

Political Shifts and Worker Representation: Trade Union Effectiveness in Interwar and Post-war Romania

ZSÓFIA PAPP¹

PhD Student, Deák Ferenc Doctoral School of Law, University of Miskolc; Junior Researcher, Central European Academy, Budapest
E-mail: zsofia.papp@centraleuropeanacademy.hu

ABSTRACT

Little has been written about the contribution of trade unions to the formation of modern Romanian society or about Romanian trade union history in general. Despite their potential as instruments of social peace and justice, the interaction between political regimes, labour rights, and trade union effectiveness in Romania has been understudied. By stripping the history of trade unions from the distortions imposed during the Soviet-type dictatorship and focusing on key strikes and labour movements in the Jiu Valley—Romania’s major coal basin and important labour centre during the interwar and post-war period—this study aims to examine Romanian political systems and historical conjunctures through the lens of trade union effectiveness. It investigates if trade unions fulfilled their intended role under different regimes and whether legal frameworks, such as provisions for freedom of association, were genuinely implemented or remained legal fictions. This perspective is insightful for understanding the marginalised role and diminished importance of trade unions today, illustrating how the legacy of fictitious workers’ representation has had long-lasting repercussions.

KEYWORDS

Trade unions in Romania, interwar period, Soviet-type dictatorship, legal framework, representation, strikes.

Schimbări politice și reprezentarea muncitorilor: eficiența sindicatelor în România interbelică și postbelică

REZUMAT

S-au scris puține lucruri despre contribuția sindicatelor la formarea societății moderne românești sau despre istoria sindicatelor din România în general. În ciuda potențialului lor de a servi drept instrumente ale păcii și justiției sociale, interacțiunea dintre regimurile politice, drepturile lucrătorilor și eficiența sindicatelor în România a rămas insuficient >>

1 ORCID iD: 0009-0008-0414-9036.

>> studiată. Analizând istoria sindicatelor dincolo de distorsiunile impuse în timpul dictaturii de tip sovietic și concentrându-se asupra grevelor și mișcărilor muncitorești din Valea Jiului – cel mai important bazin carbonifer al României și un centru esențial al muncii în perioada interbelică și postbelică – acest studiu își propune să examineze sistemele politice și conjuncturile istorice din România prin prisma eficienței sindicatelor. Se investighează în ce măsură sindicatele și-au îndeplinit rolul preconizat sub diferite regimuri și dacă legislația, incluzând prevederile privind libertatea de asociere, a fost implementată în mod autentic sau a rămas o simplă ficțiune juridică. Această abordare oferă o înțelegere profundă asupra rolului marginalizat și a importanței diminuate a sindicatelor în prezent, evidențind cum moștenirea reprezentării fictive a lucrătorilor a avut repercusiuni de lungă durată.

CUVINTE CHEIE

Sindicate în România, perioada interbelică, dictatură de tip sovietic, cadru legal, reprezentare, greve.

I. INTRODUCTION

Originally, trade unionism emerged as a mechanism to restore the balance disrupted by legal individualism, a facet of economic liberalism that favoured the accumulation of capital. By cultivating solidarity rooted in the similarity of needs and enabling collective negotiation, trade unions became instruments of social peace and justice. Despite this, little has been written about the contribution of trade unions to the formation of modern Romanian society or about Romanian trade union history in general. This gap can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, Romania was predominantly agrarian prior to the forced industrialisation and organisation policies of the Soviet-type totalitarian regime. As Lucian Boia notes in *Why Is Romania Different?*, the country's social structure consisted of a small urban population, an even smaller industrial workforce, and a vast majority of peasants, with over 80% of the population living in villages.² This lack of a massive urban working class influenced the development and role of trade unionism. Secondly, much of the literature on trade unions produced during the Soviet-type dictatorship primarily served as a tool for legitimising the regime, distorting their historical narrative. These are the circumstances under which the analysis of trade union history gains relevance and is brought into focus.

This research follows two primary tracks. The first focuses predominantly on the interwar period, while the second addresses the post-war era under the influence of the Soviet-type totalitarian regime. Furthermore, the study considers the establishment of potential cause-and-effect relationships between the historical periods examined and the effectiveness of trade unions today. The analysis of trade union history is approached from the perspective of effectiveness. How can the effectiveness of trade unions be assessed? The answer to this question shapes the areas of investigation.

The efficacy of trade unions can be measured through the relationship between their legal framework, the practical enforcement of legal norms, and the unions' ability to fulfil their intended roles. To structure this evaluation, the following groups of questions serve as a guide: 1. Where did trade union authority or empowerment stem from? Did it originate from the workers themselves, or was it imposed by the state?

2 Lucian Boia (2012): *De ce este România altfel?*, Humanitas, București, p. 64.

2. How challenging was the process of establishing trade unions? What obstacles did they face in terms of organisation? 3. What outcomes did trade unions achieve? Did they secure significant accomplishments such as collective labour contracts or the protection of certain rights? Based on these questions, the criteria for analysis include authority/empowerment, the establishment in practice and organisational strength, and the achievements of trade unions. Particular attention is devoted to collective agreements—“a central institution of collective labour law, whose existence or inexistence [and] the regulation of its conclusion and possible content [...] are of paramount importance for the enforcement of workers’ interests”³—as the right to conclude such agreements, and their practical implementation serves as a central thread weaving through the history of trade union during the periods examined.

II. ROMANIAN TRADE UNIONISM AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

1. Trade unions according to the law

The origins of Romania’s trade union movement date back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period that holds significance also from a legal perspective. This era marked the introduction of Romania’s first wave of industrial labour legislation. Though often partial and fragmented, these regulations played an important role in advancing the recognition of the right to association and organisation in the field of labour.

The 1866 Constitution already recognised the right to associate (Article 27) at a declarative level, entrusting lawmakers with defining the limits and conditions for its exercise. However, it was not until 55 years later that specific legislation detailing the content of this fundamental right in the context of labour law emerged. Before addressing this, it is worth highlighting the Resolution of the National Assembly in Alba Iulia (*Rezoluția Adunării Naționale de la Alba Iulia*). Adopted on the 1st of December 1918, this resolution proclaimed the unification of Transylvania, Banat, Crișana, and Maramureș with the Kingdom of Romania, finalising what is known as the Great Union (*Marea Unire*)⁴ and contributing to the establishment of Greater Romania (*România Mare*).⁵ Widely regarded

3 Magdolna Vallasek: A kollektív munkaszerveződés szabályozásának problémái Romániában, *Erdélyi Jogélet*, 4/2020, pp. 217–227, p. 218.

4 By the term Great Union, Romanian historiography refers to the unification of Romanian-inhabited territories with the Kingdom of Romania, beginning with Bessarabia, followed by Bukovina, and culminating with the unification of Transylvania, Banat, Crișana, and Maramureș with Romania.

