

STRUGGLING TO BE HEARD: THE PAST AND PRESENT OF EMPLOYEE VOICE IN BELARUS

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a highly under-research question of employee voice in Belarus using labour process theory, specifically, Ramsay's (1977) cycles of control theory to assess the evolution of voice at transitional periphery. Using the sample of 10 industrial enterprises, the paper explores the degree of management control over formal voice and the role of trade unions in defending of independent voice at the collective level. Informal voice at the individual level is also analysed. The findings demonstrate that the degree of direct control over formal voice in Belarus exceeds that in the Soviet Union due to suppression of independent trade union voice. The loss of workers' control over the labour process has led to decreasing informal voice at the individual level. However, the earlier argument on workers' patience is not supported due to a growing number of organised workers protests.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter analyses employee voice in Belarus, one of the economies of the post-Soviet 'transitional periphery' (Wood and Demirbag, 2015). Research on employee voice and worker representation in Belarus has been scarce due to its political sensitivity to the government of 'the last dictatorship in Europe' (Marples, 2005; Wilson, 2011; Babaev, 2013). Shedding light on these hushed up areas of labour relations helps understanding the social agreement in the country. This, in turn, allows to pinpoint the reasons for workers' passivity in the face of constantly worsening working and economic conditions and increasing repression of any forms of industrial democracy not in one single country, but across

the whole transitional periphery where Soviet ideological legacies still affect institutional and social development.

The devolution of employee voice in the former Soviet economies is largely determined by a strong history of repression, starting from a direct oppression of worker representation in the Russian Empire, to an implicit, but equally powerful, restraint of employee voice in the Soviet Union, and a *de jure* freedom but a *de facto* suppression of industrial democracy by the majority of post-Soviet political regimes.

Soviet Union was initially created with the ‘workers’ state’ ideology in mind (Kliuchko, 2007). This implied incorporating employee voice into the decision making mechanism through worker-elected trade union representation at both the enterprise and the national level. However, the ideology of bureaucratic pluralism that dominated Soviet industrial relations only allowed the voice to be expressed through state-approved unions, fully integrated in the Party and government structures (Godson, 1981). The claim usually resulted in bonus stripping and/or demotion rather than protection of one’s rights, creating the culture of employee silence and facilitating widespread corruption among enterprise management.

The situation improved during the second half of the 1980s when the relaxation of political regime in the Soviet Union created new institutional opportunities for the expression of formal employee voice. However, within the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, weak democratic traditions in most newly independent countries were suppressed by authoritarian regimes (Cameron and Ornstein, 2011; Silitski, 2010a, 2010b) and the Soviet-style model of industrial relations with trade unions as governmental institutional structures, rather than independent political force, was established.

Belarus represents an excellent example of such ‘reversed transition’ (Karbaevich, 2001; Westover, 2013; Babaev, 2013). Having been classified as a consolidated authoritarian regime by the Freedom House since 2003, with the average democracy score of 6.64¹ over 13 years of observations, Belarus is characterised by high levels of institutional corruption, a near total absence of independent media, repressed civil society, powerless local and national democratic governance and the absence of independent judiciary (for detailed references see e.g., Nations in Transit, 2004, 2015). Theoretically, the expression of employee voice through institutional channels is permitted by the country’s Constitution. The re-

ality, however, demonstrates a different picture. Officially recognised trade unions represented by the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions are the legacy of the Soviet Union. They remain a 'transmission belt', representing the interests of the management and the state rather than the workforce. The democratic unions, independent from the state, which have emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, exist on a semi-legal basis, and as such lack both financial and organising capacity to fully represent the Belarusian labour force.

The weakness of formal representative institutions makes one wonder whether employee voice is even possible under such conditions, by what means it is realised, and to what degree the workers are prepared to accept their current role at the workplace. The issue is further complicated by the scant research available. Employee voice has never been investigated in-depth in academic studies on Belarus. Most previous research on the Belarussian workforce is represented by macro-level overviews (see e.g., Gaiduk et al., 2005, 2006; Sokolova, 2011, 2012; Vankevich et al., 2008; Vankevich, 2010; Van Klaveren et al., 2010). Recent research undertaken at the enterprise level (see e.g., Danilovich, Croucher and Makovskaya, 2015; Danilovich and Croucher, 2015) has focused more on human resource management-related issues and only briefly explored employee voice with respect to management decision-making.

The chapter addresses a severely under-researched problem of employee voice in Belarus by analysing first-hand information obtained from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with individual workers, HR managers, and representatives of democratic trade unions. The current occurrence of employee voice is viewed as a direct result of power imbalances within industrial relations. Although trade union movement at transitional periphery was largely suppressed by the newly emerged authoritarian regimes and became the part of political elites, small 'democratic' unions remain in some countries, including Belarus, creating certain opportunities for an independent workers' voice. In a number of countries, large-scale protests were organised by workers both with and without trade union involvement (see e.g., Yessenova, 2007; Ziegler, 2010; Salmon, 2011; Dudarev, 2013; Petrov and Gafarly, 2013; Marat, 2014 on Central Asia; Shalamberidze, 2012 on Georgia).

