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SOCIAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN TRANSITION AND THE GREAT RECESSION

Abstract. *It is claimed that corporatism is a model best suited to good economic times, while many believe that it is most needed in hard economic times. This difference of opinion has opened a debate as to the ideal conditions for corporatism to flourish. The analysis shows that corporatism in Slovenia is predominantly a model for use in good economic times, although only a combination of conditions can explain corporatist arrangements. According to the data, corporatism can be use by a government to legitimise the system rather than as an arena for conflict solution and class compromise. Nevertheless, the lesson from the case of Slovenia demonstrates the durability and adaptability of corporatism.*

Keywords: *corporatism, social dialogue, transition, recession, Slovenia*

Introduction

There have been many debates on corporatism and neo-corporatism and its various forms since the 1930s and 1940s from whence, according to Katzenstein (1985), the historical origin of democratic corporatism can be traced. Corporatism has had its ups and downs. In his seminal work of 1974, Schmitter asked whether the twentieth century was still the century of corporatism. While the answer seemed to be a definite 'yes', scepticism re-emerged in the final decades to be followed by more interest and confidence in the survival of the model (Blom-Hansen, 2001; Molina and Rhodes, 2002). However, as Bull (1992) and Rommetvedt et al. (2012) argue, corporatism today is in many ways different from the corporatism of the previous decades in that the stable arrangements between interest groups and governments have been at least partially replaced by more *ad hoc* arrangements (Rozbicka and Spohr, 2016) and, at least recently, in its decline in those countries formerly known for their extensive corporatist arrangements (Rommetvedt et al., 2012).

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A partial explanation for this development is, on the one hand, that corporatism is only a 'fair weather' model in that it is much easier to agree and distribute gains among partners in good times when the economy is growing, even if consensus is more urgent in hard times (Gobeyn, 1993; Molina and Rhodes, 2002). On the other hand, it is empirically proven that social partners, especially in continental Western Europe as the primary domain of corporatism, also sustain corporatist arrangements in hard economic times (Hassel, 2009; Avdagic et al., 2011), although these arrangements have had to adapt. This debate has raised the question as to what the right conditions are for the development of corporatism. This debate is even more relevant in the former transition countries given the many changes their societies and economies have endured during the Great Recession.

To further this debate, we analyse the developments in Slovenia. Contrary to other post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Slovenia has opted for economic gradualism and several scholars (for example, Lukšič, 2003; Bohle and Greskovits, 2007; Avdagic et al., 2011; Crowley and Stanojević, 2011; Feldmann, 2006; 2014; Guardiancich, 2012a; Johannsen and Krašovec, 2015) have described it as the only post-socialist European country in which corporatist arrangements and social partnerships have been institutionalised with social pacts concluded systematically and almost continuously from the mid-1990s until the global economic and financial crisis in 2008–2009. As some (e.g. Guardiancich, 2012a; Feldmann, 2014) believe, it was precisely these arrangements which assured Slovenia its exceptional transition to a market economy. However, tripartite arrangements were put on hold during the Great Recession. Conditions for corporatism may have been more favourable in Slovenia than in many other post-socialist European countries but the social pacts have only lately been resumed following a six-year break with tradition, which suggests that corporatism may be a 'fair weather' model.

Given the challenges and changes, and the variation in the use of tripartite arrangements, an analysis of the development in Slovenia not only provides thought for discussion on the future prospects of corporatism in Slovenia, but Slovenia also constitutes a paradigmatic case as to how corporatism adapts. We find that there is no stable set of conditions necessary for corporatism and that corporatism today functions more to legitimise the system than as an arena for class compromise and conflict resolution.

The article is organised in three parts. The first is a review of discussions on corporatism where we pose recent research against traditional views on the conditions of corporatism. In the second part, we present data on selected conditions of corporatism in Slovenia. We close by discussing our main findings as well as the future prospects of corporatism in Slovenia.

