

## **From political neutrality to strategic alliance: the trade union movement as a political actor after the post-socialist transformation in Slovakia**

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### **Abstract**

*Interest groups and political parties have created a variety of relations and methods of mutual cooperation whereby they follow an easier way of interest representation and enforcement. These relations may include different informal practices through silent or open declaration of support up to formal agreements on mutual cooperation. This paper represents a case study on relations between political actors - trade unions and political parties - in the specific period of post-communist transformation in Slovakia. The article offers detailed excursion into the trade union movement's political relations formation and development in Slovakia after 1989 to the present. At the beginning it offers explanations of relative weakness of the trade union movement in post-communist countries. This part represents an argument base for defining the position of trade unions among other political actors – political parties – in the Slovak political system and society transformation and stabilization, and explain the reasons and consequences of political neutrality as well as affiliation in the specific period of post-socialist transformation. The analyses has been based on internal trade unions documents and materials, newspaper articles, interviews with trade unions representatives and the author's own observations and experience with an active 15-year volunteer work within trade unions.*

**Keywords:** Slovakia, trade union movement, Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic, political parties, CEEC

### **Trade unions in CEEC as a victim of legacy of communism: weak or strong political and social actor?**

There are several explanations regarding the relative weakness or strength of the trade union movement in post-communist countries (Crowley 2004) and one of them is based on evolutionary theory and highlights the legacy of communism, especially the institutional legacy of the trade unions of the communist era and ideological legacy of the regime as well as looking for identity in post-communist period. Probably, there was no any other area where a more significant impact of the communist heritage was noted as much as in the trade unions. The impact of this heritage is twofold: institutional and ideological. Under institutional we mean that the trade unions were built as a completely different organisation to operate in a very different economy. Trade

unions were considered to be the allies of management and often functioned as social agencies providing “welfare” for their members, granting them various benefits, which often seemed to be the only benefit of membership. In a market economy, trade unions should ensure benefits like higher wages, job security, better working conditions and necessary restrictions of managerial authority. The post-communist trade unions had to face the challenge of shifting to a market economy under the conditions of capitalism just at the time of economic decline, but also under the pressure of globalisation. Union members faced this problem for the first time and simultaneously responded to the legacy of the communist era left in trade unions.

At least for the last three decades, we can talk about the crisis of the trade union movement, not only in Central and Eastern Europe, although many studies focus just on the post-communist region and functioning of trade unions in new, qualitatively different political, social and economic conditions. Keller (2011) identifies several causes of the crisis of the trade union movement in “post-industrial” society.<sup>1</sup> According to him, the crisis of the trade union movement lies primarily in companies undergoing organisational changes for the new economy; further, the crisis of trade unions is the result of a new wave of economic globalisation; which also has a psychological impact on employees’ behaviour; and last but not least the trade unions are influenced by the change in the strategy of investing capital in the de-industrialisation process.

There are several possible explanations why trade unions in Eastern Europe have not become influential social and political actors at the time when the various reforms with negative impacts on living standards which, especially in the first years of economic transformation, decreased significantly in most countries, were and are still ongoing. Although the impact of the ideological heritage on trade unions in the past decade changed considerably, during that time the unions began to consolidate institutionally as much weaker organisations. Even though the majority of new studies on work and industrial relations in the post-communist countries try to point out that the position of trade unions in these countries is weak, some argue that, in some countries of Eastern Europe, the position of trade unions is stronger than in other countries. Poland, where a sharp collective protest and wave of strikes affecting all sectors of the economy were recorded in the early post-communist period, might be an example. Regarding the corporatist institutions (in the form of tripartite institutions), which essentially all post-communist societies sought to establish, Ianková (1998) speaks of the so-called transformative corporatism, which maintained social peace in the region despite the painful transformation of the economy; Ost (2000) argues that the post-communist corporatism is only illusory, false and misleading.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Keller (2011), the decrease in the rate of profit from investments directed to the industry in the 70s and 80s of the last century led investors to explore new ways of applying their funds. They found different ways, all of which converged in the process of de-industrialisation.

Could we then say that trade unions are weak political actors in Central and Eastern Europe? According to Crowley (2004), there are several explanations regarding the relative weakness or strength of the trade union movement in post-communist countries. The first explanation focuses on the aforementioned *corporatist institutions*, which were established according to the functioning model of the so-called Western democracies in the emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, mainly from government initiatives, as the preventive measures to eliminate expected social unrest during implementation of economic and social reforms. Another explanation is based on the *theory of competition* between trade unions, arguing that a more fragmented trade union movement will be more active in its activities and in order to obtain potential members. The third cause of weakness of the trade union movement in the post-communist region is seen in the fact that *individuals prefer to leak into the informal economy* before using the option of collective action. Another argument to explain the weaknesses of the trade union movement in that region is based on the *theory of exchange, economic theory of strikes and evolutionary theory*.

Post-communist society sought opportunities to build corporatist institutions. The quick establishing of a tripartite corporatism is quite an unexpected result of post-communist transformations. In Western Europe, similar structures were created as a result of strong pressure from the socialist and social democratic parties, which sought official representation of trade unions in the political process for decades. Many changes and decisions in the post-communist transformation can be called a “transformation by replica”, i.e. the transplantation of democratic institutions and organisations that have proven themselves in Western Europe. The post-communist countries that have some historical tradition in social partnership and organisation of corporate structures have (and had) also the greater tendency towards re-creation of corporate mechanisms at the present.

Corporatist tendencies in association, representation and mediation of interests are the result of the interplay of historical, international, institutional and cultural factors that accompanied the transformation of the former regime (Malová 1997). Models of tripartite negotiations between government, employers and employees have been successful in maintaining social peace, thus acceptable and desirable for the post-communist reformers. Tripartism, as institutionalised mediation of interests of labour, capital and the state, is becoming a common feature of the social environment in the whole of Eastern Europe. The question of corporatism is crucial not only because the newly entered EU countries needed to acquire European institutions, but also because of “the future of social Europe”, which lies largely in the quality of the representation of interests among the new EU member states. A number of authors argue that tripartism does indeed contribute to social reconciliation in the region and that they have been and are successful in their pursuit of social peace through compromise, on the basis of consensus among all actors involved. Some authors state that tripartism is strong corporatism, while others argue

that it is a second government or enemy of parliament (Crowley 2004). A number of studies of post-communist corporatism, however, consider these institutions to be quite weak and ineffective.

Historical development in Western Europe suggests that the governments supported the creation of a corporate arrangement of the relations between the state and the representatives of labour and capital with the expectations that the involvement of different actors in the policy making would minimise the social and political conflicts, and that the organisational discipline especially of trade unions, as well as employers' organisations, would mitigate any potential negative reaction of dissatisfied groups in enforcing unpopular measures. The corporatism in this region is often described as paternalistic, misleading and a sham, as fragile tripartism subject to the dictates of neo-liberalism or the political armor of neoliberal economic strategy (ibid).

