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Political Parties and Trade Unions in the Post-Communist Poland:
Class Politics that Have Never a Chance to Happen

Abstract: Trade unions in Poland have not built the stable and long-term relations with political parties as are observed in Western democracies. By analyzing the historical and symbolic background of the transformation to a democratic civil society and free market economy, political preferences of working class, trade union membership rates, and public opinion polls, we argue that, in case of Poland, the initial links between political parties and trade unions weakened over time. Polish trade unions never had a chance to become a long-term intermediary between society and political parties, m aking the Polish case study a double exception from the traditional models.

Keywords: *trade unions; social cleavages; Poland; party politics*

Introduction

Trade unions and party systems: Western Europe vs CEE countries

For a long time, trade unions have been recognized as crucial forces for democracy (Kubicek 2002; Mair 1997). They also played a central role in cleavage formation across Western post-industrial democracies (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), particularly due to their unique relationship between left-wing parties and the electorate. Scholars (see for example: Lipset 1999) provided evidence that trade unions are the most important form of class organization; the proportion of working class who belong to trade unions is a measure of class formation; and, people who belong to trade unions are more likely to vote for parties representing their class. The core of unions' activity is linking citizens' preferences to the decisions of elites; albeit to a different degree, varying a bit from system to system, whether corporatist in character or not. As Bornschier (2009) pointed out, the stability of party systems in the traditional models of Western democracies (weather we speak about strong link of the UK Labor Party or much weaker relations of the German SPD with trade unions), derives from the social groups divided by a cleavage supporting the same parties generation after generation. It is all about linking 'frozen' social divisions, through voting patterns, to party systems, which, then freezes accordingly. This formed part of the famous 'freezing hypothesis' of Lipset and Rokkan (1967).

Could trade unions have played a similar role in the post-communist political systems? The collapse of communism has enabled processes of democratization and marketization in Central and Eastern European (CEE). One of many focal points have been political parties and their relations with other actors, which potentially could have led to the institutionalization of the party system and building of a healthy civil society. In this context, trade unions could have been an important agent in bridging the gap between swathes of the electorate and political

parties. Nonetheless, there have been many major obstacles to achieving that. As Mair (1997, pp. 178-180) put it: it can be argued that post-communist Europe represents what is really the first case of European democratization occurring in the effective absence of a real civil society. The CEE new party systems did not result from a long-term process of democratization and politicization, but were rather created in the aftermath of that process. Consequently, the party systems which emerged after democratization (the post-communist experience) represent a quite different dynamic to those which emerged during democratization (the normal West European experience). As Mair (1997, p. 181) argued, new democracies have had scarce resources to produce any kind of party system stability or to curb electoral volatility, particularly during the first years of transition. Therefore, they were less likely to be underpinned by a strong cleavage structure, and in this sense, they were less likely to be easily stabilized and frozen.

The puzzling Polish case

25 years after the fall of Communism, we know that the Polish case was not excluded from shortcomings any other post-communist country has faced. In fact, electoral volatility and the number of political parties was one of the highest in the region. However, similar to the Western democracies' models, it had established social organizations prior to the communism collapse. Consequently, Poland could have been an exception from the typical CEE case study. And yet, the Polish trade unions have not built stable and long-term relations with political parties like we observe in Western Europe democracies.

The question is then: why not? Why did Polish trade unions and political parties not build stable relations, which could have potentially led to the West European, traditional model of 'frozen' party system? In our argumentation, we firstly consider the historical and symbolical background of transformation to democratic civil society and free market economy. Secondly, we move to decisions policymakers needed to take after collapse of communism. As we argue, early political choices mattered for the emergence of stable relations (or lack thereof) between political parties and trade unions. Thirdly, we descriptively analyze several quantitative factors: survey data from the Polish General Election Study in the context of political preferences of working class, trade union membership rates, labor working in industry, as well as public opinion polls on trade unions. We argue that contrary to the assumption that in democracies parties should develop strong links with certain groups of electorate, the links between political parties and trade unions at the beginning of the transition period (based on historical and symbolic reasons) weakened with time.