5 The term Greater Romania refers to the borders of the Kingdom of Romania during the interwar period, established as a geopolitical reality after the First World War, as a consequence of the Great Union and its ratification by the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Treaty of Saint-Germain (1919), and the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Collectively, these treaties confirmed the territorial configuration of Greater Romania, encompassing Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia, and parts of Banat, Crișana, and Maramureș.

as one of the most significant moments in Romanian history and historiography, this date holds a central place in the nation's collective memory and is celebrated today as a national holiday. Among the provisions of the Resolution was a commitment to grant industrial workers the same rights and privileges as those enjoyed in the most advanced Western industrial states.⁶ However, this progressive provision was never enshrined in law. Of the resolution's measures, only its point I—the unification of Transylvania and Eastern Hungarian territories with Romania—was incorporated into Romanian legislation.⁷

Following the First World War and in the wake of the 1920 general strike,⁸ which led to the government's suspension of trade union activities, Romania adopted Act No. 41 of 26 May 1921⁹ on trade unions. This legislation, partly influenced by the establishment of the International Labour Organisation (ILO),¹⁰ of which Romania was a founding member, for the first time solidified the existence of professional unions (*sindicat profesional*) as a legislative reality in Romania.¹¹ Such a pioneering regulatory framework established the principle of trade union freedom (Article 2), allowing for the formation of unions for employers, employees, and self-employed professionals practising the same, similar, or related professions, without requiring prior authorisation. According to this act, the objectives of professional unions were “the study, defence, and development of professional interests, limited to those of an industrial, commercial, agricultural, technical, and cultural nature, without pursuing benefit sharing” (Article 1). It was the first Romanian legislation to grant unions that have been recognised as legal persons the right to conclude collective agreements (Article 32)¹²—while also establishing the

6 “III. În legătură cu aceasta, ca principii fundamentale la alcătuirea noului Stat Român, Adunarea Națională proclamă următoarele: [...] 6. Muncitorimei industriale i se asigură aceleași drepturi și avantajii, care sunt legiferate în cele mai avansate state industriale din Apus.” Rezoluțiunea Adunării Naționale de la Alba Iulia din 18 Noiembrie/1 Decembrie 1918.

7 Zoltán József Fazakas (2024): *A Vastörvény*, Forum Iuris, Kolozsvár, pp. 67–68.

8 The 1920 Romanian general strike, which took place from 20 to 28 October, was the largest proletarian uprising in the country up to that point, involving over 400,000 workers from various sectors. In response to intensified exploitation and deteriorating economic conditions following the First World War, among the demands of the workers participating was the recognition of trade unions.

9 Published in the *Official Gazette* no. 41, 20 December 1921.

10 The creation of the ILO in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles reflects the belief that universal peace can be achieved only if it is grounded in social justice. Promoting social justice and humane labour conditions—central to the ILO's founding mission, as outlined in the Preamble of its first Constitution—requires the protection of workers through labour standards and principles, including the recognition of the principle of freedom of association. The establishment of these founding principles by the ILO positively influenced the legislative focus on labour relations in Romania.

11 Alexandru Țiclea: Evoluția legislației muncii în spațiul românesc, *Dreptul*, 4/2021, pp. 50–71, p. 55.

12 However, it still lacked detailed provisions regarding the procedure, the essential content elements, and the representativeness of the social partners required to conclude such agreements. In contrast, the 1929 Act on labour contracts—published in the *Official Gazette* no. 74 on 5 April 1929—not only provided a definition of the collective agreement—describing it as a written accord concluded between employers, their representative groups, and workers' professional organisations or groups, containing provisions on working conditions and

employer's obligation to implement them—and to represent their members in court on matters related to their professional and collective interests. Many of these provisions set a precedent for subsequent legislation.¹³

The 1923 Constitution of Greater Romania (Article 29) and even the 1938 authoritarian Constitution (Article 26) of King Carol II—including a provision mandating the obligation to work—granted the right to association. However, with the enactment of the 1938 legislative decree on the recognition and functioning of corporations of workers (*bresle de lucrători*),¹⁴ particular servants (*funcționari particulari*), and craftsmen (*meseriași*)¹⁵—and the subsequent repeal of the 1921 trade union act—trade unions were replaced with corporations of workers—professional corporate bodies modelled after the corporatist political system of fascist Italy at the time—resulting in a severe restriction of the right to association. With this, King Carol II declared that he had accomplished the “royal revolution”.¹⁶ Article 40 of this act stipulated that only a single union per country could be recognised for each professional category or related professions. Contrary to the previous *status quo* of non-political trade unions, the organisation, functioning, and dissolution of guilds were placed under the authority of the Ministry of Labour. Furthermore, guilds could only be established, and syndicate leaders appointed, through royal decree.¹⁷ Thus, the monistic structure of syndicate life and the establishment of guilds became instruments for centralisation and control¹⁸ under the new dictatorial regime. Another legislative decree from November 1940 led to the abolition of these organisations. Subsequently, a series of regulations introduced a restrictive labour regime during wartime.¹⁹

2. Trade union effectiveness in practice

With the role and legal background of interwar trade unions outlined, attention now shifts to assessing their effectiveness. This section will follow the criteria outlined in the introductory part of the research, with one exception: the analysis of trade union authority or empowerment will be omitted, as examining the origins of interwar trade

remuneration—but also established detailed regulations governing the circumstances for concluding such contracts. Vallasek (2020): p. 219.

13 National Archives of Romania, Inventory no. 3406: *Uniunea Generală a Sindicatelor din România 1944–1989*, pp. 3–4. Available at: <https://arhivelenationale.ro/site/download/inventare/Uniunea-General-a-Sindicatelor-din-Romania.-1944-1989.-Inv.-3406.pdf> (accessed on 05.11.2024).

14 The Romanian word *breslă* translates as ‘guild’, showing that the legislator chose to revive this traditional term even though, in the legal context of the time, it referred to fascist-type corporation. For the sake of historical accuracy, this paper uses the term in this latter meaning.

15 Published in the *Official Gazette* no. 237, 12 October 1938.

16 Lavinia Betea, Cristina Diac, Florin-Răzvan Mihai, Ilarion Țiu (2012): *Viața lui Ceaușescu. Ucenicul Partidului*, Adevărul, București, p. 189.

17 Țiclea (2021): p. 61; Ștefănescu (2018): pp. 97–98.

18 The police were also closely monitoring the workers by infiltrating the celebrations, gatherings, and outdoor festivities organised by the guilds. Agents “eavesdropped on what was being discussed, sung, or chanted. In doing so, they were assessing the ‘mood’ of the proletariat.” Betea, Diac, Mihai, Țiu (2012): p. 195.

19 Țiclea (2021): p. 61.

union authority holds less significance given that legitimacy during this era was not state-imposed—except in the aforementioned case of guilds/corporations.