In their empirical study of protests in the post-communist countries, Ekiert and Kubik (1998) posed the question of why there were more strike activities in Poland than in Hungary in the 1990s. They argued that protest is a rational response to the lack of access, the lack of corporatist inclusion and hypothesise that fewer strikes could be expected where an institutionalised system of tripartism exists (Ekiert, Kubik 1998). They also state that the difference between the Poland in strike and a "peaceful" Hungary is the social democratic party and an institutionalised approach to policy making. Moreover, the number of strikes in Poland decreased dramatically after the establishment of the tripartite and after the leftist social democratic party entered the government. By contrast, in Hungary in 1995, the government abandoned talks whose goal was to provide a social pact, where agreement seemed unattainable, and various austerity measures in the spirit of neoliberal policies were imposed unilaterally<sup>2</sup>. It follows that, on the one hand, if corporatism is able to explain social peace, on the other hand, it is not a guarantee for inducing social unrest, strikes and protests if the institution of tripartite fails (the similar example is Slovakia). Corporatism is therefore not able to explain the cause of the low rate of mobilisation in Eastern Europe in relation to Western Europe. Corporatism in Eastern Europe played an important role in the post-communist transformation process and is simply different from the same kind of corporatism in Western Europe.

Another explanation of the weakness of trade unions in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe is based on the laws of competitive struggle that we could call "*competition between unions*", which means that unions would be more

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<sup>2</sup> This was followed by widespread railway strikes, which subsided once a tripartite institution was established again, but negotiations in the tripartite context were reduced only to consultations and mutual informing even before 1998 when the right-wing government, openly declaring its hostility to the trade union movement, was established. In addition, the establishment of tripartite corporatism in Poland in 1994 may have contributed to the decline in strikes, but paradoxically, the later failure of bargaining and the disagreement of trade union headquarters did not lead to a rebound in strikes or other major protest responses in this area.

radical on the assumption of the existence of large amounts of trade unions (headquarters) fighting (contesting) for members and potential sources, it thus implies a competition between trade unions or headquarters. According to Ekiert and Kubik (1998), more strikes would be expected where many trade unions “*compete for the same audience*” and a larger number of unions would predict a greater likelihood of strikes. They explain this referring to the case of Poland which had the most pluralistic and competitive trade unions in Eastern Europe. While, in their opinion, fragmentation leads to competitiveness and consequently to mobilisation, standard views on labour relations suggest that fragmentation leads to weakening and competition undermines solidarity and central sources. Another reverse hypothesis is that fragmentation leads to a significant decline in membership thus depriving some trade unions (headquarters) of a critical mass of members required for mobilisation and pressure through sectoral and national measures. Ekiert and Kubik argue that where there are numerous trade unions seeking supporters within the same sector, these unions represent a real threat to one another and therefore will compete for the support of potential members. Hence, it remains questionable, whether the plurality of unions represents both their strength and ability to mobilise and recruit members, or vice versa, which means a splitting of force and threatening the solidarity, a decline in membership and inability of mobilisation. The Slovak case suggests that both the method of transforming the former communist trade unions and the quality of their management contributed most to the gradual weakening of not only the national, but also the enterprise level (Malová, Rybář 2004).

As demonstrated in the case of strike activity in some post-communist countries of the region, the economic and social transformation, the conditions of economic crisis, the decline in real wages and high unemployment did not provoke such a quantity of labour unrest as would be expected. The economic theory of strikes argues that employees tend to act collectively not when unemployment is high, but when it is low, when employees are strong and it is easier to pressure the employer. (Crowley 2004). In the aforementioned *economic theory of strikes*, Crowley demonstrates a further explanation for the relative weakness of the trade union movement in Central and Eastern Europe.

During the implementation of painful economic changes in the region one would intuitively expect a significant amount of labour unrest and intense strike activity, at least in some countries or industries, if not universally. The relative robustness, or the number of workers involved in labour disputes compared with the total number of employees, respectively, is a good indicator for national comparisons of strike alert and activity statistics. The results of these comparisons in Eastern and Western European countries are surprising. The rate of strike activity in Western Europe is 100 days not worked for every 1,000 employees per year. A comparable value for the countries of Eastern Europe is 25 days not worked for every 1,000 employees per year (ibid). Certainly, a significant difference can be seen between the strike activity in Eastern and Western Europe. Thus we can see that the scale of protests in Central and

Eastern Europe is much lower than in many recognised democracies of Western Europe (Ekiert, Kubik 1998).<sup>3</sup>

Another reason, which Crowley highlights in researching the status of trade unions in Central and Eastern Europe, is the phenomenon of the so-called individual leakage, i.e. *the individual leakage of individuals into the grey (informal) economy*. Individuals prefer such individual escape to the collective voice, or collective action, respectively, to achieve their economic and social interests. According to Crowley it is this leakage, rather than a common voice, which is the dominant model of social response to the economic pressure on the east. And the most frequent response to economic difficulties is not involvement in a strike, but to move into the informal economy. (Crowley, 2004, p. 415). For example, he mentioned Russia or Ukraine, where the level of the informal economy is high, but despite the harsh economic conditions there were relatively few protests reported. Another argument explaining the weakness of the trade union movement in Central and Eastern Europe is based on the theory of *political exchange*, which implies that the trade unions mobilise and protest only if they do not have political partners in government. Conversely, when the ruling parties are politically close to trade unions, those, in exchange for political concessions, do not organise collective protests.

A final clarification of the weakness of the trade union and labour movement in post-communist countries is based on evolutionary theory and highlights *the legacy of communism*, especially the institutional legacy of the trade unions of the communist era and ideological legacy of the regime as well as looking for identity in post-communist period. Probably, there was not any other area where a more significant impact of the communist heritage was noted than in the trade unions. The impact of this heritage is twofold: institutional and ideological. By institutional we mean that the trade unions were built as a completely different organisation to operate in a very different economy. Trade unions were considered to be the allies of management and often functioned as social agencies providing “welfare” for their members, granting them various benefits, which often seemed to be the only benefit of membership. In a market economy, trade unions should ensure benefits like higher wages, job security, better working conditions and necessary restrictions of managerial authority.

The post-communist trade unions had to face the challenge of shifting to a market economy under the conditions of capitalism just at the time of economic decline, but also under the pressure of globalisation. Union members faced this

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<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, a high rate of strike activity could rather be an indication of desperation of trade unions than their force and, on the other hand, strong trade unions would not need to strike if they could get privileges without protest activities. Nevertheless, it would be necessary to obtain evidence for the claims that unions in Eastern Europe are strong, despite (or because of or thanks to) the low level of strike activity. However, the available evidence shows rather the opposite. During the 90s, a sharp decline in real wages throughout the region was recorded, and while wages kept increasing in many countries, they are still relatively low in the new EU member states compared to the “old” members of the European Union.

problem for the first time and simultaneously responded to the legacy of the communist era left in trade unions. After the departure of communist parties, trade unions became the largest institution that survived the previous regime, and thus faced significant challenges to their legitimacy. The problem was not only that union members were suddenly not sure what trade unions should do in new conditions, but the trade-unionist “leaders” and activists remained uncertain what position to adopt towards capitalism, whether to defend workers against capitalism or to assist in its implementation. It is the legacy of the former regime which best explains the relative lack of trust in trade unions, as well as the general weakness of trade unions in post-communist societies. And this legacy is the least permissible for change - economic conditions, unemployment, the extent of the informal economy can change over time, corporatist institutions can be rebuilt or expanded, but the impact of the heritage of the communist period is much more durable and less accessible to policy changes. This impact shaped (and apparently, is still shaping) the approach of employees towards trade unions, their perception of the trade union leaders and their role in a market economy.