The concepts of conflict, control and consent, as defined by the labour process theory (e.g., Ramsay, 1977; Friedman, 1977; Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979),

are used to explain the changes in employment relations in Belarus in the last two decades. Using these concepts allowed us to estimate the actual spread of prevailing state ideology in the area of employment relations. It also helped to categorise the changes in attitudes towards voice within the available data and thus identify the dynamics of employee voice at Belarusian workplaces.

Although the chapter is mostly devoted to the assessment of formal voice at the collective level, informal voice at the individual level is also examined. The role of trade unions in negotiating formal and informal voice at both levels is discussed.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins with the research questions being derived from the HRM approach on voice, specifically the labour process perspective. Then the research framework, methods and techniques used in the research are explained. Next, the findings from the empirical study of formal and informal voice in Belarusian enterprises are presented. The discussion of similarities and differences of employee voice in Belarus, the rest of the post-Soviet region, and other developing economies, concludes the chapter.

THEORY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There is a consensus in the literature that post-Soviet transition has taken a dramatic turn away from the path it was initially expected to follow (e.g., Burawoy, 2002; Gel'man, 2003; Nutu, 2007; Shkaratan, 2007; Bogaards, 2009; Kubichek, 2010; Spechler and Spechler, 2010; Beichelt, 2012; Connoly, 2013; Wood and Demirbag, 2015). The main consequences of growing political authoritarianism at post-Soviet space are the resurrection of the Soviet bureaucratic pluralist ideology of employment relations, a ubiquitous suppression of independent labour movement and a tighter grip on workers' rights, including the right to voice. Labour-related issues have become increasingly politicised and once again a closed subject for research.

The development of employee voice at the post-Soviet space fits well within the Ramsay's (1977) cycle of control theory. Declining workers' interest in participation, loss of mobilising capacity by the unions, an overwhelming manageri-

al control and employee silence are all typical characteristics of the downward phase of a Ramsay's cycle.

The starting phase of each Ramsay's cycle at the territory of the modern transitional periphery was characterised by a dramatic rise in conflict at the enterprise and national levels. The first cycle started in the second half of the 19th century and reached its peak before the First World War, when individual informal agreements between workers and capitalist employers were largely substituted by formal voice mechanisms. Two types of trade unions formed during that period: independent pro-socialist trade unions and the so-called 'yellow' trade unions formed by 'worker aristocracy' and directed by factory management. Independent formal employee voice was at its highest during the first Russian Revolution of 1905-1907 when Russian economy was in turmoil. At that time, independent trade unions and non-union worker groups were able to obtain numerous concessions from capitalist employers and temporarily improve pay and working conditions for workers. Subsequent pre-war economic growth and repressive government policies turned the situation around: independent unions became *de facto* semi-legal organisations (Spiridovich, 2015). These developments correspond to Ramsay's observations on employee voice in Western European economies at the time thus confirming the uniformity of the capitalist labour relations across the world.

The socialist revolution of the 1917 did not revive the employee voice despite the claims of establishing the 'workers state'. By the end of the 1920s an independent employee voice at the collective level was destroyed. It was substituted by the directed voice, with the unions as the part of the Party hierarchy, entrusted with maintaining employee silence through extensive social control in exchange for welfare provision, 'linking a worker's personal well-being to that of the state' (Ruble, 1979: 235). Weak worker representation left no avenues for an independent formal voice at the collective level (Filtzer, 1994:190). Soviet trade unions "did not perform the main function of trade unions in the accepted sense of the word – defence of the rights, the standard of living and the working conditions of the workers" (Godson, 1981:106). Instead, they acted as a part of the government regulatory mechanism ensuring the fulfilment Party orders at the enterprise level. Participation in setting basic wages, salaries, monetary premium, and pensions was beyond their authority. Workers did not have the freedom to choose a trade union or whether to be or

not to be members at all; instead they were automatically allocated to a specific trade union according to the 'production principle' (one unit for one industry). The unions controlled approximately 95 per cent of all paid employees (except for young workers who did not yet have a permanent position). (Heldman, 1977:29)

Formal voice systems were designed by the state and tailored to the needs of individual enterprises by senior management who had full control over production process, workers' wages and working conditions. Any attempts to revolt against the system were brutally suppressed (e.g., Holubenko, 1975). At the same time, informality prevailed at the individual level, with some workers, particularly highly-skilled technical specialists and experienced high-*ryazryad*² workers, capable of negotiating much better pay and conditions than the rest of the workforce.