Conditions for corporatism: old and new perspectives

There are many strands concerning the concept and understanding of corporatism, for example the questions of whether corporatism is a structure of interest representation or a system of policymaking which involves different actors (see in Molina and Rhodes, 2002), or is a set of institutions governing the political economy rather than a blueprint for strategic behaviour by those involved (Woldendorp and Delsen, 2008). Nevertheless, it appears that corporatism can simply be described as an encompassing concept of the political and economic system in which a triad of organised interests or relevant socio-economic associations (namely trade unions, employer organisations and the state) reach consensus on socio-economic policies (Pryor, 1988: 317; Woldendorp, 1997: 49–50). In this regard, corporatism serves as a mechanism to balance the responsibility and responsiveness of political and social actors.

The outcome of a social dialogue is visible in social pacts, which are publicly announced formal documents that explicitly identify agreed policies, issues and goals, the means to achieve them and the agreed tasks as well as the responsibilities of each social partner (Avdagic, 2011: 25–26).

Corporatism and social dialogue (or social partnership) was primarily restricted to continental Western Europe, but with the fall of socialism it also appeared for a short time at the beginning of the transition process in post-socialist Europe (Ost, 2000; Feldmann, 2014). In Fink-Hafner's (2011) comparison of seven European post-socialist countries, only Slovenia had established strong social partnerships. Hassel (2009: 22) notes that according to the classic Western criteria, corporatism in these countries has shown clear deficits, but the contribution of corporatism to the transformation process is more significant than usually recognised. However, the consensualism of corporatism pursued in Slovenia is in contrast to the course of radical economic liberalisation followed by most countries in post-socialist Europe (Bohle and Greskovits, 2007).

Recently, corporatist arrangements have appeared in some unlikely places, in countries without the organisational and institutional conditions underlying the more traditional form of corporatism, typical of the Keynesian-era (Avdagic et al., 2011: 6). This has opened two sorts of discussions: one on the conditions for corporatist arrangements to flourish (Avdagic et al., 2011); and the other on the adaptation of traditional corporatism and its structures (Rozbicka and Spohr, 2016), rather than their abandonment (Molina and Rhodes, 2002: 309).

Schmitter (1974) identifies some of the conditions for the development of corporatism. He notes that each organisation (social partner) participating in the corporatist arrangement needs a monopoly on representation

within its respective categories, meaning that it should also be organised into a limited number of organisations (or a single organisation), with a high level of membership and encompassment. All these features enable social partners to communicate *at large* to the members and to assure the implementation of the agreed policies. This ability makes them an attractive and reliable partner. Namely, in return for the inclusion of trade unions and employer organisations, politicians not only receive information and valuable insights but more importantly gain the support of strong partners for policies. Siaroff (1999) includes the tradition of consensual politics and the importance, or dominance, of a social-democratic party as further conditions for the development of corporatism.

As Katzenstein (1985) demonstrates, from the 1970s onwards, corporatism could also explain how small open economies survived and thrived democratically, although Katzenstein stressed (1985: 198) that democratic corporatism was not an institutional solution to the problems of economic change, but rather a political mechanism for coping with change.

During the recession, the 'economic problem load' explanation of establishing corporatist arrangements gained important momentum. However, Hassel (2009) and Avdagic (2011) find little support for the argument that social pacts result only from the economic context. Based on cross-European analysis, Avdagic (2011) finds that it is a combination of conditions, ranging from organisational to institutional, political and economic. In particular, Avdagic (2011: 35) stresses that a combination of economic problem overload, unemployment and budget deficits combined with weak minority governments and intermediate trade union centralisation has the greatest explanatory power of the most recent wave of corporatist arrangements. Hassel (2009: 12) stresses two conditions that make corporatist arrangements work: government dependence on trade union cooperation determined by the macro-economic context, and union capacity to cooperate, which is largely influenced by organisational and institutional factors. The debate on the necessary and sufficient conditions for corporatism has been lively, but no condition sufficiently explains the arrangements; neither does it appear to be the case that a specific set of combination would explain the presence of corporatist arrangements. Therefore, we need to consider the contextual factors as well. So we turn to the development of social pacts in Slovenia.