In Western Europe, where trade unions met with the global post-Fordist economy from an institutional position of strength, thanks to the heritage of the communist period the trade unions in Eastern and Central Europe faced the introduction of capitalism and global pressure from the beginning in the weak position. Indeed, some authors believe that the post-communist countries follow more trends of “Americanisation” in the field of industrial relations and social policy. In many cases (privatisation, pensions, tax policy, working time, the welfare state, wage disparities, etc.) post-communist countries follow the North American way rather than the European social market economy. (Meardi 2002). In terms of the size of membership, structure and quality of collective bargaining and industrial relations in general, working arrangements in post-communist societies did not reach the practices of the European Union, but radically transformed the rigid control of the Communist era to a dramatically more flexible system, similar to that in the United States of America. (Crowley, 2004)<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Slovak trade union movement as a new political and social actor after 1989: old trade unions with a new face**

The events of November 1989 in Slovakia initiated a political system transformation which led to a pluralist and representative democracy as well as to the change from a centrally planned economy to a market economy.

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<sup>4</sup> Here it could be argued that whether Western Europe is the best case for comparison with post-communist societies. Not only do labour relations in the latter appear very similar to those in the United States, but the level of economic development is more similar to developing countries than to the developed capitalist countries. Some theorists equate the trade union (labour) policy in Eastern Europe to the countries of Latin America.

April 10th 1990 is believed to be the day of the establishment of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as KOZ SR). The changes after November 17th 1989 affected the functioning of the then-trade union Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (hereinafter referred to as ROH) and influenced the shaping of the character of the present-day KOZ SR, with some of the current problems of the Confederation having originated precisely in that period. The Czech and Slovak Confederation of Trade Unions replaced the centralised ROH on the federal level. It became an umbrella organisation for the newly created Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions regarding the Czech Republic, and the Confederation of Trade Unions regarding the Slovak Republic. The Slovak congress considering both the First Slovak Congress of Trade Unions and the founding congress of the Confederation of Trade Unions, continued on the 9th and 10th of April, 1990.

Referring to an almost quarter of a century long existence of KOZ SR shaped by its constitutional documents (programme, statutes, resolutions, messages, etc.) it may be said that, in general, based on its programme, that the Confederation focused mainly on three issues: defining its attitude to political parties and movements (or other elements of the political system); defining its position in the tripartite; and encouraging the membership. In the first years of its existence, the Confederation focused mainly on building its structures in the new conditions of democracy and its own transformation, transferring of assets from the former ROH as well as engagement in a tripartite body, the Economic and Social Treaty Council (RHSD).

Thanks to the negative "legacy" of the former regime, the Confederation focused on its political neutrality for a long time, regardless of the definition of the meaning and the content of this concept. As early as the period before the 1998 election, the Confederation participated, for the first time, in an election campaign aimed at mobilising its members to engage in election, thus contributing to the effort to change the mode of governance in Slovakia. After the "good" outcome of the election, the Confederation focused on putting forward a legislative anchoring of tripartite, in which it succeeded. Nonetheless, the gradual deterioration of relations with the government, which had even enshrined the removing of corporatist elements in the representation of interests in the economic and social spheres of its Government Policy Statement, the activities of the Confederation were aimed at shortening the electoral period of Dzurinda's cabinet by co-organising the petition and subsequent referendum. That situation forced trade unions in Slovakia to seek their political allies among the relevant political parties, which launched a debate within the union on whether to cooperate with political parties or not and, if so, to what extent. It seemed that the unions had found this political ally, resulting in a multiple signing of a cooperation agreement between the KOZ SR and SMER-SD. After the 2006 election, when party SMER-SD won, and again after the 2012 election, it seemed that this "partnership" could provide trade unions with some benefits, though this issue also causes the fragmentation of a common opinion within the unions and among their representatives. These

external effects on the activity of the Confederacy seem to “divert” its attention from the need to solve internal problems, its own reorganisation, qualitative analysis and the internal audit for the purpose of naming the causes of problems and finding new and modern forms of appropriate solutions.

In the first years of its existence, the Confederation focused mainly on building its structures in the new conditions of democracy and its own transformation, the transfer of assets from the former ROH as well as engagement in a tripartite body, the Economic and Social Treaty Council (hereinafter referred to as RHSD). After 1989, the problem and one of the key tasks and challenges of the Slovak trade union movement was to find its place in the political system and to build relations with other elements of the political system, especially with political parties and movements. Thanks to the negative “legacy” of the former regime, the Confederation focused on its political neutrality for a long time, regardless of the definition of the meaning and the content of this concept.

### **“Nonpartisanism”: the key political goal**

The KOZ SR tried to overcome the negative legacy of the past and gain legitimacy in the public eye. The non-partisan nature of trade unions has thus become their goal. An unstable political environment, especially fragmentation and splitting of political parties, was reflected in the low support for government bills in Parliament. Therefore, trade unions had to focus on pursuing their interests in Parliament through caucuses and MPs. The KOZ SR could not pursue their goals in isolation, in conditions of multiparty Parliamentary democracy. During the struggle for social justice, it had to find allies within a reasonable extent in political parties and movements that have programme objectives related to that of KOZ SR.

Before the 1994 election, the KOZ SR Convention had not approved the system of nomination of trade union officials and had recommended the representatives of trade unions to stand as the candidates individually. They found themselves on the lists of candidates with the different political parties. Most of them did not succeed and trade unions were not able to promote their interests in Parliament through those who made it to the National Council. Nevertheless, the situation changed after the 1994 election. A majority understanding of politics and the rise of autocratic tendencies were also reflected in the functioning of social dialogue which became considerably complicated and was interrupted by KOZ SR representatives in 1997. Given the prevailing party voting patterns in Parliament, the possibility of trade unions to achieve their objectives through caucuses and individual MPs was reduced. According to D. Malová, this method would be suitable only if the government had not clear majority support in Parliament. The disciplined vote of MPs in the ruling coalition, however, limited significantly the activities of trade unions in Parliament in the years 1994 - 1998 (Malová 1999).

## **Breaking point: trade unions' involvement in election campaigns**

Before the 1998 Parliamentary election, neither the KOZ SR nor individual unions engaged directly in the election campaign, but some union representatives tried to establish themselves individually as independent candidates on candidate lists of political parties. Some later experience and an overview of each vote suggest that after the election to Parliament they became members or officials of political parties without feeling commitment and efforts to promote the interests of trade unions. The behaviours of union representatives in Parliament did not bring significant benefits and achievements in promoting the interests of trade unions. Placing trade unionists on candidate lists of political parties is fraught with more risks than benefits for trade unions, and thus promoting the interests of trade unions through its members operating in Parliament is not efficient and beneficial for them.

Since 1998, the trade unions (unions covered by KOZ SR) have begun to actively participate in election campaigns. In 1998 this was done on the basis of the document "The 1998 Parliamentary Election and the KOZ SR attitude" which was discussed by the KOZ SR Convention in December 1997. The latter reflected and analysed the experience of involvement in the election of many European trade union headquarters.<sup>5</sup> It turned out that all of the trade union headquarters take a proactive approach to elections, trying to be non-partisan - not passive - in the pre-election period, affecting its members by giving them information to enable an independent and responsible decision of who to vote for, use the election campaign to promote their programmes that confront the programmes of political parties and movements, and cooperate with those of them which share the most common programming points in social and economic areas.

