification' of these countries in the Soviet era
- The penetration of the neo-liberal ideas into the Baltic political scene
- Efforts to 'Europeanise' the Baltic IR realm, the adoption of European 'social dialogue'/'social partnership' models
- The notions of 'acquiescence', instrumentalism, and the dilemma of 'politicisation' of industrial relations

The effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union



- The civic movements that led to the re-gaining of independence in 1991 were intertwined with anti-communist political mobilization
- The obvious insufficient militancy of Baltic trade unions was intertwined with the 'Russian question' associated with the experiences of Russification under the Soviet regime; this hampered the emergence of an effective, coherent civil society
- Neo-liberalism triumphed in general within CEE countries because of a disillusionment with state socialism

The effects of EU accession



- Estonia belonged to the initial group of six countries negotiating for accession in 1997, whereas Latvia and Lithuania were among a group of ten admitted in 1999
- The Baltic States scored well in the accession process in terms of political and economic criteria for the adoption, implementation and enforcement of the *acquis communautaire*
- Social dialogue and tripartite cooperation were also seen as apt models to reconcile differing interests that arose between workers, employers and governments in the new post-socialist situation
- The legal underpinnings of EU integration are reinforced by the rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Recent ECJ rulings have tested the consistency between the Baltic and Nordic models



Converging & diverging trends during the 'transition' decades

- The IR point of departure in the Baltic States was more or less the same, given the common trajectory of their Soviet past
- However, some diverging features between the Baltic States that started to take shape in the early 1990s continued throughout the 2000s
- Three periods of the development of IR in the Baltics:
 1. Early 1990s: IR in the Baltic States takes shape
 2. Growth period: mid-1990s – mid-2000s
 3. From the financial crisis in 2007 to the present: a decade of austerity and emigration

Early 1990s: IR in the Baltic States takes shape

- While the years of national awakening in 1987–1991 saw a *proliferation of participation in civil society in the Baltic States*, the membership of any kind of associations was in a steady decline after that
- *The structure of Soviet trade unions served as the basis of the trade union movement in the Baltic States. In Estonia and Latvia, major confederations were characterised as ‘reformed unions’*
- Younger workers were more likely opposed to trade unions but *many senior workers remained members on the basis of social custom*, although most did not believe in their influence
- In the early 1990s, *wages were the most important work incentive and the instrumentalist orientation towards work was prevalent*



Growth period: mid-1990s – mid-2000s

- The neoliberal grip of rightist forces consolidated their positions in the Baltic political arena
- The decline in trade union membership that started in the 1990s continued, although the rates did not drop as sharply
- From time to time, there were signs that trade unionism was reviving
- The notable *differences in union representation* become visible when looking at Baltic union structures
- The accession to the EU in 2004 prompted the first great wave of *emigration*; however, the remaining workers did not use their leverage, that is, collective voice
- The period strengthened *individuals' responsibility* to find solutions and cope with the risks and contradictions caused by social and economic restructuring



From the financial crisis in 2007 to the present: a decade of austerity and emigration

- By the onset of the crisis in 2007–2009, unionisation rates in the Baltic States had stabilised at their low levels (8–10%), which hints that the nadir of Baltic IR had passed
- Austerity policy did not lead to remarkable political unrest but had repercussions for a massive emigration of labour force
 - However, prolonged austerity is not popular...
- There has been an inclination towards leftist views in the BS in times of deteriorating living conditions, whereas favourable economic conditions have paved way for the diffusion of neoliberalist ideology
- In Latvia and Lithuania, and to some extent in Estonia, a process of re-politicization of IR may have been underway



Conclusion



- The ideological foundations of the one-nation discourse and getting-rid-of-everything associated with the communist past is drying up in the face of today's austerity and post-modern individualism
- No radical reform of the unionism model occurred until recently; the easy adoption of European 'social Catholic' models of 'social partnership' and 'social dialogue' went well with post-Soviet trade unionism
- It seems that social partnership has offered a smooth transition model for IR in the post-Soviet context, which is not too confrontational in relation to the employers
- Re-politicisation of Baltic trade union movements has occurred to some extent



'Instrumental collectivism' as an option?

- An alternative path to take for Baltic unions would be to acknowledge the current de-politicised, utility-maximising premises of citizens, and to emphasise the instrumentalist value of trade unions
- An option for the Baltic unions would be to show their instrumentalist value – in which ways they have been able to improve labour conditions – in their efforts to recruit new members
- However, workers need to take a collectivistic point of view of their instrumentalism in some way; being a union member also requires collectivism

“Individuals recognise their own weakness in relation to their employer; this signifies a point when they turn to unions to gain access to power.”

THANKS!

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