Insufficient avenues for formal voice in labour relations at Soviet enterprises led to the dominance of informal voice. Its effectiveness at individual level was determined a high degree of mutual dependency between the employees and the management in the situation when workers had almost total control over the labour process but no control over working conditions. Informality affected not only wages and benefits but also occupational and career mobility of workers. Promotions and better training and development opportunities were often offered not to the best but to the most 'useful' and biddable employees. The combination of tight bureaucratic control and informal voice practices allowed the state to successfully subdivide the workforce into the privileged 'worker aristocracy' and the proletarianised majority, strengthening management's control over the workforce.

Informality also dominated the relationships between enterprises, the Party and the state. Supposedly being fully subordinate to the state, enterprise directors could actually negotiate a significant autonomy on a range of issues. At the same time, both enterprises and the State/Party organs were accountable to the additional system of control from non-party organisations such as the People's Control Committee (*Komitet narodnogo kontrolya* or KNK), the legal organs (KGB, State Prosecution Office, the police), internal party commissions, internal ministerial inspections, Ministry of Finance, the National Bank and smaller sectoral banks, the media and other non-state organisations such as trade unions. The re-

sult was a very peculiar regulatory system with three functionally overlapping and mutually dependent layers of control over economy.

The gradual collapse of Soviet Union during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s made employees realise the real strength of their bargaining power. First independent trade unions (and employer associations) were established. However, their rise was short-lived as they were quickly suppressed by newly emerging authoritarian regimes that re-created them as the part of state institutional structures. Independent scholarly research conducted on worker participation during the 1980s- first half of the 1990s was stopped and employee voice at the post-Soviet space once again became a *terra incognita*.

Ashwin (1998) noted that limited independent collective organisation of Russian workers in the 1990s has resulted, at best, in spontaneous and unorganised protests. The majority of the workforce, however, exhibited a striking patience and pursued individual survival strategies using informal routes (pleading to managers or using their connections outside of the enterprise to influence their superiors). Ashwin explained workers' behaviour by the weakness of post-Soviet trade unions and the strength of the inherited Soviet paternalist traditions. Her arguments were later supported by Crowley (2004) and Vinogradova, Kozina and Cook (2012) who attributed the fall in union coverage and a considerable decline in collective bargaining to unfavourable market conditions, union fragmentation and powerful institutional, cultural and ideological legacies from the Soviet past. Both studies, however, noticed a temporary growth of worker resistance and increased concessions from management during crises, as well as the fall in organised protests when economic situation improved thus providing additional support to the Ramsay's cycles of control theory.

One needs to admit that the impact of Soviet legacies on institutional structures and organisational culture varies greatly across the post-Soviet space. While limited in Russia and Ukraine (e.g., Havrylyshyn, 2006; Pleines, 2012; Ljubownikow, Crotty and Rodgers, 2013), it is much stronger in the economies of the transitional periphery where reforms were either restrained or reversed (e.g., Morrison, Croucher and Cretu, 2012; Pomfret, 2012; Varda, 2014; Danilovich, Croucher and Makovskaya, 2015). Thus a path-dependence argument cannot fully account for persistently declining levels of employee voice in the region.

Alternative explanation for workers patience may lay in the national and the enterprise-level personnel management practices. Although Labour Codes of post-Soviet economies legally declare workers' right to participate in the management of an enterprise, directly or via elected representatives³, these opportunities are rarely fully utilized. Recent research on workers participation in the enterprise management in Russia (Kliuchko, 2007; Bukreev and Rudiyk, 2014) shows that capitalist owners and managers routinely engage in 'management-generated games' (Burawoy, 1979) with the aim of acquiring workers' consent for continuing exploitation in exchange for 'responsible autonomy' (as defined by Friedman 1977) for skilled workers over the pace and timing of work. Other practices include profit-sharing, share distribution schemes (Vasiliev, 2011), the establishment of production committees with consultative powers, limited information-sharing with employees through regular staff meetings or intra-firm bulletins (Ivanova, 2004), etc., giving workers a false feeling of control while being a form of 'special bonus, of which they exerted no control' (Ramsay, 1977:485).

In Belarus, the management does not see the need to hide behind worker participation schemes. Unlike Russia, where a large proportion of enterprises are private and capitalist employment relations prevail, Belarusian industry remains under a tight grip of the state which has become the largest inconspicuous employer in the country as a result of indirect re-nationalisation of industry through 'faked privatisation' (Bakanova et al., 2006; Pastore and Verashchagina, 2006). In this role, the state grants government-appointment directors full authority over workers at the enterprise level, including the right to subdue collective and individual resistance to enforced personnel management policies. In Friedman (1977) terms, enterprise management in Belarus has been given a *carte blanche* to exercise a Taylorist-style direct control strategy over the production process. Government-recognised trade unions play their role by disguising control under the mask of social partnership and 'collectivist spirit' within the carefully preserved Soviet workplace ideology of bureaucratic pluralism. The 'exit' route for workers (Hirschman, 1970) is restricted by constantly worsening conditions of the labour market and the fear of losing enterprise-specific social benefits linked to their current roles (Nozdrin-Plotnitsky and Vorobieva, 2009), generating compelled workers' loyalty to enterprises. As the result, workers in Belarus seem to be completely deprived of voice.

