

Unionization in Transition: Dynamics and Challenges in Post-Socialist European Countries

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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of unionization in post-socialist European countries remain a critical area of investigation, influenced by historical, economic, and social transitions. This study analyses union membership density and its influence across sectors and industries in ten post-socialist countries. The research is based on data from 1,076 organizations, collected through the CRANET survey during 2021–2022. Statistical methods, including Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and the Mann-Whitney U test, were employed to test the hypotheses. The results demonstrate a strong positive correlation between union membership density and its influence, underscoring that higher union membership significantly enhances unions' negotiating power. Public sector organizations consistently exhibit higher union membership and influence compared to the private sector. While traditional industries, such as manufacturing and public administration, show stronger union presence and influence at an aggregate level, this trend is only partially confirmed across individual countries, reflecting the complexity of unionization dynamics. This study contributes to the literature on labour relations by providing empirical evidence of unionization trends in post-socialist European countries. It underscores the necessity for unions to modernize their strategies, including the adoption of digital tools, engagement with non-standard workers, and advocacy for inclusive policies. These adaptations are essential to address challenges posed by emerging industries and declining membership rates. The findings offer practical recommendations for strengthening union capacity.

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1. Introduction

Labour relations refer to the formal and informal interactions between employers and employees. Over time, these relations have been influenced by economic, political, and social factors, often acting as a catalyst for broader societal transformations. Historically, the balance of power in employment relations has predominantly favoured employers. However, as employees increasingly recognized the importance of protecting their rights and addressing workplace exploitation, collective organizations emerged as a strategic response. These organizations enhanced employees' bargaining power in negotiations with employers, culminating in the establishment of trade unions—institutions dedicated to representing, promoting, and protecting the rights and interests of workers (Gumbrell-McCormick et al., 2017).

While unions have traditionally functioned as powerful advocates for workers' rights and the improvement of labour conditions, their roles and strategies have evolved in response to dynamic economic and social contexts. The challenges faced by unions today are diverse, shaped by the specific historical and institutional frameworks within which they operate. In post-socialist European countries, unions encounter distinct challenges stemming from the legacy of state-controlled unionism, transition to market-oriented economies (Czarzasty, 2024), transformative forces of globalization (Dunn, 2021; Széll, 2018; Kolawole, 2018), technological advancements (Sheehan & Williams, 2023), and shifting workforce dynamics (Zolak Poljašević, 2021). Consequently, important questions arise regarding unions' capacity to adapt to contemporary labour market demands and to effectively represent the interests of workers.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the evolving dynamics of unionization in post-socialist European countries, a region characterized by labour relations shaped by unique historical, political, and economic contexts. As Crowley (2004) stated, "perhaps nowhere is the impact of the communist legacy greater than it is on labour and trade union," referring to both the institutional and ideological legacy. The study aims to analyse the current state of union membership and its influence, with particular attention to variations

across sectors, industries, and national contexts. Specifically, it seeks to investigate the correlation between union membership density and union influence, explore disparities in unionization between the public and private sectors, and evaluate the challenges and opportunities unions encounter in traditional industries compared to emerging sectors.

The scientific contribution of this research is twofold. First, it offers an empirical analysis of the current state of unionization, providing insights into the mechanisms by which unions can enhance their negotiating power. Second, it examines sectoral and industrial disparities in unionization, contrasting traditional industries with established union frameworks against emerging sectors marked by decentralized and flexible work arrangements. These findings contribute not only to academic discourse on labour relations but also to practical strategies for unions aiming to adapt and maintain their relevance in rapidly evolving economic and social contexts.

The study adopts a quantitative methodological approach, utilizing data from the CRANET research network (2021–2022). This standardized survey data, collected across ten post-socialist European countries, provides a robust basis for analysing unionization trends. Statistical methods, including Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and the Mann-Whitney U test, are employed to test the hypotheses and identify significant patterns.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows: Following the introductory section, the theoretical background discusses the historical evolution and contemporary challenges of unionization, with a particular focus on post-socialist contexts. The methodology section details the research design, data collection processes, and analytical techniques employed. The results section presents the findings of the empirical analysis, highlighting union membership density and influence across different sectors and industries. Finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on the implications of the findings, offer recommendations for union strategies, and propose directions for future research. This structure enables a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics shaping unionization in post-socialist European countries.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

The evolution of trade unions in socialist systems reflects their role as state-aligned entities shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic factors. During this period, unions were often state-mandated mass organizations (Bomba, 2016) functioning more as instruments for implementing government policies than as autonomous advocates for workers' rights (Gumbrell-McCormick et al., 2017). The transition to market-oriented economies in post-socialist countries brought significant structural and institutional changes (Raiser et al., 2004), including the decentralization of union power and a shift from state-controlled to autonomous organizations. Unions redefined their roles to advocate for labour rights, fair wages, and improved working conditions while rebuilding public trust as independent representatives of workers. Efforts to enhance their independence included forming alliances with international labour organizations and participating in cross-border union networks to exchange strategies and gain support.