The conditions for corporatist arrangements in Slovenia

In the following section we present the characteristics of the most frequently identified conditions for corporatist arrangements and their dynamic with the aim of determining which conditions successfully explain

corporatist arrangements, whether corporatism is a 'fair-weather model', and what prospects corporatist arrangements may have in the future. Given that corporatism in Slovenia guaranteed a balance between the responsibility and responsiveness of political and social actors for more than two decades and, following its demise, democracy in Slovenia distinctly deteriorated, questions regarding the re-emergence of corporatism are important for the further development of democracy in Slovenia.

The first social pact was signed in Slovenia in 1994. It was a short document, containing only an agreement on income policy and an agreement to establish the Economic and Social Council (ESS) as the institutionalised cooperation mechanism between the three social partners. The 1994 agreement set a precedent and the institutional vehicle for the social pacts to be adopted in 1995 and 1996.

From this limited beginning the two social pacts in 2003 and 2007 respectively were broadened in scope to cover almost all relevant economic and social policies. As Stanojević and Krašovec (2011) and Johannsen and Krašovec (2015) note, some areas are more important and carry more weight; however, all governments and employers' associations have been particularly concerned with wage and price stability policy. Wage and price policy have remained the core topics, conforming to the more general European pattern, as established by Visser and Rhodes (2011: 68–69).

However, when the 2007 pact expired in 2009 it took six years to agree a new one, which is a shorter document agreed on by several partners, but again addressing wage and price policy.

The tradition of corporatism, consensual politics and collectivism

Slovenia has a long tradition of different types of corporatism, from the policies of the Catholic Church in the 1920s (Zver, 1992) to the Yugoslavian corporatism of the 1970s, forming a web of socio-political, professional and interest organisations that evolved into self-management communities (Lukšič, 1992; 2003).

Alongside the establishment of an independent Slovenia and political pluralism, by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s many of the early political parties were formed along corporatist lines and promoted the functional interests of specific groups (Lukšič, 1992: 52). This development, combined with the distrust of political parties, produced a system with an undeniably corporatist character, with the peak corporatist institutions being the National Council – the upper house of the Slovenian parliament – composed of indirectly elected representatives of local and functional interests and the Economic and Social Council (ESC). However, as the National Council has only limited formal powers, real economic and

political influence rests with the Economic and Social Council (Crowley and Stanojević, 2011; Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011; Guardiancich, 2012a; Feldmann, 2014).

Several scholars (Mrak et al., 2004; Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011; Guardiancich, 2012a; Feldmann, 2014) agree that Slovenia's exceptional transition to the market economy was precisely steered through social pacts and although newer debates have criticised corporatist arrangements for favouring entrenched interests and blocking reforms which created the seeds of the later renewed crisis (Adam and Tomšič, 2012; Guardiancich, 2016), the socially-oriented and consensus-based transformation resulted in one of the most egalitarian societies in the EU (Guardiancich, 2012a), especially compared to other post-socialist countries.

Given the research on cultural patterns, the inclination towards collectivism and the principles of social partnership is unsurprising. This research demonstrates that on the one hand Slovenes are individualist, putting their personal well-being first, while on the other hand assert collective decision making to avoid personal responsibility and delegate responsibility to the collective (Tomšič and Adam, 2009: 101). Slovenes hold the collective – the state rather than the individual – responsible on a number of issues, ranging from assuring employment, adequate pensions, unemployment benefits, industrial development and lowering income differences (Toš ed., 1999; 2004; 2009; 2012; Toš and skupina, 2013). Given that traditionally over half of all Slovenes (and lately even more than 60 percent) regard conflicts between corporate managers and workers as severe or very severe (Toš and skupina, 2013), social partnership could either overcome severe conflicts between the two groups, or a deadlock in the partnership would develop.

Trade unions and employers' organisations

For more than a decade following Slovenia's transition, trade unions and employers' organisations were strong. Trade union density ranged from 65 percent in 1991 to 40 percent in 2003 (Broder, 2016). Membership of the Chamber of Commerce, the most important employer organisation, was obligatory until 2006; and membership of the Chamber of Craft and Small Business, the second largest employer organisation, was obligatory until as recently as 2013. The organisational conditions for corporatism were good.