Independent or 'democratic' trade unions, however, claim that they have managed to achieve certain success in combatting a direct control strategy and giving workers some voice at the collective level. Also, previous research found some evidence of informal voice at individual level (Danilovich and Croucher, 2011). Our questions therefore are: to what degree has independent formal voice been eliminated at Belarusian enterprises; whether workers have indeed accepted the status quo or are still trying to challenge it through formal and informal channels available to them; to what extent have independent trade unions been successful in protecting workers right to voice.

METHODS

Those researching employee voice in Belarus come across considerable difficulties. Even those more patient about the country's political regime (e.g., Mandel, 2004: 213-222), mention the problems that researchers may face. Indeed, the government exercises pervasive control over the disclosure of any economic and social-related information on the country. Common obstacles include denial of permissions to conduct research (a particularly popular measure when dealing with Western academics), censorship of questionnaire materials and interview protocols by the management when conducting research at the enterprise level, avoidance of researchers by local officials (those working for government recognised trade unions are notorious for eschewing interviews). Private companies fear official audit or tax bodies while workers fear losing their jobs or being penalised by wage cuts. Consequently, the author had to 'walk sideways', in order to obtain the information and not harm the participants.

The common Belarusians' attitude to research is predominantly hostile; people do not believe in the possibility of confidentiality and anonymity. Researchers are perceived as being accountable either to the enterprise director or state institutions. Although the official permission to conduct research was obtained, it was extremely hard to convince employees of state-owned and quasi-private enterprises to disclose information about their working conditions, pay, relations with the management, workplace nepotism, grievance and conflict resolution procedures at the enterprises, etc.

Another obstacle is a partial availability of secondary data and low reliability of those available. Although the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis and Belarusian judicial bodies and government-recognised trade unions publish many statistical documents, including employment tribunal resolutions, these reveal little about the actual state of employee voice in the country due to the dominant bureaucratic pluralist ideology of ‘socialist market economy’. Hence, first-hand information from workers, managers and independent trade unions had to be obtained to counterweigh the official idyllic picture of the management-worker unity.

Sample

Ten large enterprises from six main employing industries (petrochemical, chemical, light, machine-building, wood processing and construction), with the total number of employees of over nineteen thousand people were selected for a detailed empirical study. All enterprises are under state control through ministries or industrial conglomerates (*kontserns*) which have substituted Soviet industrial ministries. Enterprises included in the sample are either state-owned or quasi-privatised. Both forms of ownership are treated here as being the same since a large government share in quasi-privatised enterprises varying between 84 and 99 percent, makes the state the sole executive shareholder of these entities determining almost every aspect of their business strategies and personnel management.. Four out of ten enterprises are the so-called ‘city forming’ entities – single major employers in their locations.

Measurement

As this study follows the labour process theory perspective, a historical approach to voice is assumed. First, only enterprises with the Soviet ‘history’ are selected to allow tracing the dynamics of employee voice in time. Second, the voice is analysed in a cyclical dynamics with special attention paid to the influence of key events at certain points of time on the subsequent direction of the evolution of voice to account for the impact of path-dependence. Presidential Decrees which had the most impact on voice are chosen as proxies for key events.

Three key concepts: conflict, control and consent are analysed. Following the labour process theory, the conflict is treated as the continuous struggle at the workplace between the interests of workers and those of the capitalist employer (in our case, the state), which ‘is closely intertwined with bargaining...which sometimes occurs collectively [and] sometimes takes an individual form’ (Edwards, 1979: 14-15). Three indicators for conflict with regards to voice at the workplace were selected:

- the number of complaints to the management per year per enterprise (as the proxy for voice-related conflicts at the individual level);
- the number of active protests (strikes, petitions, picketing, unauthorised personnel meetings, hunger strikes, organised absenteeism) per year per enterprise (the proxy for voice-related conflicts at the collective level)⁴;
- personnel turnover (as the indicator of passive conflict showing the share of employees who prefer taking the ‘exit’ option to voicing their concerns).

The concept of control was analysed both at the enterprise and the macro-level. Labour process theorists define control as an extreme form of coordination inherent to capitalist production where the employer presumes that by purchasing workers’ labour power he ‘receives a contractual right backed by legal force...to direct its use’. (Edwards, 1979: 17) We follow Edwards’s definition of control as the ability of the capitalist employer and/or the management to secure desired work behaviour from the personnel and determine to what degree the authoritarian style of supervision (Burawoy, 1979) has prevailed in levelling the independent and imposing the directed employee voice at Belarusian enterprises. To achieve this, three indicators of control at the workplace were selected:

- the number of documents controlling formal voice at the enterprise (the collective agreement, instructions to the management on dealing with conflict situations, complaints, job descriptions⁵, etc.). Only documents which managers/workers have to sign were chosen as they allow estimating the dynamics of control over the years. The documents were then assessed against employment tribunal decisions to understand

the actual power of the external justice system institutions in defending employee voice against the management.