Countries pursuing EU membership made greater progress in aligning their labour standards with EU requirements, while non-accession states lagged significantly behind. However, even in accession states, a notable gap persists between the labour rights guaranteed by law (*de jure*) and their enforcement in practice (*de facto*) (Cook, 2010). It can be said that the primary challenge for post-socialist countries lay in their attempt to simultaneously implement patterns and arrangements that had been gradually developed and institutionalized in Western "reference societies" over extended periods and often in a sequential manner (Czarasty, 2024; Krastev & Holmes, 2018). This rapid and often uncoordinated transition left many unions grappling with diminished membership (Crouch, 2017) and limited resources.

Significant obstacles also lie in political and legislative constraints. Post-socialist countries often prioritize economic liberalization to attract foreign investment (Dimitrijević, 2016; Jovičić & Štimac, 2021), leading to labour laws that favour employer flexibility over worker protections. For instance, decentralization of collective bargaining in Europe has led to the weakening of structures, increased

inequality in working conditions, and a reduction in the power of trade unions (Tros, 2023). Similarly, procedural barriers to strike actions (Sychenko & Volk, 2020; Creighton et al., 2020), including complex legal requirements and lengthy notification periods, undermine unions' effectiveness as advocates for workers' interests. Another critical issue is the impact of globalization, which has profoundly reshaped labour markets in post-socialist countries. The transition to open economies facilitated the entry of multinational corporations (Mutlu et al., 2015), particularly in sectors like manufacturing and retail. These corporations often exploit regional disparities in labour standards, exerting downward pressure on wages and working conditions (Wise & Martin, 2015).

Technological advancements that characterize modern economies present both opportunities and challenges for unionization (Haipeter, 2022; Land-Kazlauskas & Johnston, 2019). Digital platforms and the expansion of the gig economy have fundamentally transformed employment structures, creating fragmented workforces with diverse needs. Gig work is often short term or task-based and gig workers, typically classified as independent contractors (Land-Kazlauskas & Johnston, 2019) are excluded from traditional union protections. Furthermore, the decentralized nature of platform work complicates collective organization efforts, leaving many workers without representation or access to essential benefits such as job security and healthcare. These shifts necessitate a rethinking of traditional union models.

Public perception and engagement with unions have shifted, particularly among younger and more diverse workers. While Vandaele (2018) argues that low youth unionization rates stem from the decline of union membership as a social norm and reduced workplace exposure to unionism rather than generational attitude shifts, the reality of low youth participation persists. Traditional union structures, built around stable, long-term employment models, often fail to meet the priorities of newer generations (Alvin & Sverke, 2000), who value flexibility, career mobility, and inclusivity.

The contemporary challenges outlined above have significantly reshaped the role and influence of unions globally, with profound implications for

their function in post-socialist European countries. In this context, the historical legacy of state-controlled unionism intersects with modern challenges, creating a uniquely complex environment for unions to navigate. This complexity raises critical questions about the current dynamics of union membership and its influence in post-socialist countries. It prompts an investigation into whether unions in these countries have retained their ability to effectively represent workers. Understanding these dynamics necessitates a closer examination of the variations in union membership density and influence across different sectors and industries. To address these questions and assess the current state of union membership and influence, the following hypotheses have been developed, grounded in the theoretical insights.

H1: In post-socialist European countries, higher union membership density predicts greater perceived union influence within organizations.

Union density, defined as the proportion of employees who are union members, is a critical determinant of union power and influence in negotiations with employers. The relationship between union membership density and the union influence in organisation, including collective bargaining, is well-documented in the literature (Crouch, 2017; Croucher & Rizov, 2012). The utility of union membership model posits that higher union membership increases bargaining power and influence (Schnabel, 2020; Gumbrell-McCormick et al., 2017). This premise is based on the notion that a larger membership base provides unions with greater resources, legitimacy, and collective strength, enabling more effective negotiations with employers.

However, the literature also reveals contradictions and nuances. For example, Carvalho Neto et al. (2016) highlight that, despite low unionization rates in Brazilian corporations, human resource managers still acknowledge union influence in collective bargaining due to mandatory legislative frameworks. While the theoretical foundation broadly supports the hypothesis that higher union membership correlates with stronger union influence, in practice this relationship could be multifaceted and context-dependent. Factors such as legal frameworks (Carvalho Neto et al., 2016), employer resistance (Dundon, 2002), and the broader industrial

relations climate (García-Serrano, 2009) can significantly affect the union influence, irrespective of union membership density.

In post-socialist contexts, the relationship between union membership density and union influence is shaped by the transition from centrally planned economies to market-oriented systems. This transition often led to the fragmentation of union structures, resulting in significant variations in membership levels and bargaining power across industries and organizations. As noted by Ivlevs and Veliziotis (2016), trade union membership in post-socialist countries has been in decline over the past two decades, with unions generally perceived as weak. However, despite declining membership, unions in these countries retain a degree of collective bargaining influence, particularly in safeguarding job security. This theoretical framework underscores the complex dynamics between union membership density and union influence, offering a foundation for analysing the extent to which this relationship applies in post-socialist European countries, as articulated in Hypothesis H1.

H2: Union membership density is higher in public sector organizations compared to private sector organizations across post-socialist European countries.