Additionally, although several trade unions and employers' organisations were already formed in the first half of the 1990s, only limited conflicts emerged between the same types of organisations. In the early years, trade unions mirrored the political divisions of the time; there was a sharp division between the old but transformed trade unions and the new anti-communist trade unions with each of them associated with political parties. By

the mid-1990s, this division gradually disappeared. Trust in unions grew and reached its highest level in 1996, all of which contributed to more powerful trade unions (Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011; Broder, 2016). Yet, following the turn of the century, union density fell to under 30 percent along with a decline in trust in unions. The Great Recession represents an especially hard time for trade unions. In 2009 the lowest level of trust in unions was recorded; and levels of trust have not since recovered. Union density has also subsequently fallen further, hovering at just over 20 percent (Broder, 2016). Wildfire strikes are further evidence of the loss of legitimacy during the financial and economic crisis. Additionally, Hassel (2009) asserts that in many Central-Eastern European post-socialist countries the insignificance of trade unions began with their insignificance in the private sector, or as Ost (2000: 521) notes, just as the former socialist economies became private, the private sector became union free. In Slovenia, workers in private sector now represent just over one third of the unionised workforce (Broder, 2016). Given this trend, we can expect unions to become even less influential in the future.

In a parallel process, the largest employers' organisations also witnessed a radical decline in membership, shrinking from universal coverage to about 50 percent of employers in 2010 (Stanojević and Klarič, 2013) and continuing to fall once membership was no longer obligatory.

According to the traditional view of corporatism, these organisational developments have ramifications for the claim that corporatism represents the interests of employers and employees in the political system, and undermines the possibility of corporatist arrangements. Both employers and trade unions have attempted to compete more actively for members, which in turn has led to radicalisation, leaving less room for bargaining and consensus (Stanojević, 2012). This was evident when the Chamber of Commerce failed to sign the 2015 social pact and other employers' organisations decided to withdraw from the pact after several months of its validation when the amendments on the Law on Minimal Wage could not be agreed upon by all partners. This demonstrated that the conditions for corporatism have changed significantly.

Governments

Slovenia is typically governed by majority coalitions that have either been ideologically mixed or homogenous (Zajc, 2009; Krašovec and Cabada, 2013). The first type of coalition occurred in the period from 1992 to 2004. Since the 2004 elections, governmental coalitions have been more ideologically homogenous, and tend to alternate between similar ideological coalitions (centre-left or centre-right). The cleavage structure of the Slovenian party system resembles widely-known patterns (Fink-Hafner,

2012). However, for the first decade, the cleavage on economic issues in the party system was less profound because the gradual economic transition was locked into the social pact and because the electorate clearly expected the welfare state to be preserved (Bernik and Malnar, 2005). These strong expectations led all parliamentary parties to advocate similar social-democratic and socioeconomic policies for more than a decade (Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011; Fink-Hafner, 2012). The economic left-right cleavage in Slovenia only intensified with the 2004 elections, mainly because the electoral winner (SDS) had become more liberal in economic terms. By contrast, the libertarian-versus-traditional cleavage has been salient all the time.

Of almost 20 governments, only one, Janša's first government in the period 2004–2008 survived the entire four-year legislative term with its initial party composition. This pattern of parties slowly departing governmental coalitions due to internal disputes and/or defection means that governments have gradually evolved into minority coalitions as their legislative terms came to an end (Krašovec and Cabada, 2013), leaving weak and vulnerable governments in need of support through corporatist arrangements.

Economic problem load

From Table 1, it is evident that social pacts have been concluded against a background of growth, manageable inflation and declining unemployment; by contrast, it is more difficult to interpret the significance of the budget deficit and public debt. Thus, social pacts are not signed during the hardest economic times, such as the Transformation Recession of 1990–1993 and the Great Recession of 2008–2014.