2.1. Establishment and organisational strength

The drive for economic modernisation pursued by successive governments between 1918 and 1938 created tensions between state policy, industrial workers, and the peasantry. Within this context, labour organisation—usually happening under the advocacy of the Social Democrats—manifested itself.²⁰ As previously seen, the legal framework also recognised trade unions. However, acknowledgement alone leaves open questions: did this recognition translate into genuine support or efforts to develop the trade union movement? Did it reflect a sincere intention to meet the demands of the working class?

The Central Leadership of the National Federation of Trade Unions describes the early interwar period as an intense struggle for the survival of unions, requiring enormous efforts merely to safeguard their existence. In one of its reports, it offered the following critique:

*although there is an act in Romania recognising the right of the working class to organise, workers were nevertheless frequently obstructed—often with extreme brutality—from organising and defending their rights and interests. From the lowest-ranking detective or gendarme to the highest administrative officials, efforts were made to hinder union organising and other union actions.*²¹

Sándor Szenkovics, a trade union member who witnessed the 1929 Jiu Valley strike, echoed this sentiment, observing, “[s]ome believe that trade unions should follow a policy of begging and submission.”²²

Employers dismissed thousands of workers for attempting to organise, but persecution and unlawful measures were not enough. The formalities imposed by Act No. 21 of 6 February 1924 concerning legal persons²³—applicable to trade unions, as it sought to unify the procedure for recognising the legal personality of all associations that did not pursue profit or patrimonial purposes²⁴—even after its amendment,²⁵ further restricted the freedom to organise.

20 Anca Glont: Reframing the Lupeni Strike of 1929: State Intervention and Organized Labor in Romania’s Jiu Valley, *Plural*, 1/2023, pp. 37–59, p. 39; A romániai szakszervezetek az 1921-22-ik évben, *Erdélyi Munkásnapló*, 1923, pp. 92–96, p. 95.

21 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): *A romániai szakszervezeti mozgalom 1926–1930. A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége központi vezetőségének jelentése 1926–1930 évekről és az 1931. jan. hó 4.–7. tartott szakszervezeti kongresszus jegyzőkönyve*, Gutenberg, Kolozsvár, p. 20.

22 Sándor Szenkovics: A szakszervezetek és a politika, *Szabad Szó*, 8 November 1944, no. 7, p. 1. The translations of originally non-English quotations belong to the author of the article unless stated otherwise.

23 Published in the *Official Gazette* no. 27, 6 February 1924.

24 Nicolae Ghiulia (1929): Chestiunea muncitorească în Ardeal și Banat, in *Transilvania, Banatul, Crișana și Maramureșul: 1918–1928*, Cvltvra Națională, București, pp. 707–738, pp. 713–714.

25 The modification was intended to facilitate the establishment and functioning of professional organisations. Ghiulia (1929): pp. 713–714.

2.2. Achievements

When it comes to the prevailing social realities, the newspaper *Maros*, under the title *What Trade Unions Do? – On the Activities of Trade Unions*, provides an overall picture of the role and achievements of trade unions:

[c]onsidering that industry in Romania is at a very rudimentary level, as Romania is not an industrial but an agrarian state, trade unions here have a much greater role and mission than in any other industrial or more industrialised country. The unions fought and continue to fight against the exploitation of labour and for improving the standard of living of workers. The goal of trade unions, therefore, is to serve the economic and cultural interests of their members, foster a sense of solidarity among them, and support all efforts aimed at improving working conditions. To achieve this, they enter into collective agreements that regulate working hours, wages, and working conditions. They intervene, make proposals, and, if necessary, protest to ensure that favourable acts for workers are passed in parliament. They ensure the observance of existing acts. [...] They offer legal protection to their members, establish libraries, publish professional journals, issue notices and pamphlets, organise scientific lectures, courses, balls, and celebrations, convene meetings, lead wage movements and strikes, and support workers imprisoned for their involvement in labour movements.²⁶

One should take a closer and clearer look at some of the achievements enumerated above. Between 1926 and 1930, “the lion’s share of the work of the National Trade Union Council was devoted to organising and rebuilding efforts”.²⁷ During this period, efforts were made to organise railway workers, tobacco and match factory employees, and a significant number of private officials. This era also saw the reorganisation of unions for workers in the clothing, leather, textile, and woodworking industries.²⁸ Additionally, the enactment of the 1929 Act on labour contracts,²⁹ along with the legislation created on women’s and children’s labour and the establishment of the eight-hour workday,³⁰ were key achievements of the trade union movement between 1926 and 1930.³¹ However, due to the lack of implementation instructions or records of which companies could be granted exemptions, the latter act was not properly applied.³² Article 44 granted the Council of Ministers the authority to suspend its provisions only in the event of war or other threats to national security. Despite this, and despite the protests from the workers’ representatives, the committee operating alongside the Ministry of Labour granted numerous exceptional permits for extending working hours, some of which contradicted legal provisions.³³ The fact that not even the Ministry of Labour took the act seriously was further evidenced by the absence of any data collected regarding the results achieved through its practical application.³⁴ As previously mentioned, the 1921 Trade Union Act granted the right to conclude

26 *Maros*, 16 November 1929, no. 262, p. 4.

27 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 4.

28 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 4.

29 Published in the *Official Gazette* no. 74, 5 April 1929.

30 Published in the *Official Gazette* no. 85, 13 April 1928.

31 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 4.

32 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 76.

33 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 5.

34 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 76.

collective agreements. From 1926 to 1929, a total of 374 collective agreements were signed.³⁵ However, according to the chief labour inspector of Bucharest, union delegates were merely tolerated individuals in negotiations of collective agreements.³⁶

All these aspects illustrate that the rights enshrined formally in law and practical reality were not aligned. The complete lack or ineffectiveness of enforcement instructions for these acts—stemming from the absence of comprehensive, detailed explanations—further widened the gap between the law and its implementation.³⁷ The labour protection legislation held merely promotional value. The Central Leadership of the National Federation of Trade Unions itself noted,

[o]ur acts were not created to advance the country's people on the path of progress; rather, the primary goal has always been to use these to obscure reality from foreign observers. More than once, the very legislators themselves were the first to trample upon their own acts.³⁸

3. A closer look: The 1929 Lupeni strike from a trade union perspective

Although examples of labour movements, particularly miners' strikes in Romania, can be traced back to the 19th century, this section will primarily focus on the 1929 Lupeni strike, a notable event in the Jiu Valley in the interwar period. Situated in southwestern Romania, between the Retezat and Parâng Mountains—both part of the Southern Carpathians—the Jiu Valley was home to miners renowned for their combative spirit. Research on European social history from the 19th to 20th centuries shows that workers in hazardous environments and demanding industries—such as mining, oil, and heavy industry—developed a robust sense of human and professional solidarity. This solidarity, combined with an increased ability for self-organisation, significantly enhanced their capacity to engage in protest movements and coordinate more effectively during such actions.³⁹ The following event illustrates how Romanian labour movements aligned with this pattern.