The pre-election concept of trade unions in Slovakia in 1998 was aimed at mobilising their members and voters. Its purpose was to encourage people to participate in the election and to accomplish a composition of Parliament which would allow the trade unions to better promote the interests of their members and other employees. The Confederation representatives considered four options of participation in the election campaign, through which it would be possible to influence the election results and thus, to considerable extent, the opportunities to promote their interests in Parliament - to maintain complete neutrality and passivity; or actively promote pluralistic and socially sensitive enough outcome of the election; or publish their own electoral preferences; or create their own political party.

The first possibility is excluded due to the practical impossibility of maintaining neutrality in the conduct of major social changes, resulting in the trade unions' being heavily involved. Such a position was also accepted by the Confederation and it was nothing but a natural reaction to the battle with government

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<sup>5</sup>The German DGB, the Austrian OGB, the British TUC, the French CGT and CFTC, the Danish LO, the Hungarian MSZOSZ, the Czech ČMKOS.

concerning maintaining the position of the tripartite partners. The third variant comes with a number of risks to the members and general public, especially the possible dissatisfaction of those union members who sympathise with the non-preferred parties; increase of tensions within the trade unions due to polarisation of views which could lead to the fragmentation and weakening; denial of the principle of nonpartisanship and the consequent loss of credibility of trade unions as an independent force; escalation of attacks on unions as a hidden political power. All risks are greater than the possible profit on the preferences.

The fourth solution can be regarded as a short term solution in emergency situations. It also contains the aforementioned number of risks, including the financial one. In that case, the existing political parties having intersections with the Confederation programme could even face a withdrawal of votes, but on the other hand, the new party would fail to meet the anticipated expectations. Possible failure could jeopardize the very existence of the Confederation.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it would alter the nature of trade unions, as these, as an interest group, seek not to obtain but to influence power. Having considered all the risks, the representatives of the Confederation adopted the second option, which was in terms of trade unions identified as optimal, and with regard to their programme, as the most natural. The union members were advised to reconsider a selected number of issues in the programmes of candidate parties. On the basis of objective information provided by different pathways by the trade union headquarters, each member was to decide to whom s/he would give his/her voice; hence the Confederation did not demonstrate what political entity to vote or not to vote for, and thus did not declare open support for a particular political party. By this 1998 decision, trade unions decided to involve actively in the election campaign and in the efforts to influence political development in Slovakia, on the other hand, by distancing themselves from the expression of support for a particular political party, they shrugged off responsibility to bear the risks of possible election failure of the political entity supported.

In terms of trade unionists' candidacy, the Confederation adopted a recommendation to stand as candidates for the political entities which guaranteed in their programme that they would promote common objectives under the various programmes to ensure that when the candidates from trade unions on the candidate lists of political parties would be supported, the functional classification of union leaders would be preserved, and that union officials, who get into Parliament, provide regular reports about fulfilment of their tasks.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the Confederation has not set the possible

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<sup>6</sup> For more details see the KOZ SR document entitled *The 1998 Parliamentary Elections: the KOZ SR attitude as discussed by the KOZ SR Convention on 9 December 1997*. Bratislava: KOZ SR

<sup>7</sup> The KOZ SR held an international conference related to these topics entitled "Trade unions - Elections - Policy" in April 1998. In the same month, the KOZ published "Evaluation of the implementation of the Programme of the Government of the Slovak Republic" approved by the government in January 1995 which showed that, contrary to this programme, during the

mechanisms penalising the union representatives, who would, in case of operating in Parliament or in a political party, violate such defined criteria.

In accordance with an approved procedure, the Confederation leaders approached political parties which were likely to get to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (NR SR) after the election, to comment on the questions and issues that trade unions considered key issues in their mission and programme.<sup>8</sup> An analysis of the responses and comparison of electoral programmes showed that the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) were closest to the KOZ SR's requirements. The Confederation also developed the material which analysed the previous voting of individual MPs on issues deemed important in terms of its programme objectives. The results of the votes showed that the then ruling coalition Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Union of the Workers of Slovakia (ZRS) did not vote in favour of employees, but MPs of Democratic Union (DU), Cristian Democratic Movement (KDH), SDĽ and the Hungarian Coalition (MK) supported employees.<sup>9</sup>

Activities of trade unions and the regional KOZ SR structures in the regions aimed at meeting the information campaign and mobilising the union members to participate in elections. Along with the mobilisation, the primary effort of KOZ SR was to achieve such a composition in Parliament, which would allow the best promotion of the objectives of trade unions. We can say that, by its activities, KOZ SR significantly affected the final results of the 1998 Slovak Parliamentary election. The Confederation reached at least the first part of its objective, which was formulated as a pluralistic and socially sensitive outcome of the election. Thus, the Confederation actually became significantly involved in the political arena outside its usual activities for the first time during its existence (Malová, 1999).

In assessing the KOZ SR involvement in the election campaign, it is necessary to mention the specificity of the then political situation in Slovakia. The electoral period 1994 - 1998, in which the Parliamentary majority lay in the governing coalition of HZDS, SNS and ZRS, was considered a period of illiberal democracy (Sopóci 2002). A typical feature of the government was the significant

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reporting period unemployment increased, the situation in health, education, culture deteriorated, there was delay in entry into the EU and NATO, in other words, that the government was not fulfilling its programme at all, or only to a very limited, declarative rate.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. protection of trade union rights, social dialogue, labor law, social security, collective bargaining, housing, integration of the Slovak Republic into NATO and the EU, industrial policy, etc.

<sup>9</sup> The KOZ informed all Parliamentary parties, Gremium of the Third Sector, Roman Catholic and Evangelical Church and the media about this fact. The KOZ representatives also attended the negotiations of a "democratic round table" which helped to coordinate the actions of the then opposition, the Union of Towns and Communities, Youth Council of Slovakia and Gremium of the Third Sector. They also discussed with the representatives of churches.

application of undemocratic elements in the political life of Slovak society, for example the enforcement of acts that allowed more efficient control of representation of interests, creation of new interest groups, the number, identity and action (Malová and Čambáliková 1998), the strengthening of the partisan and the state-partisan corporatism (Malová 1997), which largely limited their autonomous status.

During this period, the KOZ SR engaged itself by its campaign in efforts for fundamental political change and democratisation of society in Slovakia. Despite the fact that one of the ruling subjects, HZDS, won the 1998 elections, there was a political regrouping and a change in the executive. A very broad and, as it turned out later, unprepared and incoherent coalition unwilling to agree on fundamental issues in the concept of economic policy and socio-economic development was established then. The new government “thanked” the trade unions for their position in the campaign by adopting the Tripartite Act and the Act on Guarantee Fund. The government began to take measures to stabilise the economy, which were not very popular among the citizens, and from the point of view of trade unions, affected adversely their social situation. Likewise, from the perspective of trade unions, the government did not fulfil its policy statement on key objectives, failed to meet the essential obligations of the 2000 General Agreement and the social dialogue from the government was regarded as formal and non-constructive by trade unions. The Confederation declared the government an untrustworthy social partner and the situation in the social dialogue began to be strained, which resulted in his suspension.