The first social pact was signed at a time when data indicates a relatively stable economy and political sphere. The economic (see Table 1) and politic turbulent period, as witnessed by the constant reshuffle of ministers and sharp inter-party competition (see Fink-Hafner et al., 2002) in the beginning of transformation, lacked a social pact. However, as Stanojević and Krašovec (2011: 236) note, the Law on Privatisation, adopted in 1992, which strongly protected internal elites and workers, almost immediately decreased tensions and conflicts between trade unions, employer organisations and the government, as witnessed also by the rapid decline in strikes. The privatisation compromise suggests that this law represented a major inter-class compromise and significant political exchange usually observed in corporatist arrangements (Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011).

After 1996, a short break in successfully negotiated social pacts followed. Nevertheless, during the period 1997–2002, the Pension Reform and the Labour Law Reform were a form of substitute for a social pact (Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011).

Table 1: ECONOMIC DATA IN THE 1990–2015 PERIOD

	Growth in GDP	Average annual inflation rate	Average annual rate of unemployment	Public debt (as a percentage of GDP)	Budget deficit (as a percentage of GDP)
1990	-7.5	104.5	4.7	–	–
1991	-8.9	247.6	8.2	–	–
1992	-5.5	88.2	11.5	–	–
1993	2.8	22.9	15.5	–	–
1994	5.3	18.3	14.4	–	–
1995	4.1	8.6	13.9	18.3	-8.2
1996	3.5	8.8	13.9	21.6	-1.1
1997	5.1	9.4	14.4	22.1	-2.3
1998	3.3	9.4	14.5	22.8	-2.3
1999	5.3	8.0	13.6	23.7	-3.0
2000	4.2	8.9	12.2	25.9	-3.6
2001	2.9	7.0	11.6	26.1	-3.9
2002	3.8	7.2	11.6	27.3	-2.4
2003	2.8	4.6	11.2	26.7	- 2.6
2004	4.4	3.2	10.6	26.8	-2.0
2005	4.0	2.3	10.2	26.3	-1.3
2006	5.7	2.8	9.4	26.0	-1.2
2007	6.9	5.6	7.7	22.8	-0.1
2008	3.3	2.1	6.7	21.8	-1.4
2009	-7.8	1.8	9.1	34.6	-5.9
2010	1.2	1.8	10.7	38.4	-5.6
2011	0.6	1.9	11.8	46.6	-6.7
2012	-2.7	2.0	12.0	53.9	-4.1
2013	-1.1	0.7	13.1	71.0	-15.0
2014	3.1	0.2	13.1	80.9	-5.0
2015	2.3	-0.5	12.3	83.1	-2.7

Source: Statistical Office of Slovenia (2016); Rugelj (2016).
Grey indicates a year in which a social pact was signed.

When the global crisis hit Slovenia in 2009, the centre-left government wanted to guarantee social protection with several measures such as subsidies for shorter working hours, raising the minimum wage and increasing social transfers. However, the government also needed to rush through deep structural reforms. These reforms were supposed to increase labour market flexibility and reduce the structural deficit, such as by increasing the retirement age. Thus, the government was on autopilot and tried to repeat the previous exchange pattern within the ESC where the social guarantees could be traded off against structural reforms. However, negotiations failed and the social pact was not signed until 2015. Still, several political

and economic exchanges between Slovenian governments and social partners have been made since 2008. These have included a watered-down version of the 2011 pension reform adopted in 2012, austerity measures in the Public Finance Balance Act, which were negotiated following the first clash between the government and trade unions. Nevertheless, these are short-term anti-crisis measures at best (Guardiancich, 2012b; Lukić, 2014; Feldmann, 2016) and not structural reforms as they were importantly watered-down during the negotiation. Considering the budget deficit had for years continuously fallen below the level set by the European Monetary Union as acceptable, and considering the extreme pressure on Slovenia from international organisations, in particular the IMF, OECD, and the European Commission (Guardiancich, 2012b) to consolidate public finances, it is hardly surprising that privatisation and public sector reforms were on the agenda for the 2015–2016 pact.

Although social pacts have not been signed during times of economic difficulty, it is, however, clear that the social partners managed to negotiate partial agreements under severe economic stress.