Transition, shock therapy and political turmoil

Since the 1980s it has been argued that the links between interests groups and political parties have waned. The decline is well-documented (Franklin et al, 2005, Dalton et al, 1985) and concerns either political parties or interest groups. As Franklin (2010) argues, social cleavages appear to have explained around 30 per cent of the variance in party choice during the 1960s, but in many of those same counties this had declined to around 10 per cent by the mid-1980s. As recent analyses show, in the last two decades it has been less than 10 per cent (Franklin,

2009, p. 430). As a consequence, it has been argued, socioeconomic cleavages have been no longer a stable predictor of voting patterns.

There have been many explanations of this phenomenon. One of the most plausible and obvious ones is that social groups - in which the old structure of conflict used to be anchored - changed. On the one hand, due to economic modernization the size of the working class has been significantly reduced, thus the significance and membership of trade union dramatically declined (van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014, van Biezen et al, 2012). As Enyedi (2008) has argued, the post-industrial society is not any more organized around large-scale units (e.g. factories) and does not allow social groups to discipline their members. Indeed, we observe now a growth of (less unionized) service sector and much more self-employment. Thus, new middle class is heterogeneous group that is not used to be "rooted" into community or to have inherited political loyalties.

On the other hand, the change also came from the top. Due to the technological revolution and the growth of mass media, politicians and their parties have found completely new ways to communicate with voters beyond those they have been traditionally associated with. It means also that the political parties themselves abandoned the model from the twentieth century, namely, being a mass organization. As the data collected by van Biezen and others (2012) shows, political parties across Europe have a drop in membership at a level never experienced before. As the authors conclude, we may observe either the end of mass political parties or, their –formerly close allies, traditional churches and trade unions, which are losing their broad-based connection to wider society. This also means that the world of collective organizations may no longer be capable of offering a refuge to parties (van Biezen et al., 2012, p.55).

Poland, as one of the Visegrad countries introduced the guidelines of so-called embedded neoliberalism as a default type of capitalism (Fink-Hafner, 2011; see also van Apeldoorm et al., 2008). The solution embedded the idea of a hegemonic articulation of the dominant neoliberal perspective, with remaining elements of neo-mercantilist discourse. As Apeldoorn explained "embedded neoliberalism is neo-liberal inasmuch as it emphasizes the primacy of global market forces and the freedom of transnational capital. Yet, as a result of such processes, markets become increasingly disconnected from their post-war national, social institutions. Embedded neoliberalism is thus "embedded" to the extent that it recognizes the limits of laisses-faire" (Apeldoorm 2003, p. 156).

In case of Poland, it meant the maintenance of a broader public sector presence on the supply side of the economy, while pursuing deep and often rigorous market-oriented reforms. The shock-therapy known also as the *Balcerowicz's Plan* included the transformation of the Polish economy into a market economy with an ownership structure changing in the direction of that found in the advanced industrial economies (Plehwe et. al., 2007). It consisted of 10 laws, which were passed by the Sejm and signed by president. The major goal of the Plan was to tackle hyperinflation and make Polish economy sustainable in a long run by reducing government spending, liberalizing of trade and privatizing state-owned companies.

Despite positive, long-term effects on the economy, Balcerowicz's reforms received a lot of criticism (Glasman, 1994; Kołodko 1992; Kowalik, 1994; Shields, 2012). As the urgent need for reforms was never questioned, critics rather questioned harshness and rapidity of the Plan. The reformers assumed that rapid reforms make citizens adapt faster than changes

introduced incrementally, as suggests by Balcerowicz himself (1995, pp.1-19). It should also not be forgotten that in 1990 Solidarity politicians enjoyed unequivocal support from society - had the severe reforms been introduced gradually, social unrest would have been more likely. Secondly, it was brought up that Balcerowicz and his partners (notably George Soros and Jeffrey Sachs) rejected any third-way between communism and neo-liberalism (Sachs, 1990, p.24).

The transformation clearly caused a division between *winners* and *losers* of economic transition. The ones who had the means to adapt quickly to rapidly changing reality obviously benefited from the transition towards democracy and capitalism. They feel strong today in the competition for better life-chances and may consider themselves 'winners' of the transition process. The growing number of private businesses opened after 1989, decline of employment in agriculture, inflow of transnational capital and, admittedly, a quick economic recovery, support this argument (Kramer, 1995). On the other hand, there were many people too dependent on redistributive practices of the state, ill-equipped to face painful challenges of free market economy.