Driven by the Great Depression, social and economic problems in interwar Romania had escalated to the point of near insolvency. To tackle this issue, the state was forced to increase taxes while simultaneously cutting incomes and salaries. The so-induced deterioration of economic conditions fuelled the growth of the trade union movement, culminating in 313 strikes involving over 65,000 workers between 1926 and 1929.⁴⁰

By the end of 1929, the miners in Lupeni, too, had already staged numerous strikes.⁴¹ However, the 1929 strike—often referred to as the first demonstration of the “highly

35 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 46.

36 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 21.

37 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): pp. 76–79.

38 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 30.

39 Tismăneanu (2006): p. 344.

40 A Romániai Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (1932): p. 44.

41 Ghiță Ionescu (1994): *Comunismul în România*, Litera, București, p. 64.

developed workers' stratum consciousness" that characterised the Jiu Valley⁴²—was somewhat atypical. It did not (only) reflect the miners' anger over wages and living standards, as might have been expected. Instead of the local traditions of labour activism and solidarity, this strike revealed a reality of disunion among the workers.⁴³

Shifts in the market and coal production from 1925—particularly the mechanisation of coal extraction and processing—along with reduced purchases by the Romanian Railways in 1927, which had previously bought over two-thirds of production, diminished the need for skilled underground miners and led to widespread personnel dismissals.⁴⁴ The leadership of the Union of Mining Industry Workers in Romania (UMIMR)—whose legal authority stemmed from the Social Democratic Party—urged miners to aid each other financially and negotiated with the coal mine directors to reduce working hours for everyone rather than implement layoffs. In response, the state suppressed trade union activity.⁴⁵

In 1928, the National Peasants Party (PNȚ), backed by a broad base of popular support in that year's parliamentary elections, came to power. The installation of the new Maniu government, which promised democratisation and civil rights while advocating a platform of social justice, gave hope to the miners that the political climate would provide a fertile ground for negotiating a new collective contract between the Jiu coal miners and the coal companies. Discussions had already occurred as early as January 1929, and the contract was finalised in July the same year. However, the seemingly hostile PNȚ did not intervene in the negotiations, and the conditions proposed by the mining companies were disappointingly unsatisfactory.⁴⁶ The destabilisation and growing discontent ruling the Jiu Valley paved the way for the creation of a new, highly radical labour group—the Independent Union (*Sindicat Independent*)—at Lupeni. By this, the unified front of mining unions had been divided between Independent and UMIMR chapters.⁴⁷ Ongoing negotiations and heated debates among miners from different unions escalated into a refusal to work, accompanied by a campaign of violence and the shutdown of the power plant, trapping hundreds of miners below ground, with a limited supply of breathable air.⁴⁸ This unrest was brutally suppressed by the gendarmerie, who resorted to live fire, leaving behind a tragic toll of deaths and injuries.

Just as the communist affiliation of the Independent Union's membership remains uncertain, it is unclear whether the strike was led by and representative of Communist agitators. According to Ghiță Ionescu, the party's organisations in the most significant industrial areas were reportedly weak. Unprepared for mass action, the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) was unable to take the lead in the spontaneously triggered struggles at Lupeni.⁴⁹ The 1932 Congress of the party openly acknowledged that workers'

42 Adrian Mica: Discussion on the 1977 Jiu Valley Strike as Scandal in Romania, *Sfera Politicii*, 129–130/2008, pp. 31–42, p. 32.

43 Glont (2023): p. 40.

44 Glont (2023): pp. 45, 47.

45 Glont (2023): p. 47.

46 *Erdélyi Hírlap*, 9 August 1929, no. 3331, p. 5.

47 Glont (2023): p. 52.

48 Glont (2023): p. 53.

49 Ionescu (1994): p. 69.

actions had developed spontaneously, without Communist support or leadership. The Lupeni miners' demonstration was even described as a police provocation. Nevertheless, at the RCP's 30th anniversary, weaving the event into the party's mythology, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej⁵⁰ claimed that the Communist Party had been the one to call the proletarian masses to action and urge workers to organise a broad mass movement.⁵¹ Despite these ambiguities, it is clear that the strike was neither an exclusively Communist action⁵²—a significant number of Social Democratic and non-affiliated workers also participated—nor a manifestation of revolutionary communism.⁵³

What is more important to conclude is that the 1929 Lupeni action cannot be considered emblematic of labour organisation during the interwar period. It reflected the increasing internal divisions within the labour movement and the largely unmet expectations trade unions had of the government. Unions in the Jiu Valley operated in a context where both the political system and employers played dominant roles in shaping labour conditions and restricting workers' autonomy. With the coal industry in crisis, miners lost faith in the ruling government, which failed to fulfil promises and support the workers,⁵⁴ giving rise to labour militancy.

From the perspective of trade union effectiveness, the 1929 Lupeni strike highlighted both the strengths and limitations of the labour movement. On the one hand, it demonstrated the miners' capacity for collective action and the unions' potential to organise and advocate for workers. On the other hand, it also revealed the structural constraints unions faced, as they could not fundamentally alter the power dynamics between workers, employers, and the state. Instead, their role became more about mediating immediate grievances and less about challenging systemic inequalities. This dynamic also demonstrates how the state's pursuit of modernisation repeatedly suspended or undermined civil rights.⁵⁵

III. ROMANIAN TRADE UNIONISM IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD: REALITIES OF THE SOVIET-TYPE DICTATORSHIP

After examining the emergence of trade unionism at the end of the 19th century and its subsequent erosion and prohibition during the interwar period, it is now important to take a closer look at the legal framework and political regime that shaped and governed trade unionism during the historical conjuncture referred to as the "post-war" period.

50 Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was the leader of communist Romania between 1947 and his death in 1965.

51 Ionescu (1994): p. 70.

52 Zoltán Serfőző: A világgazdasági válság hatása Romániában. A romániai kommunista párt 1928–1931 között, *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József nominatae: Acta Historica*, 1987, pp. 19–34, p. 22.

53 Glont (2023): p. 56.

54 Glont (2023): p. 56.

55 Glont (2023): p. 59.

1. Context of the role of trade unions – Why were they so important?

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Romania remained an overwhelmingly agrarian country,⁵⁶ with its urban population (approximately 24%) being only one-third the size of its rural population (approximately 76%).⁵⁷ In this context—but also stemming from the forced adoption of Soviet ideology—it is hardly surprising that, following the Communist takeover, the newly installed regime, led by the Romanian Communist Party, prioritised the establishment of an industrial and urban working class. Ruling in the name of these workers and claiming to represent their interests became central to the regime's strategy for legitimising its authority.⁵⁸

To overcome the social consequences of the war and implement Soviet-style production techniques in labour relations, the regime adopted a so-called politics of productivity.⁵⁹ However, while the state created the *façade* of the existence of an urban working class, its forced industrialisation and urbanisation policies failed to improve living standards in the long run. Instead, conditions eroded: factory wages were insufficient to ensure a minimal standard of living, and widespread hardship—including food shortages and restrictions on gas and electricity consumption—replaced the utopia of a prosperous workers' society with their exploitation in the interest of the state.