- Trade union density at the workplace (in both state-approved and independent unions). This measure was chosen because it allows assessing the ratio of the independent versus the directed voice at the enterprise level.

Since the government was defined as the major ‘capitalist’ employer, its influence on employee voice at the workplace was also assessed. It was defined as the number of legal acts which directly or indirectly limit voice opportunities at the workplace.

The concept of consent with regards to voice was examined partially using the data obtained on conflict and control, as the decreased opposition to the suppression of the independent voice would mean an increased acceptance of the *status quo* by the workforce. At the same time, it is vital to see whether this acceptance takes the form of a passive protest, exit, or leads to an increased informal voice at the individual level. To do so, the choice of these three options was offered to workers as the part of their interviews. The results were compared with the interview data from earlier studies on Belarusian enterprises. This provided a historical perspective on workers’ perception of voice and exit options available to them.

Data and Methods

The study adopts a mixed methods approach, which is, however, heavily skewed towards qualitative techniques due to lack of reliable quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews are the preferred research technique, and are supplemented with documentary and statistical analyses. Altogether, 38 interviews were conducted: 3 with government recognised trade union officials, 9 with the representatives of independent ‘democratic’ trade unions, 16 with workers of various skill, age and education levels, and 10 with line and middle managers. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Interviews with ‘official’ trade union officials and the managers were conducted at their workplaces. Others took place ‘*sub rosa*’ since ordinary workers were not comfortable being interviewed at

their workplaces and most independent trade unions do not have official offices as landlords deny them rent due to fear of persecution from the authorities.

The interviews served two purposes. First, they were a source of first-hand data on policies and practices of employee voice which would have otherwise been impossible to obtain. Second, they performed a function of data quality control. The interviews thus included a number of questions regarding how employee voice could be expressed, what procedures existed at the enterprises included in the sample, and what methods were used by trade unions to help workers express the voice. Workers and managers were also asked to provide opinions on informal voice mechanisms available at their enterprises and assess whether those prevailed over formal voice mechanisms. Using interview as a research method in authoritarian states is often seen as unreliable due to high probability of biased responses. In this case, a potential criticism is addressed by including respondents representing opposing interest groups (employees vs. managers, and government recognised trade unions vs. their 'democratic' counterparts). All interview data were manually analysed by coding in relation to the research questions and the resulting themes.

The main categories of documents selected for analysis are collective agreements, trade union documents, enterprise HR documentation, labour market legislation, trade union documents, decisions of employment tribunals, legislation on main voice mechanisms (strikes, complains, protests, etc.). Enterprise documentation and employment tribunal decisions proved to be the most informative; as they allowed seeing the influence court decisions have on enterprise policies towards personnel. The documentation obtained from 'democratic' trade unions was useful in terms of demonstrating the state, dynamics and directions of workplace conflicts and the effectiveness of formal voice mechanisms in resolving them. It was also a good source of information on the organising capacity of the state-independent trade union movement and its influence over employment relations. The documents from the government-recognised unions were the least informative first-hand source, most of them paraphrasing government propaganda taglines. The documents (except for the legislation) were analysed using Mayring's qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006).

In addition to interviews and documentary analysis I analysed whatever little statistics was available on organised labour protests; voice-related dismissals;

changes in working conditions (working hours, overtime, pay, non-monetary benefits) as the result of voice (the two latter statistics were obtained from archival records of the sampled enterprises and systematised manually).

FINDINGS

Employee voice in independent Belarus at the macro-level

The second Ramsay cycle started in Belarus at the same time as everywhere else in the Soviet Union (second half of the 1980s). In 1991 – 1994 it coincided with *disintegration* – the first stage of Burawoy's (2002) involuntary retrogression, when Belarus experienced similar disintegrative trends as the rest of the former Soviet Union. This period was characterised by a weak attempt to introduce neo-liberal reforms suggested by international lending organisations. The endeavour largely failed since the new independent government, formed by former Party officials, was unwilling to go beyond the minimum that allowed securing international assistance.

In the area of employee voice, the disintegration stage was marked by a considerable widening of formal mechanisms at the collective level and shrinking of informal voice as the result of the activity of newly created independent trade unions. For the first time in Belarusian history workers were able to negotiate changes in the formal voice system at the national level. The organised worker movement was further strengthened by the establishment of the Belarusian Democratic Trade-Union Congress (BDTC) in 1993. BDTC was able to organise a number of strikes aimed at improving working conditions. They counteracted the government-recognised Belarusian Trade Union Federation (BTF) which saw its role in reducing social tensions, or as one of its officials put it, 'trying to calm down the hot heads in the streets who tried to destabilize the situation in the country by putting out demands which could not be satisfied during crisis' (he refers to pay rise and improved health and safety).