Alongside clear cut *winners* and *losers* of the transformation, a third group emerged: blue collar workers organized in trade unions. Their situation resists simple characterization as they - theoretically - had the tools to oppose government's draconian cut in spending. Firstly, at that time, more than four million Poles were still trade union members (Solidarity trade union itself accounted for 1,6 million, post-communist OPZZ had 3 million members). Secondly, one could think that as Solidarity, and its predecessor, Worker's Defense Committee, were initially built up to stop repressions towards workers in state-owned companies, it would live up to these ideals after transformation.

The main source of power of the Polish trade unions in the early transposition process was a fact that their relationship with political parties resembled the political entanglement of the first years of democracy. Right-wing politicians were deeply associated with Solidarity - the major anticommunist political force, which roots had been a trade union movement from the 1980s. The peak of popularity came at the time of the first free presidential elections. As an outcome, Lech Wałęsa, the Solidarity leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, won the campaign.

The power of the movement was further built upon symbolic and historical associations. The wave of support was built upon the movement's image as a victor of the fight against communism and its collapse. At the same time, post-communists from SLD opted for OPZZ that emerged from the reformed official trade union structure of the Communist period. Secondly, at the beginning of the transformation, more than 50 percent of Poles worked in state-owned companies; in almost all of them there was a trade union branch, either Solidarity or OPZZ. It was thought to be an incentive for political parties to build or maintain close relationships with trade unions.

Empirical studies conducted by Gardawski and Żukowski (in 1991 and 1993) in 49 enterprises in Poland, surprisingly, show that Polish unionists at the beginning of transformation tended to support the shift to capitalism. However, managers interviewed, stereotypically, thought of trade unions as a major obstacle in reforming enterprises. Industrial relations in Poland very quickly moved then towards hierarchical authoritarian management. As Ost and Weinstein (1999) imply from their surveys among Polish trade unions, the reasons behind it are not only managers' decisions to strip away unions' influence, but trade unions'

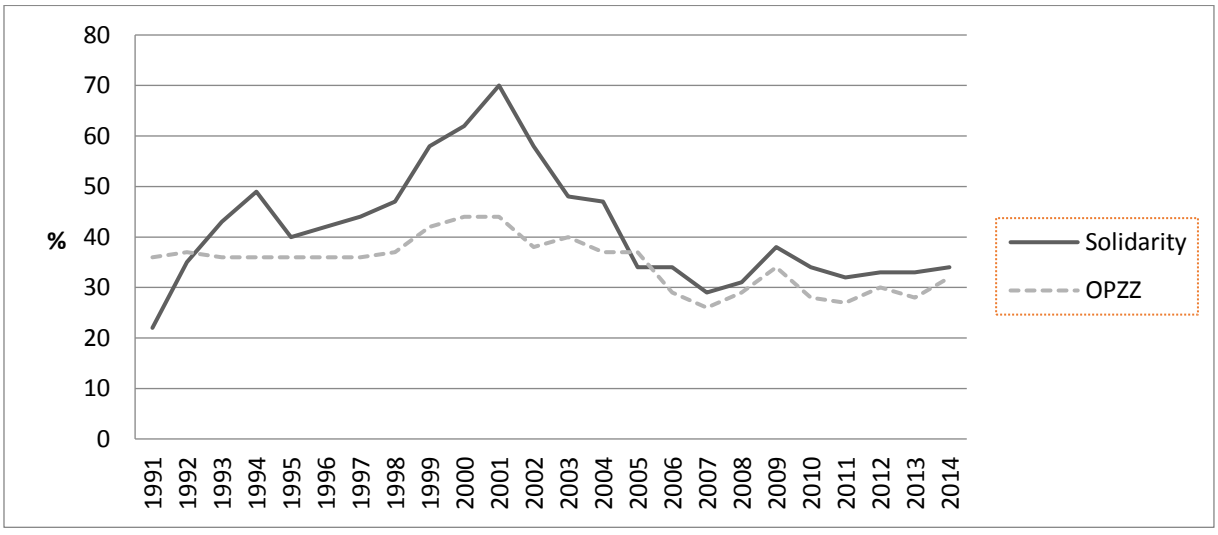
members attitudes towards decision-making in a free market economy. So not only did management seek the exclusion of workers, but workers supported the very policies undermining their potential interests.