Amid this life of economic deprivation, fear, and a profound disconnection from the proletarian ideology officially proclaimed by the RCP,⁶⁰ trade unions representing the industrial working class could have played a determining role. Their potential to act as the voice for workers, engaging in open dialogue and addressing these pressing concerns, was especially required in such circumstances. Why, then, was this role not realised?

1.1. Legal landscape

Beginning with the constitutional foundation of both trade unionism and labour law, it is evident that the right to association—including union association in most instances—in Romania is consistently recognised. This was reflected in the three Romanian constitutions of the Soviet-style totalitarian dictatorship: the 1948 (Article 32), 1952 (Article

56 Boia (2012): p. 64.

57 Romania's population in 1948 was approximately 15.87 million, of which 12.1 million lived in rural areas, while 3.7 million constituted the urban population. By 1966, the urban population had increased to 38% and by 1977 to 43% of the total, eventually surpassing the rural population with 54% in 1992. Institutul Național de Statistică: *Populația la recensămintele din anii 1948, 1956, 1966, 1977, 1992 și 2002 – județe și medii*. Available at: <https://insse.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/vol1/tabele/t01.pdf> (accessed on 21.01.2025).

58 Monica Ciobanu: Reconstructing the Role of the Working Class in Communist and Post-communist Romania, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 3/2009, pp. 315–335, p. 319.

59 Adrian Grama (2019): *Laboring Along: Industrial Workers and the Making of Postwar Romania*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–Boston, p. 11.

60 Ciobanu (2009): p. 316.

86), and 1965 (Article 27) constitutions.⁶¹ Grounded in the socialist principle, famously phrased as “he who does not work, neither shall he eat”—originally rooted in the New Testament,⁶² later adopted by Lenin—the obligation to work was also a permanent provision of the 1948, 1952, and 1965 constitutions.

On 21 January 1945, Act No. 52 on Professional Trade Unions⁶³ entered into force. Like its predecessor from 1921, this act—which remained in effect until August 1991—established that the primary objective of professional trade unions was the study, defence, and development of professional interests, with the prohibition of benefit-sharing remaining an essential condition. Article 17 of this act stipulates that the manner of establishment, organisation, and operation of the professional trade union is determined by the free will of its members through statutes, for all matters not otherwise regulated by the present law.

The 1950 Labour Code⁶⁴ bore all the hallmarks of the Soviet Union’s approach to labour legislation. Though incomplete, it regulated collective labour contracts.⁶⁵ Similarly, the 1972 Labour Code⁶⁶ also included provisions on collective labour agreements.⁶⁷ Regarding international legal sources, Romania ratified several key conventions of the ILO. These included The Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (No. 87) ratified in 1957, followed by the ratification of The Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (No. 98) in 1958. Article 4 of this Convention calls for measures to encourage and promote voluntary negotiation mechanisms between employers or their organisations and workers’ organisations, intending to regulate employment terms and conditions through collective agreements. However, the agreements of this era primarily aimed to fulfil the goals of centralised economic planning, with the improvement of working and living conditions for workers remaining a secondary goal. This clearly reflected the ideology of the ruling political regime.⁶⁸

Moreover, the right to strike was excluded—tacitly outlawed—from both codes on the rationale that workers, as collective owners of the means of production, were theoretically in control of these resources through the state. Thus, any hypothetical conflict between workers and management was considered an internal contradiction—a protest against themselves within a system that claimed to have abolished class divisions. The same logic extended to negotiations over wages or working conditions. In both

61 Ion Traian Ștefănescu: Momente esențiale ale reglementării raporturilor de muncă în secolul după Marea Unire. *Concluzii, Dreptul*, 12/2018, pp. 93–108, p. 105.

62 2 Thessalonians 3:10–13.

63 Published in the *Official Gazette* no. 17, 21 January 1945.

64 Introduced through Act No. 3/1950, published in the *Official Bulletin* no. 50, 8 June 1950.

65 Article 3 of the Code, in fact, defined the enterprise-level collective agreement as an agreement concluded between the Trade Union Committee in an enterprise or institution, as the representative of employees, workers, and civil servants on one side and the employers on the other. Magdolna Vallasek (2020): *Román munkajog. 2. Bővített és aktualizált kiadás*, Forum Iuris, Kolozsvár, p. 124.

66 Introduced through Act No. 10/1972, published in the *Official Bulletin* no. 140, 1 December 1972.

67 This code also addressed the regulation of the enterprise-level collective agreement, without introducing significant changes compared to the previous provisions. Vallasek (2020): p. 124.

68 Vallasek (2020): p. 124.

instances, the absence of explicit regulations was interpreted as a prohibition.⁶⁹ This reality-distorting approach did nothing but directly embed ideology into legislation, transforming the provisions of labour law—or the lack thereof—into arms of the principal employer, the true owner of all means of production, and the effective beneficiary of industrial labour: the state. By framing rebellion and dissent as illegitimate and contradictory, the state’s exclusivity in power was—at least in theory and by law—peacefully preserved and protected.

Examining this legal framework reveals that in most cases the law itself did not pose an explicit, fundamental barrier to the development of a union association. However, given the state’s control over the law, a purely textual legal analysis offers little insight into the practical realities of Romania under the Soviet-type dictatorship. Its characteristics are better and more deeply understood through factual analysis within a sociological framework.

1.2. Trade unions as “transmission belts”

In Soviet-type political systems—following a broader regional pattern—the re-emerged official trade unions operated under the Marxist–Leninist principle of “transmission belts”. Romanian trade unions were no exceptions in this regard. This suggestive concept defined their bidirectional function: through top-down transmissions, unions mobilised workers to contribute to labour production for the collective welfare of the society, while they were also meant to safeguard workers’ rights and interests through bottom-up mediation.⁷⁰ Trade union membership was mandatory,⁷¹ and the General Union of Romanian Trade Unions (UGSR – *Uniunea Generală a Sindicatelor din România*), a confederation encompassing all existing unions, was established in 1966, automatically incorporating all workers.⁷² Much like cooperatives, press organs, cultural-educational organisations, and youth unions, the UGSR functioned as a mass organisation⁷³ of the Soviet-style socio-economic system. However, did the concept of “transmission belts” align with how the industrial working class generally perceived the position and influence of trade unions? Not in the least.

2. Trade union effectiveness

When assessing post-war trade union effectiveness—which is both the next task after outlining the required role and legal background of post-war trade unions and the main focus of this article—the same questions regarding the establishment, authority/

69 Ștefănescu (2018): pp. 99–100.

70 Anita Chan: Revolution or Corporatism? Workers and Trade Unions in Post-Mao China, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 29/1993, pp. 31–61, p. 36.