The fundamental principles of trade unions before the 2002 Parliamentary elections were characterised in the same way. The entities, that had already been in government in the period 1994-2002, were a disappointment, as they failed to meet their election promises, in particular in the social field, the growth of real wages and salaries, in addressing the issue of unemployment. The political scene missed the left-wing body, which could guarantee the enforcement of the needs of employees and trade union members. Trade unions participated in the election campaign again in 2002 in an effort to persuade as many voters as possible to participate in the elections, without any obligation towards the Confederation<sup>10</sup>. Similar to the pre-election period in 1998, the representatives of the Confederation approached all relevant political parties to comment on the substantive issues of trade union rights and social policy.<sup>11</sup> By the involvement in the election campaign, trade unions sought to fully inform

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<sup>10</sup>Under the central motto “Who votes, affects their own destiny!!!” The Confederation representatives again discussed the possibility of involvement of KOZ SR in the election campaign with the resulting material “The KOZ SR attitude to the Parliamentary elections in 2002” (KOZ SR, 2002) which reworked the need to: 1. maintain complete neutrality, 2. promote actively pluralistic and socially sensitive enough outcome of the election, 3. declare own electoral preferences and 4. create own political party.

<sup>11</sup> The Confederation published an analysis regarding the responses of individual political parties and also the evaluation of the performance of selected parts of the Government policy statement, and the analysis of MPs voted to selected problems.

citizens - voters about the mode of governance and Parliamentary activity (based on their own analyses); to mobilise all eligible voters to participate in elections; to accomplish the composition of Parliament which would allow the trade unions to better promote the interests of their members and other employees; and to influence the election results so as to obtain a composition of government that would recognise the social dialogue, social partnership and would focus on solving the existential problems of citizens (the KOZ SR, 2002). The union members - voters were to decide on which political entity they would elect accordingly.

The result of pre-election activities of trade unions was a bit ambiguous. There was an impression among the trade unionists that the unions did not find any political partner among political parties. Based on the results of the Parliamentary elections, the right-wing centrist government was established. If over time initially non-existent tensions cropped up between the trade unions and the broad government coalition that emerged from the 1998 elections, it was more than likely that after the 2002 elections there would be a further widening. On the basis of the Confederation offer to negotiate with the political subjects addressed in the post-election developments in Slovakia, seven political parties declared a willingness to communicate and cooperate, four of which entered Parliament and only one entity was part of the ruling coalition (SMK).<sup>12</sup>

The election results confirmed the concerns and expectations of a possible government of right-wing coalition. The expressed views and opinions as well as the pre-election programmes of parties of the ruling coalition were quite distinct from the programme objectives of trade unions. The Government policy statement itself enshrined the aim to remove the elements of corporatism in Slovakia, hence the trade unions could be worried about the loss of exclusive access to the Government on matters of negotiation of the measures in the economic and social field. The very results of Parliamentary elections suggested that the trade unions would have a difficult position. Nevertheless, the Confederation continued in its efforts to find, through mutual communication and cooperation, possible joint penetrations with relevant political parties and their Parliamentary caucuses, through which they would seek to promote their interests particularly in the social field; however, the coalition parties clearly showed no interest in this kind of cooperation, only the opposition political groups ĽS-HZDS<sup>13</sup>, Communist Party of the Slovakia (KSS) and SMER responded positively and they also offered cooperation in the National Council.

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<sup>12</sup> HZDS-ĽS: 19.5 %, SMER: 13.46 %, SMK: 11.16 %, KSS: 6.32 %, HZD: 3.28 %, SDA: 1.79 %, SDE: 1.36 %, the following parties entered the National Council: HZDS-ĽS, SMER, SMK, KSS

<sup>13</sup> On the Republic Transformation Convention of HZDS in Trnava in March 2000, the Movement for Democratic Slovakia was transformed into a standard people's political party. Accordingly, the delegates of the Republic Convention voted for a change in June 2003, or addition to the name, respectively, to The People's Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS).

## **From political neutrality to the quest for allies**

As a result of growing tensions between the trade unions and the government coalition, the protests and rallies were organised by the trade union headquarters, or by individual trade unions, which also promoted a certain convergence with the opposition, namely the political party SMER<sup>14</sup>. It is understandable that if negotiation mechanisms fail and the partners are unable to proceed with the willingness to look for (and receive) compromise solutions, interest groups extend their activities to coercive ones, through which they'd want to achieve fulfilment of their objectives. The protests, however, missed their effect as the government refused to accept the social demands of trade unions. The Confederation reached the conclusion that the change in social conditions can be brought about only by early elections. Therefore, they committed to an unusual step and, based on the resolution of the extraordinary meeting of the KOZ SR Convention (October 2003), decided to support the proposal to organise a petition calling for a referendum on snap elections. The political party SMER wanted to achieve the same objective; hence the very active cooperation between the two entities began. The parties KSS and SDL were also involved in this action. The governing coalition declared the KOZ SR an ally and party companion of SMER (Hospodárske noviny, 20 October, 2003). According to some political scientists (e.g. D. Malová), organising of petitions does not fall within the traditional instruments of trade union headquarters to defend their interests and, due to the share of political parties, the petition became not only a political but also a party action, which is a significant risk for trade unions (Hospodárske noviny, 11 November, 2003).<sup>15</sup>

The referendum was attended by 35.86%<sup>16</sup> of eligible voters which, given the failure to meet the condition of absolute majority participation, meant its annulment<sup>17</sup>. Despite the invalidity of the referendum, the trade unionists and opposition regarded the result as a success claiming that nearly 36% of eligible voters came to express their opinion in the referendum, among which 87% of votes were for the termination of the then governing coalition; also the

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<sup>14</sup> There were also considerations that the unions were going to participate in the formation of a new political party, which essentially confirmed the then Vice President Peter Gajdoš in an interview with *Hospodárske noviny*, when denied that the new left-wing party could arise by transforming the trade unions, but said that unions could initiate its formation (*Hospodárske noviny*, 17 October, 2003). The reason for these issues was in the absence of a non-communist left-wing political party in the National Council as a natural partner and ally of trade unions.

<sup>15</sup> The petition ran from mid-November 2003 to mid-January 2004, the organisers managed to gather 606,352 signatures. President Rudolf Schuster announced the referendum on 3 April 2004 to shorten the third election period of NR SR, the first round of presidential elections took place on the same day.

<sup>16</sup> As stated by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

<sup>17</sup> Of those, who voted in the referendum, the question "Do you want the MPs to adopt a constitutional law on the shortening of III. Slovak Parliament election period so that the elections to Parliament would be held in 2004?", 86.78% replied in the affirmative, 11.93% in the negative.

governing coalition also assessed the outcome of the referendum as successful. The trade union representatives think that the causes of failure (meaning the invalidity of referendum conditional to absolute majority of eligible voters) might be seen in a massive anti-campaign and challenging the legitimacy of the referendum, the call of the governing coalition to boycott it, in certain corrections of social restrictions that government made under a pressure of a referendum, and in apathy and lethargy of the public and citizens.