The explanation of this odd behavior might be argued as follows. Firstly, after the collapse of communism, left-wing ideals were not popular. No one, and particularly not trade unionists, would like to be seen as propagandists of the recently defeated *ancient regime*. Secondly, due to the polarization between communism and anti-communism, many trade unionists, especially those affiliated with Solidarity, could have genuinely believed in neoliberal market reforms as capitalism appeared to be a winning side. Thirdly, from the very beginning of the democratic transition, the Solidarity union leadership was tightly connected with emerging political elites, who, on the other hand, were pressured by various international bodies. As an outcome, political parties supported neo-liberalization to be in line with the IMF and World Bank, who "vociferously urged on transition governments to restructure it the right way" (Shields, 2013, p. 85).

Distrust towards trade unions and diminishing political base

Another argument which can shed some light on a weakening link between political parties and trade unions over the years, is the level of distrust in trade unions. Firstly, we collected data from CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center) between 1991 and 2014 about the two biggest trade unions in Poland (see Figure 1). CBOS's polls are particularly handy as changes in trust or distrust in trade unions can be tracked almost to the very beginning of transformation. It can shed some light on the perception of unions currently and in the past.

Figure 1.
Levels of distrust towards trade unions in Poland



Source: author's calculations.

Solidarity entered the transformation period with relatively high trust levels. The downfall coincides with implementing the *Balcerowicz Plan*. By then, Solidarity (trade union) supported the government and distanced itself from broad and public discontent of workers led mainly by OPZZ, which expressed rather hostile attitudes towards Balcerowicz's "shock

therapy" (Dudek 2004, p.93). Dramatic deterioration of trust in Solidarity continued between 1997 and 2001. Again, it corresponds with direct involvement in politics as Solidarity (the union) created its own coalition of right-wing parties - Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS). AWS formed a coalition with the Freedom Union (UW). Both parties had their roots in the pre-1989 anticommunist movements, however, UW was also clearly neoliberal. In addition, the architect of economic transformation Leszek Bacerowicz became minister of finance and deputy-prime minister. Since then, Solidarity no longer focused just upon labor affairs. Solidarity leaders addressed society as a whole, often using populist, Catholic and anti-communist slogans (Ost, 2005). What might be potentially confusing for students of Polish politics is the fact that Solidarity trade union involved itself directly into politics by creating its own party, and endorsed the long-term trade union leader, Marian Krzaklewski, for a prime minister spot.

OPZZ, before transformation, was supposed to be a government-sponsored counterweight to Solidarity. After 1989, it became the major post-communist trade union. As Grzymała-Busse points out, while Solidarity began to bear the blame for the hardships and austerity that followed market reforms, OPZZ held on to its considerable material assets, was free to criticize the government, and presented itself as the real defender of labor (2002, p. 207). Even so, this advantageous position has never been reflected in public opinion data. Since the beginning of the transformation more people have tended to distrust OPZZ. On the other hand, it has never reached so much negative public opinion as Solidarity at its worst in 2001. In the 1990s OPZZ was closely tied to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR)'s successor – the Democratic Left Alliance, which resulted in an electoral coalition between 1991 and 1997.

Following post-communist cleavage (e.g. post-communists vs anti-communists; Grabowska, 2004), during 1990s there was a lot of hostility between Solidarity and OPZZ. The main arena of the conflict was the Socio-Economic Tripartite Commission, where trade unions almost automatically opposed reforms proposed by the "hostile" government. As Gardawski and Meardi (2010, p.76) pointed, when the government rejected these, Solidarity abandoned the Tripartite Commission, thereby preventing it from meeting in plenary sessions. After Solidarity's election victory in September 1997, the roles were promptly reversed. Solidarity and OPZZ were an integral part of the two opposing political sides, to the point that up to one fifth of all MPs were at the same time trade-union members (Gardawski and Meardi, 2010). In opinion of Ost (2001), the story of Solidarity summarizes the role of labor movements in Poland. He distinguishes within three periods: 1989-1992 when unions attempt to impose market reforms, 1992-93, an interlude of budding class militancy, and 1994-2001, the turn to direct political engagement. Table 1 presents computed results of support for a given political party among different trade union members available from the Polish General Election Study. We used every single wave from 1997 to 2011. The numbers confirm that unionists' support has been polarized, even though the old conflict between post-communist and anti-communists has faded since 2001. Solidarity members have tended to vote for right-wing parties. The only anomaly happened in 2001, when the majority of them voted for post-communists. It does not necessarily indicate a dramatic and long-term shift in unionists' party affiliation, but rather shows how big a failure the AWS government was.