71 In contrast to Article 2 of the 1945 Act on professional trade unions, which declared that no one shall be compelled to join, refrain from joining, or cease being a member of a professional trade union against their will.

72 Vladimir Tismăneanu et al./Comisia prezidențială pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din România (2006): *Raport final*, București, p. 155.

73 Tismăneanu (2006): p. 137.

empowerment, and accomplishments of trade unions from the interwar period should be revisited.

2.1. Authority/empowerment – Worker-driven or state-imposed?

Given the organisational autonomy and potential strength of trade unions, their subordination represented a persistent concern for Romania during the Soviet-type dictatorship that inherently sought to maintain a monopoly on power.⁷⁴ In practice, the Romanian state's top-down control often overshadowed any efforts by the trade unions—bound by predefined roles—to represent the subordinated interests of workers. Thus, instead of fulfilling the doctrine of workers' empowerment and promoting their autonomy, trade unions paradoxically co-opted them into a paternalistic system that deprived them of political power.⁷⁵ Unlike in democratic settings, the authority of trade unions did not originate from their members but was instead imposed through state control. Due to their primary loyalty to the Party, they could only play a diminished, if not entirely fictive, role as social actors, as the state consistently suppressed attempts at prioritising workers' advocacy. For example, despite being a highly trained communist, Tudor Anton, the President of the Labour Union at “23rd August”, formerly Malaxa Works, Bucharest's largest metal factory, was dismissed in the summer of 1951 for befriending workers. Confronted with the intensification of labour unrest, and instead of freeing himself of his class bindings and being accused of “vanity”, “Tudor was the ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ delegate of the locomotive section who [...] completely identified with their demands.”⁷⁶

According to a party report—retrieved from the National Archives of Romania by Adrian Grama—on the situation in the southern Transylvanian town of Mediaş, workers viewed trade unions as watchdogs for the state. For this reason, from a delegate's perspective, the “fear of the masses” often outweighed the allure of holding prestigious positions—such as those in the factory committees—within the trade union hierarchy.⁷⁷ However, in certain instances, such as the 1987 Braşov rebellion—sparked by widespread discontent with Ceauşescu's economic policies⁷⁸—it was the state itself that shifted responsibility to local officials and the factory management. This strategy aimed

74 Gheorghe Socol: *Sindicate și sindicaliști. O analiză sociologică a reconstrucției sindicalismului în România*, *Calitatea Vieții*, 1–4/2001, pp. 147–154, pp. 147–148.

75 Paul J. Kubicek (2004): *Organized Labour in Postcommunist States: From Solidarity to Infirmary*, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, p. 24.

76 Adrian Grama (2018): *Practices of Distance and Perceptions of Proximity: Trade-Union Delegates and Everyday Politics in Post-Second World War Romania*, in Muriel Blaive (ed.): *Perceptions of Society in Communist Europe. Regime Archives and Popular Opinion*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, p. 36.

77 Grama (2018): p. 38.

78 Following the death of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965, Nicolae Ceauşescu became the leader of the Romanian Communist Party, serving as General Secretary until 1989. He also held the position of President of the State Council from 1967 and in 1974 became Romania's first President of the Republic. His policies of forced industrialisation—and the debt repayment it necessitated—led to severe economic decline and widespread poverty during the 1980s, fueling dissent and culminating in the 1989 revolution, which brought an end to the Soviet-type dictatorship in Romania.

at obscuring and denying the political nature of the uprising.⁷⁹ At the same time, party delegates frequently acted as though the party itself were to blame for the prevailing economic hardship.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, union advocacy for workers' interests against the state or management was the exception rather than the rule.⁸¹

2.2. Establishment in practice and organisational strength

Before assessing the establishment of trade unions, it is worth first addressing the situation of workers' councils. The creation of workers' councils in 1971 could be considered innovative, not only compared to the Soviet-style labour relations but also because they were intended to empower workers by enabling self-management (*autoconducerea*) and participation in workplace governance at the enterprise level.⁸² Paul J. Kubicek argues in his book that the establishment of these councils can be seen as an implicit acknowledgement by the regime of the unions' ineffectiveness in representing workers.⁸³ This interpretation, however, calls for scrutiny. It is highly unlikely that the party would willingly abandon its rigid ideology and undermine the propaganda by admitting such a weakness in a regime built on and centred around the power of the ruling working class. To the exact contrary, their establishment just further strengthened the existing hierarchical structures that already characterised union operations. Kubicek himself states that council members were not elected but nominated by party or trade union leadership, and they were often part of the management.⁸⁴ The discourse centred on workers' rule bore no resemblance to the simulated power and autonomy infused into the meetings of workers' councils.

In 1979, an attempt was made to create a free trade union in Romania, with its declared purpose being the protection of human rights, particularly those arising from labour relations.⁸⁵ Despite receiving support from the workers⁸⁶—proving the existence of a substantial group of dissatisfied people, eager to be represented by an organisation independent of the communist regime—the Party and the Department of State Security

79 Ciobanu (2009): p. 327.

80 Grama (2018): p. 38.

81 David Mandel (2004): *Labour after Communism*, Black Rose Books, Montreal, pp. 5–6.

82 Ciobanu (2009): p. 320; Kubicek (2004): p. 24.

83 Kubicek (2004): p. 25.

84 Kubicek (2004): pp. 24–25.

85 Ana-Maria Cătănuș (2014): *Vocația libertății. Forme de disidență în România anilor 1970–1980*, Institutul National pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, p. 113.

86 Contrary to the communiqué of the SLOMR from 6 March 1979, which stated that 1,478 people joined the founding core of the SLOMR, the actual number of members could not realistically exceed a few hundred people, although it is difficult to estimate. Oana Ionel, Dragoș Marcu (2005): Vasile Paraschiv și „Securitatea lui”, in Vasile Paraschiv: *Lupta mea pentru sindicate libere în România: terorismul politic organizat de statul comunist*, Polirom, Iași–București, p. 368. The fact that SLOMR was not born out of a strike or a prolonged labour conflict meant that solidarity with this union was somewhat limited in both numbers and geographical spread. In any case, it is worth mentioning that after the radio announcement about the creation of the SLOMR, dozens of individuals expressed their desire to be part of the new structure, with some even sending letters of affiliation to the union to Radio Free Europe. Cătănuș (2014): p. 118.