Unionism in the public sector differs fundamentally from that in the private sector with respect to its historical roots, primary objectives, and underlying philosophies (Norcross, 2011). Union membership in the public sector is generally higher than in the private sector (Visser, 2019; OECD, 2017), driven by various structural and historical factors. Public sector organizations typically offer stable employment conditions (Schnabel, 2020; Checchi et al., 2021) and operate within institutional frameworks that have traditionally supported unionization. Furthermore, public sector employees are often concentrated in larger organizations, a factor associated with higher union density (Visser, 2019; Shin & Ylä-Anttila, 2018; OECD, 2017), as the costs of unionization are relatively lower and organizing efforts are more efficient in such settings (Schnabel, 2020). Legislative frameworks in many countries also favour union activities in public institutions, such as healthcare and education, where unions play a vital role in policy advocacy and em-

ployment negotiations. Recent studies suggest that public sector unions are increasingly emerging as dominant labour actors in terms of both membership and activism, in advanced as well as emerging economies (Etchemendy & Lodola, 2023). In contrast, the private sector, characterized by more fragmented workforces and diverse organizational structures, often demonstrates lower union density and influence.

In post-socialist European countries, the public sector has maintained a stronger union presence and influence compared to the private sector, which has undergone extensive restructuring and privatization. This trend reflects the enduring impact of unions in public institutions (Croucher & Rizov, 2012). The public sector appears to have preserved much of its union influence during the transition to market economies, benefiting from legacy institutional frameworks conducive to organized labour activity. These outcomes are not only the result of current structural advantages but also reflect deeper sectoral institutional legacies (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025). In many post-socialist contexts, public sector organizations inherited centralized administrative cultures and embedded channels for employee representation, which helped sustain union presence throughout the transition period—unlike the private sector, which underwent significant institutional disruption due to privatization and market liberalization.

Interestingly, while union membership influence is typically higher in the public sector, the literature reveals some contradictions. For example, in China, the union wage premium effect is greater in the private sector, although differences in union coverage still widen the wage gap between the public and private sectors (Ma, 2024). This suggests that while public sector unions may maintain a stronger presence, their influence on wage-setting is potentially diminishing in comparison to the private sector. Such findings challenge the conventional assumption that public sector unions wield greater influence over wages.

This context provides the basis for Hypothesis H2, which examines the differences in union membership density and influence between the public and private sectors in post-socialist European countries.

H3: Union membership and influence are significantly higher in traditional industries (e.g., manufacturing, public administration) compared to emerging sectors (e.g., IT, telecommunications) within post-socialist countries

While union membership and influence are generally higher in public sector organizations, the relationship between union membership and sector type is more complex. Factors such as technological progress, globalization, and evolving labour market dynamics are reshaping union influence across various sectors.

Traditional industries, such as manufacturing and public administration, have historically formed the backbone of unionization efforts. These industries are often characterized by standardized work processes, larger employee bases, and well-established union structures, all of which contribute to higher union density and influence. In post-socialist countries, these industries inherited robust union frameworks from the pre-transition era, allowing them to sustain higher levels of union activity. However, even in traditional sectors like manufacturing, mining, and construction, union density has declined over time as the number of unionized jobs has decreased (Visser, 2019).

The rapid pace of technological change and globalization has induced structural shifts in labour markets, impacting employment patterns, job quality, and wage disparities (Awad, 2024). Emerging sectors, such as IT and telecommunications, pose unique challenges to unionization (Sheehan & Williams, 2023). These industries are often characterized by decentralized organizational structures, a greater reliance on freelance and short-term contracts (Vardanyan, 2023), and a younger workforce that may perceive unions as less relevant to their needs (Hodder & Kretsos, 2015). Furthermore, these sectors frequently prioritize flexibility and innovation, which can conflict with traditional union approaches to collective bargaining and worker representation. The dynamic and rapidly growing nature of these sectors further complicates union organizing efforts, leading to diminished union influence.

The theoretical framework and hypotheses outlined above provide a comprehensive foundation

for exploring the dynamics of union membership and influence within the context of post-socialist European countries. Further empirical analysis will investigate these dynamics, offering deeper insights into their implications for union strategies and practices in the region, and guiding the methodological approach to data collection and analysis outlined in the following section.

3. Methodology

This study investigates unionization trends and their contemporary challenges in post-socialist European countries, drawing on data collected through the CRANET research network (Cranfield Network of International Human Resource Management). The CRANET survey, a standardized instrument designed for cross-country comparisons of human resource management practices, ensures the collection of robust and reliable data (Zolak Poljašević & Berber, 2024). For this research, data from the most recent cycle (2021–2022) were utilized, focusing on union membership and influence within the context of post-socialist transitions.

Data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire completed by human resource managers in organizations employing more than 100 workers. The questionnaire, composed of closed-ended questions, was designed to minimize respondent bias and ensure consistency across countries. This study analyzed data from 1,076 companies across ten post-socialist European countries, providing a representative sample across various sectors and industries.

To evaluate the data reliability and internal consistency, the relationships between key variables were analysed. Although Cronbach's alpha is typically used to assess internal consistency of multi-item scales, an exploratory calculation was conducted here to examine the consistency of responses across items relating to union membership and influence. The alpha value of 0.872 suggests that respondents who reported higher union density also tended to report greater union influence, indicating a coherent response pattern.