One of the best examples of a high organising capacity of trade unions at the macro level at that stage was the 1992 strike organised by the Independent Miners Union. The requests put out by the workers included the introduction of the

termless work contract, increased pay and improved working conditions. The strike continued for 44 days including the 18-day hunger-strike. It resulted in the signing of the first in Belarusian history industry-wide tariff agreement which linked the minimum wage to the minimum consumer budget and led to the 3.4 times growth of average wage across the Belarusian mining industry. In 1993, the first ever freely negotiated industry-wide collective agreement was also signed by the mining Ministry. Some of its key points included decreasing the working day by an hour for miners and an increase of the annual leave to 66 days for those working underground (Dovnar and Eroshenya, 2011). Generally, the number of strikes and other forms of protest grew almost three times in this period compared to the previous decade (Fig. 1)

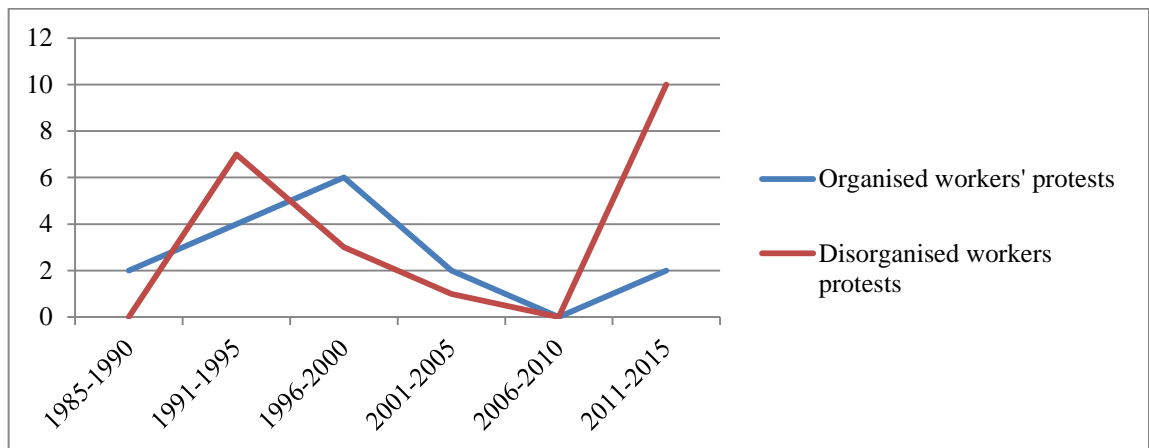


Fig. 1: Dynamics of collective workers' protests in Belarus (1970s-2015) Source: data obtained from interviews with independent trade union representatives, various media sources

The second stage of involuntary retrogression – *reform* – started in 1994 after President Lukashenka was elected. It can be roughly divided into two periods: (a) 1994-1996 when Lukashenka had not obtained a full grip on power and had to reckon with the opinion of a relatively independent parliament, and (b) 1996 – 2004 when the previous partial reforms slowed down and then were either frozen or reversed. The division is made based on the changes in the country's Constitution towards the greater authority of the President in political, social and economic affairs which by 2004 had led to the establishment of his authoritative regime and a full transformation of Belarus into the 'last dictatorship in Europe'⁶.

The *reform* stage was characterised by rapidly decreasing opportunities for formal voice at the national level. Although at the start of the period the authorities maintained the simulacrum of industrial democracy, by the 2000 the level of control over voice at the national level increased considerably, mirrored by a falling number of strikes and other organised forms of protest (see Fig. 1). A repressive campaign against independent unions started after the 1995 transport workers' strike which was openly suppressed by special police forces. The leaders of the independent unions were detained, some were arrested. On the 21st August 1995 the activity of the Independent Trade Union of Belarus was suspended by the Presidential Decree No.336 (the union was re-registered two years later after the ILO and international union federations interfered). Starting from 1997, the government began to assume indirect control over the majority of industrial enterprises. By 2004 it became the main shareholder in approximately 83 percent of the privatised large and medium enterprises, with the average value of shares over 90 percent. During that period the agreement between the government and BTF was concluded which saw the trade union federation *de facto* included in governmental structures, exactly as it was in the Soviet Union.

Two main legal acts regulating the functioning of worker representative organisations were issued in this period: the Law of the Republic of Belarus 'On Professional Unions' (14.01.2000) and the Presidential Decree No.2 'On measures of the regulation of activities of political parties, trade unions and other civil society organisations' (26.01.1999). These legal acts, particularly the Presidential Decree No.2 made it extremely hard to officially register any civil society organisation which was not the part of the government structure. This made impossible for independent workers organisations to officially protect workers' rights in court and establish their branches at enterprises. The final incorporation of the BTF into the government structure occurred in 2002 when the former chairman of the President's administration, Leanid Kozik was 'elected' as the BTF chairman.