(*Securitate*)⁸⁷ rapidly suppressed the initiative before it could evolve into a movement. As a result, though legally established,⁸⁸ the Free Trade Union of the Working People of Romania (*Sindicatul Liber al Oamenilor Muncii din România* – SLOMR) existed solely in a six-month-long formative phase, never advancing beyond that point.⁸⁹ The broadcast of its founding declaration by Radio Free Europe on 4 March 1979 was followed by the immediate imprisonment of its three leaders.⁹⁰ What became evident was a virtually paralysed civil society. All workers' organisations had to operate exclusively through party-approved channels.⁹¹ “[W]orkers who gave thought to non-party union organisation felt the heavy hand of Ceaușescu’s Securitate.”⁹² The regime systematically responded to any gesture of independence by silencing its initiators.⁹³ Those who dared to call for free trade unions faced ruthless persecution.⁹⁴

2.3. Achievements

As the point of reference for evaluating trade union accomplishments, the attention now shifts to collective agreements. While collective labour contracts were reintroduced, they prioritised output figures and productivity targets over collective bargaining, making these metrics the criteria for accessing benefits.⁹⁵ The overlapping of union leader and membership and Communist Party membership further emphasised the functioning of trade unions—adjuncts⁹⁶ to the RCP—as a relay for spreading the message coming from the party’s forums.⁹⁷ Thus, trade unions were not only deprived of the ability to express the real interests of those they represented but, on the contrary,

87 The Department of State Security (*Departamentul Securității Statului*), commonly known as the *Securitate*, was the secret police agency of the Socialist Republic of Romania and the primary instrument of repression of dissent. “Paradoxically—and not by coincidence—the term *securitate*, which typically conveys a sense of comfort and the absence of interference in private life, was used to name an institution that systematically restricted, and often nullified, human rights. This was done to enforce the demands of the party-state in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the construction of socialism.” Tismăneanu (2006): p. 172. For details, see Tismăneanu (2006): pp. 167–186.

88 The legality of the SLOMR was stated right in the preamble of its founding declaration, indicating that the union was established in accordance with Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, both ratified by Romania in 1974. Additionally, the union’s affiliation with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions was announced. Cătănuș (2014): p. 113.

89 Ciobanu (2009): p. 323.

90 Ionel, Marcu: (2005): pp. 367–371.

91 Kubicek (2004): p. 22.

92 Daniel N. Nelson (2019): *Romania after Tyranny*, Routledge, p. 7.

93 Ciobanu (2009): p. 321.

94 Tismăneanu (2006): p. 19.

95 Grama (2019): p. 12.

96 Victoria Stoiciu (2023): *Romania – Trade Union Monitor*, Friedrich Eber Stiftung, Bucharest, p. 2.

97 Socol (2001): p. 148.

they became a supplementary means of control of the party and state authorities over the employees.⁹⁸

The re-emergence of trade unionism and the promising—preferential—provisions of collective labour contracts instilled faith in the industrial working class regarding their rights; however, their hoped-for power could not materialise. As a result, the dynamics of party-making, even at the factory level, led to “a winter of inertia and resignation”⁹⁹ punctuated by “cyclical episodes of workers’ explosions and suppression”,¹⁰⁰ a pattern seen throughout Eastern European socialist states.

3. The 1977 Lupeni strike

Labour unrest during communism should not be classified as part of the structured, politically conscious, disciplined activism typically associated with legitimate leadership and trade unions in democratic settings. Instead, the absence of effective representation, driven by the indifference and powerlessness of the unions, usually led to protests marked by more or less spontaneous outbursts and sometimes localised violence, with workers resorting to direct action.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, this period can be divided into three major phases—1945–1958, 1958–1977, and 1977–1989—reflecting somewhat distinct characteristics of workers’ protests.¹⁰²

The strikes of the 1945–1958 period were mostly spontaneous, non-violent, small-scale, and defensive, typically provoked by harsh working conditions, increased labour quotas, or unpaid wages. These protests frequently arose in sectors with pre-communist labour traditions, such as the oil, mining, machinery, and steel industries. Testimonies suggest that at this stage workers still had some faith in communist leaders from labour backgrounds, and the divide between the people and the communist elite had not yet fully formed. Despite these efforts, the protests did not lead to any significant outcomes.¹⁰³

Following the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1958, a new era emerged, marked by forced industrialisation and “nationalising” the Soviet model. The accelerated pace of industrialisation required a larger workforce, leading to an influx of rural workers into the industrial sector. This social hybridisation eroded established traditions within workers’ social universe in and outside of the factory, weakening labour solidarity. A tacit acceptance developed between the working class and the communist regime, contributing to a lower incidence of protests. The protests that did occur were either small-scale, defensive actions or individual initiatives by courageous workers such as

98 Socol (2001): p. 148. Interestingly, in contrast to the extensive archives of the Communist Party, the records of Romanian trade unions after 1945 are either lost or nonexistent, making them virtually untraceable. However, in terms of content, the former cannot be regarded as a substitute or repository for the latter. Grama (2019): p. 22. This reality further reinforces the omnipotence of the party and state control.

99 Tony Judt (2005): *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, The Penguin, New York, pp. 170–171.

100 Chan (1993): p. 37.

101 Grama (2019): pp. 122–123.

102 Tismăneanu (2006): p. 345.

103 Tismăneanu (2006): pp. 345–346.

Vasile Paraschiv, who openly opposed the regime with his proposals for democratising workers' unions, addressed to the General Association of Romanian Trade Unions (UGSR).¹⁰⁴

On 4 March 1977, a powerful earthquake (7.2 on the Richter scale) struck Romania. Under its unexpected impact, the Romanian society reacted with solidarity in the face of death and destruction. However, this unity was soon followed by what writer Paul Goma referred to as “the earthquake of people”.¹⁰⁵ Later that year, the large-scale miners' strike in the Jiu Valley marked the end of the era of tacit acceptance of the communist regime by workers. Underlining the discrepancy between the goals proclaimed by the party and the reality of everyday life, this became the first significant labour movement under Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule¹⁰⁶ and posed a greater threat to the communist regime than any other form of protest in the 1970s.¹⁰⁷

Provoked by newly introduced legislation—Act No. 3 of 30 June 1977¹⁰⁸—bringing salary cuts and the prolongation of the age of retirement, the mature, non-violent, defensive strike began on the morning of 1 August at the Lupeni mine, with miners occupying their workplaces indefinitely. Bypassing the official trade union—which was not even aware of the salary cuts¹⁰⁹—the workers elected their own representative body.¹¹⁰ Their key demands included better wages, improved working conditions, a reduction in the retirement age, better healthcare, and an end to the increased work quotas. Ceaușescu himself was compelled to visit the miners and address their concerns personally. Faced with a group of 35,000 miners,¹¹¹ he ultimately agreed to all their demands, including the assurance that no one would be punished for participating in the strike. This convinced the miners to return to work the same day. The majority of the miners' demands were indeed satisfied for a short period.

The existence of strong miners' movement traditions in the area fostered a unique sense of cohesion among the miners. This solidarity, combined with the dangerous nature of their work, enabled miners to organise and execute a large-scale protest, often referred to as the best-conducted workers' protest in Romania during the Soviet-type dictatorial regime.¹¹² Nevertheless, the communist authorities did not use direct force to suppress the strike; they gradually took measures to prevent future solidarity among the miners, such as forced relocations, demotions, arrests, interrogations, trials,

104 Tismăneanu (2006): pp. 346–347. For further insight into the story of Vasile Paraschiv, whose struggle with Securitate lasted for more than two decades, see Ciobanu (2009): p. 321.