This study focuses on variations in union membership density and influence across public and

private sectors, traditional and emerging industries, and different country groups. To capture these variations, the data were analyzed at both aggregate and country-specific levels, enabling a detailed examination of regional and national trends.

The analysis was guided by a set of hypotheses designed to test key assumptions about union membership and influence in post-socialist European countries. These hypotheses investigate the relationship between union memberships and its influence, sectoral differences in union membership and influence (public vs. private sectors), variations between traditional and emerging industries, and cross-country comparisons to identify specific national trends.

To ensure accurate hypothesis testing, statistical methods were carefully selected to align with the nature of the data. Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was applied to assess the relationship between union membership density and collective bargaining influence, providing a reliable measure for ordinal data. Additionally, the Mann-Whitney U Test was used to analyse differences in union membership and influence between groups, such as public and private sectors or traditional and emerging industries. This test is particularly suitable for comparing distributions between two independent groups.

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 23, ensuring accuracy and efficiency in data processing and interpretation. This methodological approach ensured that the analyses were appropriately tailored to the structure of the data.

4. Results

To test the proposed hypotheses, we analysed both overall data trends across the surveyed organizations and country-specific variations to capture broader patterns as well as unique trends within each national context. Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was employed to assess the relationship between the observed variables. This statistical method was deemed the most appropriate for analysing the relationship between union membership density and the union influence, given the ordinal nature of the data. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Spearman Correlation Between Union Membership Density and Perceived Union Influence, by Country*

Spearman's rho		Union membership rate	Union influence level
Overall correlation	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.818*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	980	881
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.679*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	47	47
Croatia	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.706*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	113	111
Estonia	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.731*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	76	75
Hungary	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.239*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.050
	N	156	68
Latvia	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.815*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	22	22
Lithuania	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.891*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	120	114
Poland	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.935*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	63	62
Serbia	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.855*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	106	106
Slovakia	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.880*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	153	153
Slovenia	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.773*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	124	123

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Notes. Authors' calculations based on CRANET 2021–2022 data.

The Spearman correlation coefficient between union membership percentage and union influence is 0.818 ($p < 0.005$), indicating a strong positive relationship between union membership and influence. A country-specific analysis reveals that this correlation varies by country. All countries, except Hungary, demonstrate significant and strong positive correlations, with the highest correlations observed in Poland ($\rho = 0.935$) and Lithuania ($\rho = 0.891$). Hungary shows a weaker, but still positive, correlation, potentially reflecting country-specific institutional or political dynamics that merit further investigation. These findings strongly support the first hypothesis (H1): in post-socialist European countries, higher union

membership density predicts greater perceived union influence within organizations. This relationship holds true across different countries, although with varying strengths.

In the subsequent steps of the analysis, variations in union membership and influence were examined with respect to sectoral affiliation. Given the ordinal nature of membership density data and the nominal classification of sector types, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to compare distributions between two independent groups. This test is particularly suitable for ordinal data and does not require a normal distribution assumption. The results of these analyses are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2*Differences in union membership rate in private and public sector*

Sector		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Statistics ^a	
Overall analysis					Mann-Whitney U	47804.000
Union membership rate	Private sector	668	406.06	271250.00	Wilcoxon W	271250.000
	Public sector	254	607.30	154253.00	Z	-10.813
	Total	922			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Bosnia and Herzegovina					Mann-Whitney U	176.500
Union membership rate	Private sector	29	21.09	611.50	Wilcoxon W	611.500
	Public sector	16	26.47	423.50	Z	-1.362
	Total	45			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.173
Croatia					Mann-Whitney U	843.000
Union membership rate	Private sector	68	46.90	3189.00	Wilcoxon W	3189.000
	Public sector	44	71.34	3139.00	Z	-4.032
	Total	112			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Estonia					Mann-Whitney U	479.500
Union membership rate	Private sector	52	35.72	1857.50	Wilcoxon W	1857.500
	Public sector	20	38.53	770.50	Z	-.632
	Total	72			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.528
Hungary					Mann-Whitney U	1377.000
Union membership rate	Private sector	114	69.58	7932.00	Wilcoxon W	7932.000
	Public sector	30	83.60	2508.00	Z	-1.811
	Total	144			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.070
Latvia					Mann-Whitney U	11.000
Union membership rate	Private sector	11	7.00	77.00	Wilcoxon W	77.000
	Public sector	8	14.13	113.00	Z	-2.884
	Total	19			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.004
Lithuania					Mann-Whitney U	546.500
Union membership rate	Private sector	80	47.33	3786.50	Wilcoxon W	3786.500
	Public sector	28	74.98	2099.50	Z	-4.666
	Total	108			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Poland					Mann-Whitney U	87.500
Union membership rate	Private sector	40	22.69	907.50	Wilcoxon W	907.500
	Public sector	21	46.83	983.50	Z	-5.695
	Total	61			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Serbia					Mann-Whitney U	136.000
Union membership rate	Private sector	90	47.01	4231.00	Wilcoxon W	4231.000
	Public sector	16	90.00	1440.00	Z	-5.433
	Total	106			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Slovakia					Mann-Whitney U	831.500
Union membership rate	Private sector	109	62.63	6826.50	Wilcoxon W	6826.500
	Public sector	36	104.40	3758.50	Z	-5.437
	Total	145			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Slovenia					Mann-Whitney U	790.000
Union membership rate	Private sector	75	48.53	3640.00	Wilcoxon W	3640.000
	Public sector	35	70.43	2465.00	Z	-3.430
	Total	110			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001

a. Grouping Variable: Sector

Notes. Authors' calculations based on CRANET 2021–2022 data.