Table 1 Level	2011	Others		-	-	-	14,29	0	28,57	28,57	-	-	0	Source:

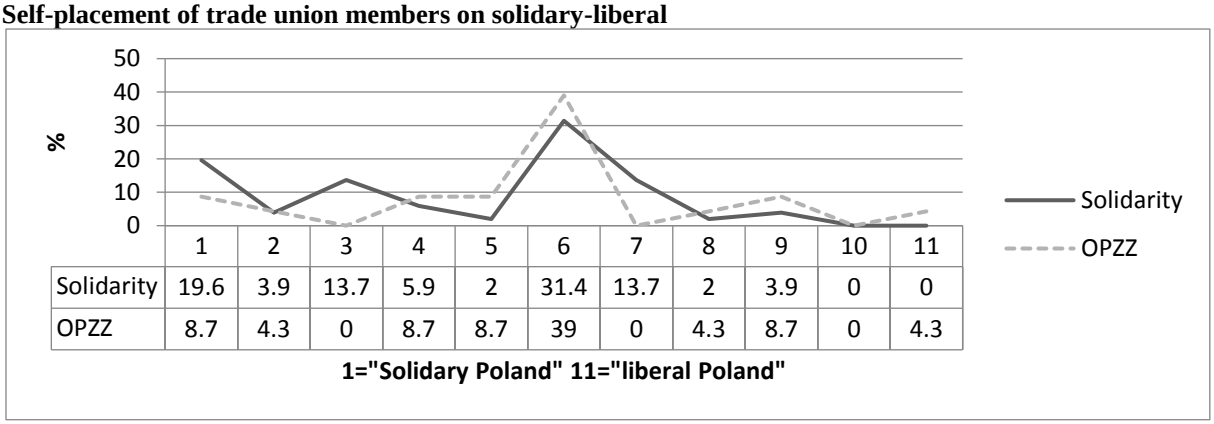
	1997			2001			2005			2007				
Parties	Solidarność	OPZZ	Others	Solidarność	OPZZ	Others	Solidarność	OPZZ	Others	Solidarność	OPZZ	Others	Solidarność	OPZZ
UP	2,53	4,35	5,13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
UW	12,66	8,7	11,54	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AWS	43,04	15,22	14,1	9,38	4,55	1,79	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SLD*	6,33	26,09	25,64	31,25	59,09	55,36	9,9	3,85	18	3,64	4,17	13,04	2,94	14,29
PSL	3,8	6,52	7,69	3,13	9,09	8,93	3,03	7,69	6	5,45	8,33	4,35	2,94	7,14
PiS	-	-	-	9,38	0	5,39	60,61	23,08	32	21,82	0	18,84	38,24	21,43
PO	-	-	-	15,63	9,09	12,5	9,09	38,46	22	36,36	45,83	43,48	38,24	42,86
LPR	-	-	-	21,88	13,64	5,36	3,03	0	8	1,82	0	1,45	-	-
Samoobrona	-	-	-	9,38	0	8,93	3,03	11,54	2	1,82	0	0	-	-
Ruch Palikota	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8,82	7,14

In 2001 we can observe first glimpses of new party system configuration - Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS) emerged on the ruins of AWS. Since then both parties have dominated the political system in Poland, and the support of unionists has gone along with it. Interestingly, though, more of them have supported the neoliberal centre-right Civil Platform, which has been in power with its coalition partner PSL (Peasants' Party) since 2008. High and relatively stable support either from Solidarity or OPZZ unionists for Civic Platform is puzzling. As Markowski (2007, p.826) argues, the PO's electorate is evidently richer, of better

professional and labor market standing, and lives in metropolitan areas. On the other hand, PiS is slightly poorer, occupies less prestigious labor market positions, and less frequently identifies as upper-middle or upper class. As empirical research on the Polish General Election Study conducted by Kotnarowski and Cześnik (2011) suggests, the division between PO-PiS corresponds with the diminishing of the traditional left-right dimension. As the authors conclude, it could be replaced by solidary-liberal one, which may become a genuine social and political split which will no longer divide the country along the left-right wing opposition axis.