In the situation after the rejected 2004 referendum, trade unions were forced to take further steps to seek their political allies. The opinion of the KOZ SR raised two basic questions or tasks: either actively contribute to the integration of existing left-wing social democratic entities or to promote the emergence of one strong left-wing social democratic entity programmatically and clearly oriented towards common objectives of trade unions. The KOZ SR organised four discussion events with the participation of representatives of Parliamentary and non-Parliamentary entities "Trade unions and political parties"<sup>18</sup>, which were designed for trade union officials to initiate a discussion within the union on a new form of relations of trade unions to political parties. The discussions resulted in the need to talk about the subject of the cooperation of trade unions with political parties and to seek opportunities for cooperation with political entities that have common programmatic goals with the unions. Following the KOZ SR initiative of the, further discussions on the so-called Social roundtable were held, which all center-left political parties were invited to in order for them to discuss the possibility of integration with the Left, or creation of a new strong left-wing party, respectively.

Trade unions were thus supposed to actively participate in the integration with the Left in Slovakia. Nonetheless, the aforementioned initiative and the steps taken give the new dimension to the cooperation of trade unions with political parties. They were slowly blurring the myths and fears regarding trade union cooperation with political parties. This fear, or rather caution, was caused mainly by the experience and the historic legacy of the former regime, where trade unions were considered a "gear lever" of the ruling party policy. Trade unions in Slovakia became a part of the post-communist image: the left-wing spectrum (orientation towards the east and the past) versus the right-wing party (guarantor of democracy and the orientation towards the Euro-American society). The social issue presented as obscurantism and the hostility of the majority of the political spectrum to the trade unions prevailed. Trade unions were also burdened by the legacy of distrust, distrust of trade unions to political parties. Therefore, the post-1989 trade union movement declared their "nonpartisanism and political neutrality" (regardless of clarifying the content of those terms) for many years.

Discussions on cooperation with political parties culminated at the turn of 2004 and 2005. The KOZ SR began to direct their efforts to seek and establish a

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<sup>18</sup> Discussion events were organised in the period 2002 - 2004.

strategic partnership with one political party of a social democratic type. More than ten years of experience allowed trade unions to reconsider their opposition to cooperation and promotion of a left-wing political entity as a strategic partner which they would support in the Parliamentary elections. The open interest in strategic partnership with KOZ SR was demonstrated by the political party SMER.

The Fifth KOZ SR Congress clearly declared that the unions would be independent of any political party (Materials of the Fifth KOZ SR Congress of, 2004). Nevertheless, they did not exclude cooperation with any Parliamentary entity. The Congress Delegates adopted a resolution that commits the KOZ SR to the establishment of cooperation and partnership with political entities, bearing in mind the political diversity of union members. The Confederation expressed its preparedness to cooperate with all political parties whose programmes were consistent with its programme objectives and which showed an interest in such cooperation. Furthermore, the message states that it is necessary to seek such forms of cooperation that minimises the disparity of promises and actions. The requirements of trade unions will therefore seek to strengthen their position in employment relations, to strengthen social dialogue and tripartism and to accept a social nature in the reform process.

In accordance with the approved message of the congress delegates, in a letter dated 15 December 2004, all Parliamentary political parties were addressed with a request to express whether their programme objectives are close or identical to the KOZ SR programme to the end of February 2005. Responses of the addressed political parties were to become the basis for determining the scope and form of possible future cooperation with the Confederation and the relevant political entities. Parliamentary political parties were to comment on the KOZ SR substantive agenda items in the area of tripartism, economic policy, social policy and social justice, employment, the Labour Code, collective bargaining, Occupational Health and Safety, environmental and working environment, protection of wages, pension, health, sickness, supplementary pension insurance, child benefits and social protection and inclusion. The first of all Parliamentary parties which responded to the invitation of the KOZ SR was SMER-SD (social democracy), which invited the KOZ SR representatives to negotiations on 26 January 2005. The main goals of the negotiations were the proximity of programmes of the KOZ SR and SMER-SD, the requirements of trade unions to strengthen their position in employment relations, strengthening of the social dialogue and tripartism, maintaining of the social nature in the reform process and standardisation of the relations between SMER-SD and the KOZ SR. Another political party, which responded to the call of the Confederation of Trade Unions, was the Communist Party (KSS) which declared the proximity of the KOZ SR programme with that of KSS and its main tasks in its written statement. Here it states that the trade unions can count on the support and active participation in fulfilment of the programme approved by the Fifth KOZ SR Congress if it is necessary. Given the proximity of programmes, the cooperation with SMER-SD became a priority. In addition,

trade unions expressed their interest in contributing to the integration of left-wing entities into one strong left-wing party.

### **From quest for allies up to the strategic partnership**

On 21 December 2005, a cooperation agreement between the KOZ SR and political party SMER-SD was signed. The object of the agreement was mutual assistance and cooperation in the implementation of tasks arising from the scope of the tasks of the contracting parties. The aim of this agreement was to implement mutually beneficial cooperation between the contracting parties. In this agreement, KOZ SR and SMER-SD also pledged to choose such forms of cooperation that would be mutually beneficial and create optimal conditions for the fulfilment of programme objectives of KOZ SR, trade unions and SMER-SD (Agreement on cooperation between the KOZ SR and SMER-SD, 2005).

The agreement also contained the general content related to the cooperation between the contracting parties after the election. Some parts of the agreed points were also reflected in the Government policy statement as written by the coalition consisting of the parties SMER-SD, SNS and ĽS-HZDS after the 2006 elections. Moreover, signing of the cooperation agreement was nothing but a written declaration of the “sympathy” expressed between the trade union representatives and social democracy, existing since 2004. The agreement sparked contradictions and heated debates even within the trade unions, because not all trade unions or their representatives and leaders, covered by KOZ SR identified with such an agreement and supported it. Many blamed the KOZ SR leaders and trade unions for having political ambitions and for ensuring the high positions in politics through such agreement. On the other hand, it is true that trade unions cannot guarantee their members’ participation in elections and voting for the selected political party. An interest group cannot guarantee that its members will vote for the political party which it has concluded a cooperation agreement with since it can gather members with different electoral preferences, i.e. belonging to some interest group does not automatically mean the uniformity in electoral preferences. Thus, even within the trade unions there were different views on declaring active support for one political party in the election campaign. It evoked associations connected with the pre-1989 period, when trade unions supported one political party more or less on a “mandatory” basis. Moreover, they continued to declare their “nonpartisanism”, which is only a buck-passing attitude of the trade union representatives towards their members, but also away from them.

On the other hand, there were arguments supporting the effort of trade unions to demonstrate openly an “affection” to a chosen political party that is programmatically close to their mission. In most cases, trade union representatives in Slovakia share the view that it is necessary for trade unions to cooperate with political parties. Their opinions are divided on whether to cooperate with all relevant political parties equally, or to prefer one of them as a “strategic partner”. The issue of cooperation of trade unions with political

parties (whether all relevant ones or only a narrow range of selected political parties) has not been solved and has produced differences of opinion between their representatives as well as between the members within trade unions. While some representatives of the trade union advocate for a close cooperation with the selected political party (parties)<sup>19</sup>, some representatives, however, see in such cooperation only the possibility to exploit the potential of trade unions before the election, or they are concerned about the possible “dependence” of trade unions regarding such cooperation.