The overall analysis reveals significant differences in the proportion of employees who are trade union

members between the private and public sectors in most of the analysed countries. Union membership

is consistently higher in the public sector, as indicated by higher average ranks for public sector organizations and statistically significant p-values ($p < 0.05$) in the majority of cases. Notable exceptions include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, and Hungary, where union membership shows a tendency to be higher in the public sector; however, the differences are not statistically significant. This may indicate similar unionization patterns across sectors or potential sample limitations, such as those observed in Bosnia

and Herzegovina. In contrast, other countries demonstrate substantial differences favouring the public sector, likely attributable to regulatory, cultural, and socioeconomic factors specific to these contexts. These findings suggest that unionization remains deeply entrenched in the public sector, while union membership in the private sector is considerably lower. Further research is needed to explore the underlying causes of this disparity and its implications for labour relations.

Table 3

Differences in union influence level in private and public sector

Sector		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Statistics ^a	
Overall analysis					Mann-Whitney U	39468.000
Union influence level	Private sector	595	364.33	216778.00	Wilcoxon W	216778.000
	Public sector	240	551.05	132252.00	Z	-10.681
	Total	835			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Bosnia and Herzegovina					Mann-Whitney U	144.500
Union influence level	Private sector	29	19.98	579.50	Wilcoxon W	579.500
	Public sector	16	28.47	455.50	Z	-2.199
	Total	45			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.028
Croatia					Mann-Whitney U	1015.500
Union influence level	Private sector	67	49.16	3293.50	Wilcoxon W	3293.500
	Public sector	45	67.43	3034.50	Z	-2.988
	Total	112			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.003
Estonia					Mann-Whitney U	535.000
Union influence level	Private sector	51	36.49	1861.00	Wilcoxon W	1861.000
	Public sector	21	36.52	767.00	Z	-.009
	Total	72			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.993
Hungary					Mann-Whitney U	221.000
Union influence level	Private sector	48	29.10	1397.00	Wilcoxon W	1397.000
	Public sector	16	42.69	683.00	Z	-2.666
	Total	64			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
Latvia					Mann-Whitney U	16.000
Union influence level	Private sector	11	7.45	82.00	Wilcoxon W	82.000
	Public sector	8	13.50	108.00	Z	-2.527
	Total	19			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.011
Lithuania					Mann-Whitney U	379.000
Union influence level	Private sector	77	43.92	3382.00	Wilcoxon W	3382.000
	Public sector	25	74.84	1871.00	Z	-5.251
	Total	102			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Poland					Mann-Whitney U	102.500
Union influence level	Private sector	39	22.63	882.50	Wilcoxon W	882.500
	Public sector	22	45.84	1008.50	Z	-5.649
	Total	61			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Serbia					Mann-Whitney U	257.000
Union influence level	Private sector	90	48.36	4352.00	Wilcoxon W	4352.000
	Public sector	16	82.44	1319.00	Z	-4.335
	Total	106			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Sector		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Statistics ^a	
Slovakia					Mann-Whitney U	1055.000
Union influence level	Private sector	109	64.68	7050.00	Wilcoxon W	7050.000
	Public sector	36	98.19	3535.00	Z	-4.375
	Total	145			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Slovenia					Mann-Whitney U	625.000
Union influence level	Private sector	74	45.95	3400.00	Wilcoxon W	3400.000
	Public sector	35	74.14	2595.00	Z	-4.474
	Total	109			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: Sector

Notes. Autors' calculations based on CRANET 2021–2022 data.

The results indicate that union influence is significantly greater in the public sector across most of the analysed countries (8 out of 10, $p < 0.05$). Notable exceptions include Estonia, where no statistically significant difference is observed, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the difference is relatively smaller compared to other countries. This outcome is partially attributable to the small sample size, which may limit the ability to detect minor differences between groups.

The analysis supports the second hypothesis (H2), confirming that union membership and union influence are significantly higher in public organizations compared to private organizations in the majority of analysed post-socialist countries. These findings highlight the persistent strength of unions within the public sector, likely driven by structural advantages such as more stable employment conditions, a stronger tradition of unionization, and legislative frameworks that support collective bargaining and union activities in public institutions.

In the final segment of the analysis, differences in union membership and influence were examined across various industries. For this purpose, industries were categorized into two groups: traditional and emerging industries. The traditional category encompasses sectors with long-standing industrial development, manual labour, and a historically strong tradition of unionization, including mining, manufacturing, electricity supply, agriculture, and public administration. The emerging category comprises newer sectors associated with modern technologies, innovations, and services developed in recent decades, such as the manufacturing of computers and electronic products, telecommunications, IT, and other information services.