Figure 2 presents self-placement of unionists on solidary-liberal scale. As we can see, even though more than 40 per cent of Solidarity members tend to choose "solidary" part, many see themselves right in the centre. It is even more evident in the case of OPZZ, where even more members have moderate views. We can argue that trade union members are not as homogeneous as they used to be in the 1990's. Despite worsening economic situation, years of implementing controversial, neoliberal policies, lots of organized labor would not place themselves on the extreme point of "solidary" axis.

Figure 2.
Self-placement of trade union members on solidary-liberal



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Solidarity	19.6	3.9	13.7	5.9	2	31.4	13.7	2	3.9	0	0
OPZZ	8.7	4.3	0	8.7	8.7	39	0	4.3	8.7	0	4.3

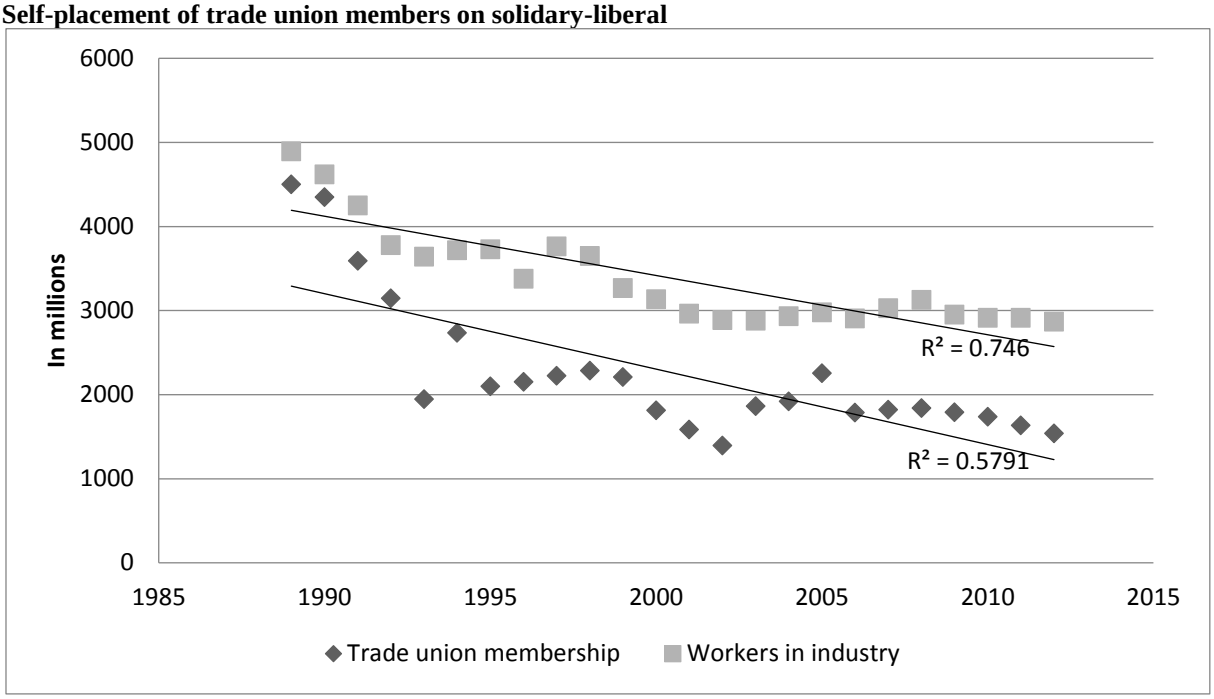
Source: PGSW 2011.