Since 2005 Belarus has been going through *stabilisation* – the third stage of Burawoy's involutory retrogression. In his work on Russia, Burawoy defines this stage as being characterised by the development of barter and oligarchic mafia-type structures which take over the role of the lender of last resort from the state. In Belarus, such elite also exists, though, unlike their Russian

counterparts, Belarusian oligarchs are totally subordinate to the state which acts as a capitalist corporation.

Employee voice at the national level is currently characterised by disorganisation (see Fig. 1) and disillusionment of the workforce in the ability of any trade union to protect their rights. Out of 12 workers' protests in the 2011-2015 only two were conducted by BDTC-affiliated unions. The rest were spontaneous actions organised by the workers at individual enterprises. Unlike organised protests of the past (especially those of 1991-1994) which fought for creating new and strengthening existing formal voice channels, disorganised strikes of 2011-2015 demanded pay increases and/or paying off wage arrears. Workers seem to be more preoccupied with economic matters rather than with defending their right to voice. The fact that spontaneous conflicts are often mediated by local officials who negotiate payment terms with the management and almost never by the independent or the state-controlled trade unions means a shift of workers' trust away from the unions and towards the government which may be seen as the victory for the paternalist ideology of unitarism at the national level.

Employee voice in Belarus: enterprise level

The analysis of the dynamics of employee voice at Belarusian workplaces resulted in a number of important findings. First, the analysis of company documentation and statistics shows a considerable drop the number of formal voice mechanisms at the enterprises in question in the last fifteen years. During the disintegration stage when independent employee voice was on the rise in Belarus, nine out of ten enterprises in the sample introduced consultation and suggestion schemes with regards to quality control, innovation, and occupational health and safety. Four enterprises in the sample had whistle-blower protection schemes put in place and seven introduced improved grievance procedures in collective agreements (five of them did it with the independent industry trade union being involved). Workers received the ability to settle individual disputes with the management in court. The employment tribunal statistics showed a considerable growth in disputes with regards to pay, working conditions (predominantly overtime pay related), health and safety (especially with regard to workplace traumas, an issue which was silenced during the Soviet times) and unfair and constructive

dismissals. As the personnel manager from the chemical fibre plant said, “the most noticeable change was the amount of paperwork I suddenly had to deal with. Everyone started writing, and writing, and requesting, no one wanted to just come and talk it through. And everyone suddenly knew their rights too much, everyone was suddenly a lawyer. Did not last long but drained a lot of blood...”

The time after 2000 is seen by the managers as the period of the return of the managerial power over employees. The most popular terms used to describe the changes were ‘clearer instructions’, ‘I finally got my voice back’, ‘rules became rules again’, ‘the boss has become the boss’, ‘I started to be listened to without interruption’, and so on.

The suppression of formal employee voice at the national level had dramatic consequences for formal voice at the workplace. One of the older workers, a textile factory employee, says: “It suddenly became very hard to come out and, basically, ask what is going on, not like in the beginning of the 1990s when you could raise the issue. Everyone became suspicious of everyone, just like it was under the Soviets. Don’t say, look another way, you know how it was. The unions became better again, though, with the New Year presents for kids, helping with the trips, summer camps for kids, all the entertainment. So it became OK again”.

Another, a technical specialist in her late 30s, notices: “I came to this enterprise in 2002 and it felt exactly like my mother told me about how it was in her days, with unions doing the entertainment and the presents, and the rest. I remember when I was at college, there were strikes, people in the streets, real Wild West. Then I worked at a private firm, we had no union, just work, no protection at all, so I quit. Then I got this job through a good friend of mine and, of course, there is a difference, it is a state enterprise, after all. Well, not exactly state but you know what I mean. The management has become tougher in time though, my opinion does not matter anymore, so I just follow the production process instruction....Yes, there were a few people who tried to get another union in, and it even worked for some time, but they did not stay for long in the end”.

As the result, there has been a considerable increase of inter-personal and intra-organisational conflict in the last decade (see Tables 1 and 2).

At the same time, most managers point out that workers are now less willing to formally complain and when they do, they rarely escalate to employment tribunals. The main reasons for this, they believe, are harsh economic conditions and the fear of not being able to find another job in the industry. As the manager from the petrochemical plant puts it: “People may think whatever they want, but

they know that if they go too far, the director will also go too far. And good jobs do not lie on the road, especially in such times as now. The enterprise is trying its best for the workers and the majority of the collective understand this. Of course, there have always been those making noises but our gates are always open, we are not holding anyone by force”.