This classification enabled a focused analysis of how union membership and influence differ between industries with deep-rooted union traditions and those representing modern, technology-driven sectors. Consistent with previous analyses, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied to assess these differences. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

Differences in union membership rate in traditional and emerging industries

Sector		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Statistics ^a	
Overall analysis					Mann-Whitney U	82839.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	673	511.91	344516.00	Wilcoxon W	127390.000
	Emerging	298	427.48	127390.00	Z	-4.556
	Total	971			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Bosnia and Herzegovina					Mann-Whitney U	220.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	32	23.38	748.00	Wilcoxon W	748.000
	Emerging	15	25.33	380.00	Z	-.473
	Total	47			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.636
Croatia					Mann-Whitney U	1328.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	72	59.06	4252.00	Wilcoxon W	2189.000
	Emerging	41	53.39	2189.00	Z	-.915
	Total	113			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.360

Sector		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Statistics ^a	
Estonia					Mann-Whitney U	511.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	52	40.67	2115.00	Wilcoxon W	811.000
	Emerging	24	33.79	811.00	Z	-1.547
	Total	76			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.122
Hungary					Mann-Whitney U	2491.500
Union membership rate	Traditional	102	75.93	7744.50	Wilcoxon W	7744.500
	Emerging	54	83.36	4501.50	Z	-1.083
	Total	156			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.279
Latvia					Mann-Whitney U	16.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	15	11.93	179.00	Wilcoxon W	31.000
	Emerging	5	6.20	31.00	Z	-1.992
	Total	20			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.046
Lithuania					Mann-Whitney U	975.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	90	64.67	5820.00	Wilcoxon W	1440.000
	Emerging	30	48.00	1440.00	Z	-2.581
	Total	120			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.010
Poland					Mann-Whitney U	254.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	39	37.49	1462.00	Wilcoxon W	554.000
	Emerging	24	23.08	554.00	Z	-3.376
	Total	63			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
Serbia					Mann-Whitney U	718.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	76	59.05	4488.00	Wilcoxon W	1183.000
	Emerging	30	39.43	1183.00	Z	-3.120
	Total	106			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
Slovakia					Mann-Whitney U	2329.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	100	80.21	8021.00	Wilcoxon W	3760.000
	Emerging	53	70.94	3760.00	Z	-1.291
	Total	153			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.197
Slovenia					Mann-Whitney U	729.000
Union membership rate	Traditional	95	62.33	5921.00	Wilcoxon W	982.000
	Emerging	22	44.64	982.00	Z	-2.254
	Total	117			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.024

a. Grouping Variable: Industry

Notes. Authors' calculations based on CRANET 2021–2022 data.

The overall results support the main hypothesis ($p < 0.05$); however, country-level differences indicate that the effects are not universal and are influenced by specific national characteristics. These findings may be partially attributed to data aggregation. When data are aggregated at the overall level (combining all countries), the sample size increases significantly. Larger sample sizes enhance the statistical power of the test, allowing for the detection of even minor differences between groups (in this case, traditional and emerging industries). The overall result may appear significant because differences present in certain countries dominate

the aggregated sample, while data from countries with smaller differences conform to the general trend. At the individual country level, smaller sample sizes reduce statistical power, increasing the likelihood that existing differences will not be detected as statistically significant. In countries with limited sample sizes, results may be affected by variability or other factors that obscure meaningful differences. These findings underscore the importance of further analysis of country-specific characteristics to uncover subtler differences and explore the underlying causes of deviations from the overall trend.

Table 5

Differences in union influence level in traditional and emerging industries

Sector	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Statistics ^a		
Overall analysis				Mann-Whitney U	65699.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	609	464.12	282649.00	Wilcoxon W	101477.000
	Emerging	267	380.06	101477.00	Z	-4.769
	Total	876			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Bosnia and Herzegovina				Mann-Whitney U	210.500	
Union influence level	Traditional	32	24.92	797.50	Wilcoxon W	330.500
	Emerging	15	22.03	330.50	Z	-.714
	Total	47			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.475
Croatia				Mann-Whitney U	1366.500	
Union influence level	Traditional	73	58.28	4254.50	Wilcoxon W	2186.500
	Emerging	40	54.66	2186.50	Z	-.574
	Total	113			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.566
Estonia				Mann-Whitney U	555.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	52	39.83	2071.00	Wilcoxon W	855.000
	Emerging	24	35.63	855.00	Z	-1.112
	Total	76			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.266
Hungary				Mann-Whitney U	422.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	41	37.71	1546.00	Wilcoxon W	800.000
	Emerging	27	29.63	800.00	Z	-1.730
	Total	68			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.084
Latvia				Mann-Whitney U	19.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	15	11.73	176.00	Wilcoxon W	34.000
	Emerging	5	6.80	34.00	Z	-1.743
	Total	20			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.081
Lithuania				Mann-Whitney U	910.500	
Union influence level	Traditional	87	60.53	5266.50	Wilcoxon W	1288.500
	Emerging	27	47.72	1288.50	Z	-1.995
	Total	114			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.046
Poland				Mann-Whitney U	260.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	38	37.66	1431.00	Wilcoxon W	585.000
	Emerging	25	23.40	585.00	Z	-3.430
	Total	63			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
Serbia				Mann-Whitney U	764.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	76	58.45	4442.00	Wilcoxon W	1229.000
	Emerging	30	40.97	1229.00	Z	-2.797
	Total	106			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.005
Slovakia				Mann-Whitney U	2307.000	
Union influence level	Traditional	100	80.43	8043.00	Wilcoxon W	3738.000
	Emerging	53	70.53	3738.00	Z	-1.385
	Total	153			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.166
Slovenia				Mann-Whitney U	819.500	
Union influence level	Traditional	95	60.37	5735.50	Wilcoxon W	1050.500
	Emerging	21	50.02	1050.50	Z	-1.313
	Total	116			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.189

a. Grouping Variable: Industry

Notes. Authors' calculations based on CRANET 2021–2022 data.