Some scholars (Guardiancich 2013, Gardawski and Meardi, 2010) suggest that since Civic Platform took over power in 2008, the relationship between trade unions and political parties has tended to normalize. For the first time since communism collapsed, the ruling party does not have official support from OPZZ or Solidarity, and in fact, both unions for the first time are on the same side. Gardawski and Meardi imply that it could lead to normalization of labor movement representation. This might be true, but Solidarity supported Law and Justice's candidates in the last three presidential campaigns. Nonetheless one should remember that it is nowhere near politicization of trade unions from the 1990s, when they become directly linked with political parties through open support of party candidates.

Figure 3 presents the membership rates and decreasing number of workers in industry in Poland over a span of 22 years. The picture is depressing. The number of unionists went down from 4 million of members in 1991 to 1.5 million in 2012. Despite the economic crisis of 2008, unions did not become the last resort of individual protection, which should potentially be attractive for new members, especially from private enterprises. The opposite happened, unemployment rates skyrocketed and membership continued to decline. At the same time, according to public polls, in times of crisis Poles judge trade unions only slightly better. What

is often overlooked in analyzing trade unions is policymakers' decisions to privatize or close large scale industrial enterprises during transformation era. It was in those companies that the activity of trade unions was centered, thus any market-oriented reforms would take their toll in trade union membership. It was definitely harder to organize in private companies with owners often hostile to trade unions. And as Ost (2009, p. 28) remarks, "unions were terribly weakened even in the old state-owned firms, for when privatization and restructuring came, these firms devolved into a host of spinoff firms, created as entirely new entities".

Figure 3.
Self-placement of trade union members on solidary-liberal



Source: author's calculations.

Conclusions

In our article we tried to answer the question why trade unions in Poland have not built stable relations of partnership with political parties like we observe in Western Europe democracies. The data collected by us does not give one, clear answer. There is no doubt trade unions failed to overcome shortcomings created by neoliberal policies imposed after 1989. Perhaps they were never meant to do so. Being a weak actor means that trade unions did not have strong enough independent position to bargain with political parties, oppose laws that were hostile to labor, have resources to expand their bases or counteract when public opinion towards them peaked down. At the same time, both unions (Solidarity and OPZZ) were engaged in a political conflict, for example, by obstructing the meetings of the Tripartite Commission when a hostile party was in power.

Perhaps, *the original sin* was Solidarity's success in fighting communism. It entered the transformation period in twofold way - as a trade union with large membership base and with high approval rates from public polls and as a right-wing political party, which often imposed policies quite to the contrary to the trade union's interests, not to mention supporting

the neoliberal Balcerowicz's Plan or gradual privatization and deindustrialization. Being in government between 1997 and 2001 resulted in almost 70 per cent of negative attitudes in CBOS' public opinion polls and major losses in membership. Solidarity never recovered from this decay. It is also particularly striking that society did not see trade unions more positively despite the economic crisis of 2008, which shows how strong resentments are towards them.

The data from PGSW also shows that Polish unionists rarely had identical views to the party they associated with. Solidarity members have been more inclined to vote for right-wing parties such as AWS or PiS, but in 2001 most of them supported SLD, and in last two elections one-third Civic Platform. The same goes for post-communist OPZZ. Usually steady support for SLD changed after 2001, when neoliberal Civic Platform has been gaining around 40 per cent. Ironically, thus, many members *of labor organizations vote for a party which has strong ties to Polish* employers′ organizations. Weak and politicized trade unions in times of introducing neoliberal reforms not only helped to create stable class politics in Poland, but also corresponded with the weak and unstable party system during 1990s. As Kubicek (2002) argues, trade unions were crucial forces for Western democracies, and we can argue that their fragile position in Poland reflects deficiencies of the Polish party system. Our concluding argument is thus twofold. Because of specifics of the structure of Polish economy, the Polish trade unions are weak, which weakens their role in the party system. Conversely, the way in which the Polish party system has developed is not hospitable to strong links between parties and trade unions. In Western democracies trade unions and their confederations have been able to maintain influence by having strong rates of coverage of collective bargaining arguments, even where membership has plummeted. Arguably coverage is more important than membership in determining influence. But – for all the evidence provided above – there has been no scope to expand collective bargaining to any significant extent in Poland.

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