International context

In times of globalisation and the predominance of neo-liberalism, one can expect corporatist arrangements to be neither possible nor 'desirable' (Ost, 2000: 506). However, Avdagic et al. (2011) finds that the process of establishing the European Monetary Union (EMU) drove a more recent wave of social pacts. In line with Katzenstein's (1985) observation that corporatism is a political mechanism for coping with change, social pacts in Europe in the 1990s reflected the needs of many countries to bring inflation and deficits down to the level imposed by the EMU convergence criteria (Avdagic, 2011). In addition, Hassel (2009) notes that supranational institutions, like the European Commission or ILO, support social partnership.

This debate is familiar in Slovenia. The need to reduce inflation (see Table 1) in order to meet the Maastricht criteria for Euro adoption was an important reason for the successful conclusion of some social pacts (Stanojević, 2012). With EU and Eurozone membership, and in circumstances of protracted economic recession with a growing budget deficit and public debt, the room for possible political manoeuvre between social partners and consensus-seeking solutions has narrowed significantly. In an international context where international financial institutions 'demand' austerity policies to reduce budget deficits and public debt, social partnership is more difficult to attain because these policies are resisted by the trade unions and the general public, while governments are often pushed to seek quick fixes, leaving little time for patient negotiations with partners. As Gobeyn (1993)

observes, businesses no longer view corporatist arrangements as beneficial to the global capitalist system.

In this context, the social pact of 2015 was agreed not only due to the policy of the government, but also upon the recommendation of the European Commission (Rugelj, 2016: 136) in order to reduce tensions between social partners and increase the legitimacy of the policies. Given the pressure from outside, it is understandable why the 2015 pact was less successful with respect to conflict solving.

Main findings and future prospects of corporatism

Generally speaking, the most important conditions of corporatism are present in Slovenia. As is evident from Table 2, where the conditions are brought together collectivist values in conjunction with weak and vulnerable governmental coalitions are the most important conditions for the future of corporatism or social partnership. On the downside, there has been deterioration in the organisational conditions, suggesting that the relative strength of the negotiating partner is changing. Thus there is neither a monocausal explanation nor does a stable combination of conditions explain the social dialogue.

Table 2: THE CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL PACTS IN SLOVENIA

	1994	1995	1996	2003–2005	2007–2009	2015–2016
Tradition and collectivist values	√	√	√	√	√	√
Huge economic problem load	–	–	–	–	–	–
Strong trade unions	√	√	√	√	-	–
Strong employers' organisations	√	√	√	√	-	–
Weak governments/ elections approaching	√	√	√	√	√	–
International context	–	–	–	√	–	√

Finally, it is evident from Table 2 that corporatism is predominantly a 'fair weather model' while economic hardship leads partners, in the tradition of consensual politics, to negotiate surrogates to corporatism. Given that all social pacts emerged when governments were weak due either to major internal conflicts (the pact in 1994), minority status (the pact in 1996), or because the government was in the final year of its four year mandate (the pacts in 1995, 2003 and 2007), governments appear to employ social pacts to legitimise the capacity of their policies with an eye to forthcoming

elections (Stanojević and Krašovec, 2011). Only the last social pact of 2015 was signed by a strong governmental coalition at the beginning of its legislative term. However, as an indicator of its low conflict-solving capacity, the Chamber of Commerce did not sign it and other employers' organisations withdraw from the agreement a few months afterwards.

We can say that developments in Slovenia on one hand support Ost's earlier findings (2000: 508), that, given the context of weaker and more radical trade unions and employers' organisations, corporatist institutions in Central-East European post-socialist countries '... are used more as a legitimisation of a system instead of an arena for conflict solutions and class compromises'. This does not imply that corporatism is illusory. The Slovenian example represents a rekindling of the long tradition of collectivist and corporatist politics. It demonstrates persistence in the face of early challenges and negative attitude toward corporatism of a centre-right government (2004–2008). But it also demonstrates adaptability given that the classical pillars of corporatism – trade unions and employers' associations – are in decline and radicalised, in that weak governments in conjunction with intense foreign pressure turned to a tripartite arrangement to negotiate and legitimise policies. Thus, despite the weakness of social organisation, the turmoil of the political system, with increasing volatility and fragmented political parties, corporatism might take centre stage once more as an anchor of stability.

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