Similar to union membership, the analysis indicates a greater influence of unions in traditional industries. At the individual country level, however, the differences

are less pronounced and statistically significant only in certain cases, such as Lithuania, Poland, and Serbia. This suggests that, while the overall results support

the hypothesis, its applicability is not universal and is influenced by specific national characteristics. In other words, the hypothesis cannot be uniformly applied across all post-socialist countries.

Hypothesis H3 is accepted at the aggregate level, as the analysis reveals a strong difference in favour of traditional industries within the total sample. However, at the individual country level, the hypothesis is only partially supported, underscoring the significance of national contexts. These findings highlight the need for further research into the specific factors at the national level that shape union influence and membership across different industries.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the dynamics of union membership and influence in post-socialist European countries, highlighting significant variations across sectors, industries, and national contexts.

The study confirmed a strong positive correlation between union membership density and union influence, providing empirical support for the first hypothesis (H1). This result underscores the pivotal role of union density in determining the strength of unions during negotiations with employers. The positive relationship indicates that higher membership rates enhance unions' capacity to advocate for workers effectively, driven by the increased resources, legitimacy, and collective solidarity associated with a larger membership base. These elements are fundamental to the collective bargaining process, enabling unions to present a unified front and apply greater pressure on employers to meet workers' demands. The findings are consistent with the results of similar studies (Schnabel, 2020; Crouch, 2017; Croucher & Rizov, 2012). A larger membership base not only provides greater financial resources for union activities but also enhances the legitimacy of unions as workforce representatives (Sierocka, 2021). The practical implications of this relationship are substantial. To enhance their influence, unions should focus on strategies to increase membership density. This includes implementing targeted recruitment campaigns, particularly in sectors or regions with low unionization rates. Addi-

tionally, unions can broaden their appeal to younger and more diverse workers by modernizing communication strategies (Hansen & Hau, 2024; Carneiro & Costa, 2020), prioritizing inclusivity, offering services that address the priorities of the contemporary workforce, and building alliances with other social movements to engage a broader and more diverse constituency (Cha et al., 2018). However, it is important to recognize that union density, while a critical factor, is not a standalone solution. The broader industrial relations environment, including labour laws (Reis, 2023), employer attitudes, and the socio-economic context (Kerrissey & Schofer, 2018), plays a pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness of union.

The analysis of sectoral variations strongly supports the second hypothesis (H2), confirming that union membership and influence are significantly higher in public sector organizations than in their private sector counterparts. This finding aligns with existing literature (Visser, 2019; OECD, 2017), which attributes the strength of public sector unionization to structural, historical, and regulatory factors that distinguish it from the private sector (Checchi et al., 2021; Schnabel, 2020; Shin & Ylä-Anttila, 2018; Norcross, 2011). However, notable exceptions were observed in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, and Hungary, where differences between public and private sector unionization were less pronounced. This variability underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping the strength and influence of public sector unions, highlighting the need for country-specific approaches to union strategy and policy reform.

From a practical standpoint, the persistent strength of public sector unions underscores their potential to play a leading role in addressing disparities in unionization across sectors. Public sector unions can leverage their established influence to advocate for labour reforms that extend protections and benefits to private sector workers. By advocating policies that promote collective bargaining rights, job security, and fair labour standards, public sector unions can help create a more inclusive framework for all workers. At the same time, strengthening private sector unionization is essential to bridging these disparities. Unions in the private sector should adopt innovative organizing strategies, including

engaging with non-traditional workforces such as gig and freelance workers, and utilizing digital tools to enhance communication and recruitment efforts (Haipeter, 2022; Martinez et al, 2021; Land-Kazlauskas & Johnston, 2019). By harnessing the strengths of public sector unions and addressing the unique challenges facing private sector unionization, labour stakeholders can work toward more balanced and equitable representation for workers across all sectors.

Hypothesis H3, which proposed that union membership and influence are higher in traditional industries compared to emerging sectors, was confirmed at the aggregated level but only partially supported at the individual country level. At the aggregate level, the findings align with theoretical assumptions that traditional industries, such as manufacturing and public administration, benefit from long-standing union frameworks, centralized workforce structures, and historical traditions of collective organization. In contrast, emerging sectors, such as IT and telecommunications, face significant barriers to unionization. These sectors are often characterized by decentralized and flexible work arrangements, including freelance and project-based roles, which complicate unionization. Additionally, the predominantly younger workforce in these industries often prioritizes flexibility and individual career growth over traditional union benefits, perceiving unions as less relevant (Alvin & Sverke, 2000). The partial confirmation of H3 highlights the complexity of union dynamics across national and industrial contexts. Variability across countries may reflect local labour laws, cultural attitudes, and economic conditions. Small sample sizes in specific countries may further limit the ability to detect less pronounced variations among the observed data groups.