105 Florin Constantiniu (1997): O istorie sinceră a poporului român. Capitolul “Vraja se destramă”, in Barbu Mihai, Alexandru Bogdan, Gheorghe Chirvasă (eds.): *După 20 de ani sau Lupeni '77-'97*, Matinal & Cameleonul, Petroșani, p. 120.

106 Cătălin Docea (1997): Lupeni '77, in Barbu Mihai, Alexandru Bogdan, Gheorghe Chirvasă (eds.): *După 20 de ani sau Lupeni '77-'97*, Matinal & Cameleonul, Petroșani, p. 78; Cătănuș (2014): p. 18.

107 Ciobanu (2009): p. 322.

108 Published in the *Official Bulletin* no. 82, 6 August 1977.

109 Mica (2008): p. 35.

110 *Chicago és Környéke*, 31 December 1977, no. 53, p. 1.

111 Mica (2008): p. 33.

112 Cristina Petrescu, Dragos Petrescu (2007): Resistance and Dissent under Communism: The Case of Romania. *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*, 2/2007, pp. 323–346, p. 332.

and convictions. In some cases, even physical liquidation occurred.¹¹³ Ten years later, in November 1987, the protesters of the Braşov strike faced similarly harsh treatment and an even grimmer fate.¹¹⁴

IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Using factors such as authority or empowerment, establishment, and accomplishments of trade unions as key points of reference, alongside an examination of the legal framework and social realities, this paper aimed to assess the effectiveness of trade unions in Romania during the interwar and post-war periods.

Regarding the legal framework, recognition of the right to association and the right to conclude collective agreements—despite interruptions—was a defining feature of trade union history during the examined periods. The protection of these rights, through legal milestones such as the 1921 trade union law and the 1929 law on labour contracts, shaped the collective labour law of the interwar period, a time when labour law institutions were undergoing significant development. The first fault line in this continuity emerged during the dictatorship of King Carol II when the 1921 trade union law was repealed and trade unions were replaced by corporatist guilds. Within this framework, authority shifted to the Ministry of Labour, and the establishment of unions became dependent on royal decrees. The restriction of trade union freedom was further intensified by the prohibitive wartime labour regime. After the Second World War, Romanian labour law was shaped in the spirit of Soviet-type labour regulation, subordinating unions to the state. Alongside this, their original goal—to improve the working and living conditions for workers—became overshadowed by the need to fulfil the objectives of centralised economic planning.

When it comes to the authority/empowerment of post-war trade unions—criteria interpreted solely in the context of guilds in the analysis of the interwar period—the following excerpt from a 1977 newspaper encapsulates the functional formalism that defined trade unions in the Soviet-type dictatorship, emphasising their supervision by and subordination to the Communist Party:

*[Workers], unlike their Western counterparts, lack effective representation. [A]s in other communist regimes, the “official trade unions” are aligned with the government, representing its interests rather than those of the workers.*¹¹⁵

Reduced to mere puppets of the regime, these unions, bound by predefined roles, were stripped of genuine power or authority, straying far from their original mission

113 Tismăneanu (2006): pp. 347–350.

114 For a detailed account of the Braşov workers’ anticommunist uprising of 1987—a precursor to the December 1989 revolution—and the fate of its initiator, Iosif Farcas, see Ciobanu (2009): pp. 316–317, pp. 325–326.

115 *Chicago és Környéke*, 31 December 1977, no. 53, p. 1.

of promoting workers' rights and welfare. Their bottom-up empowerment and role in representing workers became illusory,¹¹⁶ leaving them incapable of addressing social and economic grievances.

When considering establishment in practice and organisational strength—the second criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of trade unions—interwar trade unions, although legally recognised, struggled to gain the genuine support necessary to meet the demands of workers. On the contrary, efforts to hinder union organising through dismissal, persecution, or other unlawful measures were widespread.

Post-war trade union establishment was not legally obstructed either, as evidenced by the creation of the SLOMR free trade union in accordance with the law. However, all workers' organisations were required to operate exclusively through party-approved channels. The regime systematically responded to any gesture of independence by silencing its initiators. As for the organisational strength of trade unions under the Soviet-type dictatorship, the rhetoric of workers' rule bore little resemblance to the simulated power infused into these organisations. Labour movements faced continued resistance and suppression, with the affirmation of certain rights being merely declarative and in stark contrast to reality. Framing rebellion and dissent as contradictory and legally prohibited was nothing but the reality-distorting reflection of ideology in the law. Despite facing resistance and suppression, the Jiu Valley protests demonstrated the miners' solidarity and ability to self-organise. In the early years after the fall of the totalitarian regime, they once again became the "protagonists"¹¹⁷ of the so-called *mineriade* (*mineriade*), during which armed miners from the Jiu Valley brutally suppressed opposition movements challenging the new government in Bucharest. These unique Romanian phenomena illustrate how the organisational power exhibited by miners, when mobilised and supplied at the request of the government, could transform into a dangerous and militant force—potentially shaping the trajectory of Romania's fledgling democracy.

In terms of achievements—the third criterion in evaluating the effectiveness of trade unions—there were notable accomplishments in the interwar period. The collective enforcement of rights through labour struggles during this time significantly shaped the development of the entire labour law framework. Trade unions played an indisputable role in the enactment of the 1929 Act on labour contracts, as well as in legislation addressing women's and children's labour and the establishment of the eight-hour workday. These provisions set precedents for subsequent legislation. However, the rights acquired by unions and enshrined in law did not fully align with practical reality. Labour protection legislation often held merely promotional value, while trade unions had to endure a series of abuses of authority in a country where substantive and effective social policy could not be discussed.

Although post-war trade union movements demonstrated the solidarity of workers, unlike the strikes that contributed to the democratisation of the working class in

116 Socol (2001): p. 148.

117 Mica (2008): p. 32.

Poland¹¹⁸—despite facing similar repression by the Polish Communist Party—no labour movement in Romania achieved significant results. This can be attributed, on the one hand, to the agrarian nature of the society and the top-down enforced industrialisation, which lacked organic, bottom-up development. On the other hand, other social groups, particularly intellectuals, remained detached from the events, choosing not to express solidarity with the workers.¹¹⁹ As a result, the labour movement remained numerically weak. Workers lost their confidence in the similarly weak unions, which demonstrated their inability to influence policies. Ultimately, when considering long-term consequences, the absence of strong collective worker representation in Romania today—characterised by dramatically low trade union density and collective agreement coverage—can, to some extent, be traced back to forty-five years of fictitious syndicalism.

118 For details, see: Alain Touraine, François Dubet, Michel Wieviorka, Jan Strzelecki (1983): *Solidarity. The Analysis of a Social Movement. Poland 1980–1981*, Cambridge University, Cambridge.

119 Cătănuș (2014): p. 18.