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Striking with tied hands: Strategies of labor interest representation in post-communist Romania and Ukraine

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Abstract

Trade unions have been a weak political actor at the national level in most of post-communist Europe. The situation differs at the plant level, where workers and trade unions mobilized and often took successful if isolated actions against employers. This dissertation asks why and how such forms of workers' interest representation could emerge in a hostile context, which makes it difficult for workers and trade unions to mobilize, pose threats to employers, and break out of isolation. The study's overarching question is: What specific strategies can succeed in advancing the rights and living standards of workers (given the structural difficulties brought about by post-communist transformation)? The dissertation's main argument is that strategy matters even under the harshest conditions. Successful unions ensured a situational definition connecting the workers' and the union leaders' perceptions about employers and thus ensuring that workers would back the actions of the union. Furthermore, successful unions calibrated threats they addressed to employers to the production intentions of the employer and to the employer's organizational structure. They also ensured outside support, at least in the form of state intervention. These strategy elements (a shared situational definition within the union regarding employer intentions, threats and disruptive actions adjusted to employer intentions, and outside support) proved crucial for defending workers' rights and living standards. The cases studied in this dissertation are 18 contention episodes at 10 privatized plants in the Romanian steel industry and Ukraine's civil machine-building sector in the 2000s.