While the partial country-level results do not fully align with the aggregated findings, the need for unions to adapt their strategies to address the challenges posed by emerging industries remains clear—particularly in sectors such as platform-based services or IT, where decentralized work arrangements and independent contracting hinder traditional union outreach. In traditional industries, unions should focus on maintaining and modernizing established frameworks to remain relevant

to workers' evolving needs. Conversely, in emerging sectors, this adaptation requires the use of digital tools, including online platforms and social media, to engage younger workers and create virtual spaces for collective action. Furthermore, unions should prioritize advocating for legislative reforms aimed at extending collective bargaining rights to encompass non-standard workers, including freelancers and participants in the gig economy. Such strategies would empower unions to respond more effectively to the evolving nature of work, thereby promoting more inclusive representation within the modern workforce.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study advances the understanding of unionization trends and challenges in post-socialist European countries through an empirical analysis of union membership density and influence. The findings highlight the critical role of union density in strengthening union influence, the structural advantages associated with unionization in the public sector, and the disparities observed between traditional and emerging industries. However, several research limitations must be acknowledged.

The reliance on self-reported data from human resource managers introduces potential bias, as responses may reflect subjective perceptions rather than objective measures of union membership and influence. Differences in sample sizes across countries also affect the generalizability of the findings, with smaller samples in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina potentially obscuring nuanced patterns. Furthermore, the broad classification of industries into traditional and emerging categories may overlook sectoral complexities, as some industries exhibit characteristics of both. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to capture longitudinal trends or the evolving dynamics of unionization in response to economic and technological changes.

Future research should address these limitations by exploring how union membership and influence evolve over time, particularly in response to structural and policy changes such as shifts in labour laws, economic reforms, and technological ad-

vancements. Complementing quantitative analysis with qualitative research, including interviews with union leaders, workers, and policymakers, can provide deeper insights into the contextual factors shaping unionization trends and strategies. An examination of country-specific socio-economic factors and cultural dynamics would provide a more nuanced understanding of unionization within diverse national contexts. Additionally, focusing on the challenges and opportunities within emerging sectors could reveal innovative approaches to engaging non-traditional workforces. Comparative analyses between post-socialist countries and other regions, such as Western Europe, may further enrich the discourse, identifying shared challenges and region-specific solutions to unionization issues.

This study provides a critical empirical foundation for future comparative research on labour relations in post-socialist and transitional economies. By identifying sectoral and industrial patterns in union membership and influence, it highlights key leverage points for strengthening worker representation. The findings underscore the need to support inclusive collective bargaining structures, extend legal protections to non-standard workers, and promote union strategies tailored to fragmented and digitalized labour environments. These implications are particularly relevant for policy makers, union leaders, and international labour organizations working to revitalize union influence in evolving labour markets.

In practical terms, the results can inform HR professionals and policymakers about the structural conditions that either enable or hinder union influence. For instance, understanding the role of sectoral dynamics can guide targeted initiatives in sectors where union presence is weak. Policymakers can use these insights to design supportive legal frameworks and incentives for collective bargaining, while unions can tailor their strategies to better address the needs of emerging industries and fragmented labour markets.

By addressing these areas, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of union dynamics and offer actionable insights to strengthen union strategies and labour relations

in post-socialist European countries and beyond.

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Biography

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Синдикално организовање у транзицији: динамика и изазови у постсоцијалистичким европским земљама

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САЖЕТАК

Динамика синдикалног организовања у постсоцијалистичким европским земљама и даље представља значајно подручје истраживања, под снажним утицајем историјских, економских и друштвених транзиција. Ова студија анализира густину чланства у синдикатима и њихов утицај у различитим секторима и индустријама у десет постсоцијалистичких земаља. Истраживање се заснива на подацима из 1.076 организација, прикупљеним путем CRANET анкете током 2021–2022. године. За тестирање хипотеза коришћене су статистичке методе, укључујући Спирманов коефицијент корелације рангова и Mann-Whitney U тест. Резултати показују снажну позитивну корелацију између густине синдикалног чланства и његовог утицаја, наглашавајући да веће чланство значајно повећава преговарачку моћ синдиката. Организације у јавном сектору досљедно показују виши ниво синдикалног чланства и утицаја у поређењу с приватним сектором. Иако традиционалне индустрије, попут производње и јавне управе, на агрегатном нивоу биљеже јаче присуство и утицај синдиката, овај тренд се само дјелимично потврђује на нивоу појединачних земаља, што одражава сложеност динамике синдикалног организовања. Ова студија доприноси литератури о радним односима пружајући емпиријске доказе о трендовима синдикализације у постсоцијалистичким европским земљама. Посебно истиче потребу за модернизацијом синдикалних стратегија, укључујући примјену дигиталних алата, ангажман са атипичним радницима и заговарање инклузивних политика. Такве прилагодбе су кључне за превазилажење изазова које намећу нове индустрије и опадајуће стопе чланства. Налази нуде практичне препоруке за јачање капацитета синдиката.