The discussion with the divergent views on the cooperation of trade unions with political parties, or with one political party respectively, was steered inside the membership base but also in the media and the wider public. The announcement of the President of KOZ SR, I. Saktor, to run for mayor of Banská Bystrica in the upcoming 2006 municipal elections also contributed to the overall “pre-election” tensions within trade unions. That tension was reflected in the Board of KOZ SR meeting on 17 May 2006 after the speech of I. Saktor on the 1st May Day celebration in Banská Bystrica where he left the floor to the Chairman of SMER-SD and indirectly urged the participants to vote specifically for this political party despite the fact that the representatives of other opposition political parties were also invited and were present at the meeting. The right-wing political parties perceived the behaviour of KOZ SR as strongly negative and regarded the KOZ SR presence as that of a political organisation (SME, 2 May 2006). Several trade unions, especially non-productive ones, (*Hospodárske noviny*, 11 May, 2006) expressed dissatisfaction with the course of the meeting, considering the trade unions as being drawn into the political ambitions of their leader. This dissatisfaction was labelled by some as the split in the trade unions or the opinion inconsistency (SME, 12 May 2006).

As trade unions represent their members with different political views and preferences of political parties, only a small percentage of them will be governed by the recommendations of the trade union headquarters, and those who disagree with the exclusive cooperation with one party, better recognise the

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<sup>19</sup> E. Machyna, President of the OZ KOVO, one of the unions which signed an agreement with SMER, said in an interview from 30 October 2007 in Banská Bystrica that he considered the relationship with politicians and political parties essential in promoting the interests of trade unions. According to him, it is necessary to have partners who share the same values as trade unions and who understand them. In his opinion, the trade unions should cooperate with political parties, which is quite common throughout Europe.

J. Blahák, former chairman of the OZ Chemistry (now ECHOZ), in an interview from 12 March 2005 in Bratislava noted that he is not in favor of cooperation with only one political party, but promotes the same closeness - distance to the relevant political parties, while the mutual cooperation should be very informal.

M. Gatciová, former President of the SLOVES (Slovak Trade Union of Public Service), in an interview from 25 October 2005 in Bratislava confirmed the opinion that trade unions should cooperate with political parties, but not to cooperate exclusively with one in order not to get into the “bondage”. Cooperation should be based on a serious partnership and the effort of its establishment should not be shown only shortly before the elections with the aim to obtain some potential voters.

distribution of political risks. Cooperation with only one political party, in the opinion of the then-president of SLOVES, M. Gatciová, was unacceptable, threatening the existence of employees working in government administration (Hospodárske noviny, 11 May 2006). The Bureau of the Trade Union of Workers in Education and Science in Slovakia declared on behalf of its membership a distance from the arbitrary practices of the President of the Confederation of Trade Unions, which have a negative impact on the attitudes of their members, and stressed that it sought to cooperate with each political entity whose programme corresponded to the programme of trade union and KOZ SR (TASR, 9 May 2006). Management Board of the KOZ SR finally demonstrated the unity of trade unions and the President of KOZ SR announced his intention to resign as president in November - even before the municipal elections.

Trade unions were actively involved in the election campaign and they urged members to participate in elections but also recommended voting for political party SMER-SD. Five trade unions which signed the cooperation agreement with SMER-SD together with KOZ SR held the meetings with their members where they urged them to vote for SMER-SD. Extensive material produced by KOZ SR which examined the votes of MPs on bills of a social nature, the evaluation of fulfilment of the 2002 Government policy statement and the KOZ SR attitude to the snap 2006 Parliamentary elections in June was also a part of the election campaign.

The active participation of trade unions in the election campaign and declaration of support for SMER-SD was apparently worth the effort. The June snap election proved SMER-SD to be the outright winner and its leader Robert Fico was commissioned to form a new government by the President of the Slovak Republic. Trade unions claimed satisfaction with the results of the elections as, citing the President of KOZ SR, I. Saktor, they bet on the winner (Hospodárske noviny, 22 June 2006). The government was formed on the basis of three political parties: SMER-SD, SNS, LS-HZDS. In July 2006, after the appointment of the government, the trade union representatives were invited to the negotiations concerning the Government policy statement, where they summarised their demands in six priority points: raising the minimum wage to 60% of the average wage in the national economy, progressive taxation of individuals, a reduction in VAT on selected goods, restoration of tripartite institutions and the Labour Code, the membership contribution of the trade union members as a deduction. Most of these requirements were actually reflected in the Government policy statement; the Government committed itself to reestablish the tripartite arrangement and its functioning as a body of consultations on the principle of equal social partnership of governments, trade unions and employers' organisations.

Despite the seemingly affiliate and positive relation between KOZ SR and SMER-SD<sup>20</sup> after the 2006 Parliamentary election, which was enhanced by

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<sup>20</sup> From 1 September 2007, the amendment of the Labour Code came into force, which appeared to be favorable to trade union demands, as it strengthened their legislative and

creating a center-right coalition government after the June 2010 Parliamentary election and the transition of up to then ruling party SMER-SD into opposition, the debate and difference of opinion over the signed agreement between trade unionists persisted. Before the March 2012 Parliamentary election, KOZ SR and SMER-SD signed another cooperation agreement, while KOZ SR declared open support for SMER-SD during the election campaign. Despite the mentioned fact, the President of KOZ SR stressed that cooperation and recommendation by the Confederacy was not contradictory to its nonpartisanship. (SME, 20 March 2010). Trade unions were also actively involved in the election campaign for the 2012 snap Parliamentary election when the Cooperation agreement with SMER-SD was re-signed. While the union representatives argued that the information campaign was designed for the voter's deciding who to vote for<sup>21</sup>, their attitude could be seen as a buck-passing concealment of the fact that unions have their political ally with no possibility to talk about their "nonpartisanship". This is also contradictory to both the union members and public because on the one hand, the relation between trade unions and the political party is formalised for several years in the form of cooperation agreements with declaring mutual support, on the other hand, the unions present their involvement in election campaign only by providing information (e.g. in 1998 or 2002). Such behavior can be explained in particular by aiming to satisfy both "warring" opinion groups and trying to maintain the image of the "nonpartisanship" without the label of a particular political party.

Trade union cooperation with left-wing political entities operates in several Western European countries, and promotion of a certain political party during the pre-election battle by an interest group belongs to the activities of pressure and interest groups, through which they achieve their objectives. But the operation, the influence and the work of trade unions in post-communist countries is very specific, unlike the case of the so-called stable democratic countries in Western Europe. The influence of trade unions is based mainly on economic and political principles and depends on specific conditions, expectations of a particular government policy, context and ad hoc agreements. It is not possible to talk about a precisely profiled model yet, as the political context and environment are not so stable as to define such a long-term model (Uhlerová, 2010). Nevertheless at this point it is important to note that the

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institutional position in the workplace. Nevertheless, union members were not completely satisfied with some provisions of the Labour Code applied in practice (e.g. restrictions on overtime in healthcare), the government resumed negotiations at tripartite level in the Council of Economic Partnership, trade unions have been consulted on the proposal of the Act on the Minimum Wage.

<sup>21</sup> Representatives of trade union headquarters stressed that trade unions were not commanding who to vote for, just provided information to the members and the public about things promoted in Parliament and in the government by individual representatives, who was, by his/her views and acts, closer to employees and citizens (KOZ SR press conference, 27 February 2012). However, from the pre-election activities (e.g. publishing the information leaflets, magazines, etc.) it was obvious that the SMER-SD got an ample scope to present their programme.

nonpartisanship of any organisation ends when it chooses a political party for cooperation and, in addition, gives advice on how to behave at the election. The use of and emphasis on the concept of “nonpartisanship” by the trade unions after the selection of a particular political party for their partner can be regarded as the declaration of a desirable condition and an avoidance of associations notoriously linked to the pre-1989 period. According to some “defendants” of the sealed partnership among the trade union representatives, the signing of the cooperation agreement was an ill-considered step of unions without the strategic/forecastable analysis, which may have adverse effects on the KOZ SR relations with political parties and the government in the future, when the political party SMER-SD is not in the government. At the same time, such a relation between trade unions and a political party may have a negative impact on the relations with employers built up over a long period of time and also with other political partners of KOZ SR.

## Conclusion

We can summarise the brief digression presented into the genesis of the relations of trade unions in Slovakia with political parties as follows: during the first years of its democratic existence, trade unions in Slovakia took a neutral stance towards political parties and movements in order to overcome the negative legacy of the former regime and to eliminate the public perception of trade unions as the extended arm of the Communist Party. They tried to promote their interests in Parliament through the individual MPs or caucuses. In the period 1990-2005, trade unions did not find a natural ally and “reliable” partner in the political arena. There was not such a political entity in the spectrum of the political scene that would trade unions clearly like to support. Those political parties that were closer to trade unions or would cooperate with trade unions and assist in enforcing their demands often carried out steps that can be regarded as the right-wing ones. Another problem may be that, in the past years, there was no clear differentiation of political parties on the left and right. Even the left-oriented ones were in tow in coalition with right-wing parties and basically could not clearly and principally enforce their policy. There was no right-wing or left-wing government until 2002. The fact that the left-wing parties failed in the 2002 Parliamentary election was the result of their wrong policies as they were drawn into cooperation within the coalition with right-wing parties (SDL).

Trade unions began actively participating in election campaigns only in 1998. Before the 1998 Parliamentary election, the active participation of trade unions in an election campaign was aroused by the effort to change the mode of governance and the expected change in the attitude of the new government towards the tripartite and the trade unions themselves. After this period, and after the deterioration of relations first with M. Dzurinda’s cabinet, trade unions launched efforts to seek and find a political ally among the political parties. That effort persisted and became one of the most debated topics within the trade

unions until 2005, when they found a strategic partner in the political party SMER-SD. The discussion about the form and scope of cooperation with the political parties is still ongoing and the opinions of individual trade union representatives differ. Support for cooperation (despite the signed agreement) with SMER-SD is not clear as there is a risk of worsening the long-term relation built with employers and the concerns of some trade union representatives. As for the political party, when cooperation changes to loyalty and obedience by the trade unions to the government, there may be nothing but exploitation.

Having a political ally comes with certain advantages and risks to trade unions. A requested (and expected) advantage may be an easier promotion of interests in the tripartite, if the partner political party is in government, and strengthening corporatist tendencies in the development and implementation of government policies, especially in social and economic areas. This was the strongest motivation for KOZ SR to find a strategic partner among political parties. However, if the partner party is in opposition, trade unions may face deterioration in relations with the government, in which the supported or supporting political entity is not represented. If a political party partner can, based on the results of the elections, form a government for several election periods in a row, it will allow the partners to create a sort of model of communication and cooperation, and to stabilise and standardise the negotiation environment.<sup>22</sup>

Seeking a natural ally of trade unions in Slovakia among the political parties distracted trade unions from the need of internal reform and transformation of the structures, resulting in a weakening of their own position within the political system and social partners - government and employers. On the one hand, trade unions seek to strengthen their position towards the exterior, on the other hand, it is weakened inwards (structure, internal communication, membership, financial resources, fragmentation, etc.), which is reflected by a relation to the external environment. The opinion concerning cooperation with a political party inside the membership and the trade union representatives is not entirely uniform and clear either, which may result, for example, in the outflow of membership or other fragmentation (dissenting departure) of trade unions, and thus not only worsen the bargaining power of trade unions in enterprises and industries, but also weaken their ability to act in organising various protest actions, if negotiations fail.

If the power of trade unions and their position in the workplace and the society-wide level is measured by the effectiveness of collective bargaining (Crowley 2004, Lawrence and Ishikawa 2005) the relation with the government does not affect and determine strengthening or weakening of their position directly. Government, as one of the social partners at the tripartite level, affects the social dialogue at the national level, which is only partially transferred into the results

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<sup>22</sup> An example of this may be the Scandinavian countries, but it is very difficult to compare it and to seek the parallels with those countries whose historical, social and political development determining the content and level of political culture is so different.

of collective bargaining at the sectoral level and, at the same time, may affect relations between trade unions and employers. Relations between the trade unions and the government do not determine directly the degree, efficiency and results of collective bargaining at sectoral level and the industrial relations, as the relations between trade unions and employers are important for the degree of material benefits from collective agreements and the collective bargaining culture, but these relations could be negatively affected merely by the positive relation of government to only one of the social partners. The legal relations between employers and trade unions are important for collective bargaining to work properly. Moreover there is a risk of worsening of relations with employers due to close relations with the government (political party in government, respectively), which is reflected in the bipartite social dialogue.

The existing institutional structure of social dialogue brings the trade unions affiliated in KOZ SR an exclusive access to the government with the possibility to comment on the important economic and social problems but for the purposes of collective bargaining this is not strictly necessary. At the tripartite level, legislative and political intentions of the government in economic and social sphere are discussed; in the sphere of wages, the subject of negotiations usually concerns determining the minimum wage or remuneration of public sector employees in relation to the state budget. Tripartite, however, does not affect the setting of wages in each sector. One might also assume that if the left-wing party is in the government, wages will grow faster than in a situation when there is the right-wing government in power. But the aforementioned Western European model does not apply to Slovakia, as the minimum wage rates during R. Fico's (left-wing) cabinet, influenced by collective bargaining, grew at a slower pace than during M. Dzurinda's (right-wing) cabinet (Uhlerová, 2012). Focusing on strengthening their own position in society by strengthening the position towards the government, the trade union representatives overlooked the need to reorganise and streamline the decision-making mechanisms, which would, also help to streamline the collective bargaining itself.

In Slovakia, the situation of the trade unions was difficult after 1989 as they became a part of the national and economic transformation process whereas the process implied their internal reform as well as the transformation into an individual organisation based on democratic principles. During the first years of its existence, the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic, the biggest organisation representing Slovak trade unions, focused on looking for its position in the political system and the international environment, its own transformation process and the creation of new structures as well as the transfer of the property from the former ROH. Later, the Confederation concentrated on three basic problem types; the definition and the search for its position within the tripartism as well as the relationship towards the government and the social partners, the definition of its attitudes towards the political parties and movements that led to looking for a political ally, and the activation of the membership base which had been showing a decreasing trend. The trade unions focused on the above mentioned problems as they wanted to strengthen their

position in society as well as towards the social partners. Moreover, they also wanted to promote their interests, especially through an alliance with the relevant left-wing political party.

In Slovakia, the trade unions have been trying to find a certain compromise among their own requirements, the expectations of citizens and their members, the current political and social situations as well as the measures of a particular government for a long time. The trade union functioning, influence and work in post-communist countries is very specific. Their influence is based especially on economic and political principles but it also depends on actual conditions, the particular government's expectations, current political actors, a political context and ad hoc agreements.

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