Table 1. Intra-Organisational and Inter-Personal Conflict at Belarusian Enterprises – Workers’ Viewpoints, Percentage of Total Responses.

Question	Significantly Increased	Slightly Increased	Did Not Change	Slightly Decreased	Significantly Decreased
How has level of inter-personal conflict changed at your enterprise in the last ten years	22.7	51.8	17.3	6.9	1.3
How has the level of conflict between management and workers changed at your enterprise in the last ten years	57.4	36.3	4.1	1.3	0.9

Source: interview data

Table 2. Intra-Organisational and Inter-Personal Conflict at Belarusian Enterprises - Managers’ Viewpoints, Percentage of Total Responses

Question	Significantly Increased	Slightly Increased	Did Not Change	Slightly Decreased	Significantly Decreased
How has level of inter-personal conflict changed at your enterprise	18.3	21.4	43.5	11.7	5.1
How has the level of conflict between management and workers changed at your enterprise	48.2	32.1	17.6	1.4	0.7

Source: interview data

Enterprise statistics on the dynamic of complaints confirms the management’s position. (Table 3)

Growing levels of conflict between the management and the workforce are dealt with in an authoritative manner by increasing the degree of control. The analysis of collective agreements shows that each of them was amended at least once during the last decade to include paragraphs on the updated definitions of labour discipline and the punishment for not keeping to it. Following the issue of the Presidential Decree No.5 the list of violations was extended to include ‘activities that is or may be potentially damaging to the enterprise’. No definition of what constitutes such activities is specified in either the Decree or the collective agreements but the independent trade union representatives interviewed claim that it involves any kind of independent formal collective voice.

In addition, the number of instructions to the management in areas of conflict management, grievances, and unauthorised union activity has increased 3.7 times in the last decade. Job descriptions for highly skilled specialists and skilled workers (which one has to sign when being hired) now include worker’s agreement to be dismissed if found to have violated labour discipline. Official trade unions do not interfere in the suppression of employee voice. Earlier studies (Danilovich, Croucher and Makovskaya, 2015) found that workers view these unions only as welfare providers which shows a striking similarity to workers’ attitude towards unions during the Soviet times. Although membership in state-recognised unions is, in theory, voluntary, the usual practice is to enforce the membership on workers upon the signing of the contract.

Table 3. Formal Complaints to the Management at Sampled Enterprises - Escalated to Formal Disputes.

En-ter-prise	Pay-related complaints			Complaints on inadequate working conditions (including health and safety)			Complaints on un-fair/constructive dismissals		
	1985-1994	1995-2004	2005-2015	1985-1994	1995-2004	2005-2015	1985-1994	1995-2004	2005-2015
1	76	14	14	152	59	26	37	26	12
2	46	21	7	63	19	18	44	20	8
3	33	9	3	47	25	6	28	13	4
4	42	8	1	98	27	5	31	18	10
5	17	6	0	51	18	4	39	16	8
6	69	15	5	97	33	11	26	19	7

7	73	20	12	114	58	15	35	35	16
8	29	7	3	32	17	6	9	4	1
9	96	45	18	127	69	14	23	17	14
10	51	15	6	92	55	13	26	19	10
<i>Tot</i>	<i>532</i>	<i>160</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>873</i>	<i>380</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>298</i>	<i>187</i>	<i>90</i>

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Source: compiled by the author from enterprise archives data

If the worker refuses, the job offer may be revoked. The explanation for this is simple: by law, every employee must be covered by a collective agreement which is, in theory, developed in the consultation with the official union. If the worker refuses to be the member of the union, they cannot sign the collective agreement and hence are not allowed to sign the contract. Forced membership has led to an approximately 95 percent coverage of the labour force by the state-controlled unions, a figure similar to the Soviet times.

The suppression of formal voice and workers' rights in general, has not, however, led to massive exit of the workforce. The average coefficient of employee turnover across the sample in the last five years was 0.11. The highest coefficient of turnover was among young highly skilled specialists (university graduates under 30) – 0.17 (increased from 0.12 in 2005-2010) and young skilled workers (technical college graduates under 30) – 0.23 (increased from 0.09 in 2005-2010). The increase in turnover for these two categories is biennial since their graduate distribution contracts are signed for two years. After the contracts expire, young specialists are no longer bound to their enterprises. The lowest coefficients of turnover (as may be expected) were among the workers over 40 (regardless of their skill level): 0.047 for highly skilled workers (increased from 0.041 in 2005-2010) and 0.038 for skilled workers (increased from 0.033 in 2005-2010). Workers explain their unwillingness to leave enterprises by the fear of not finding better paying jobs in the industry either in Belarus or in the neighbouring Russia. The majority does not seem to be too concerned with the loss of formal voice opportunities. As one of the interviewees, a skilled electromechanical worker from the automotive plant says: 'Of course, it is good when you can defend your right. Makes you feel more of a man. But the main thing is to get paid and paid well. This is what I want. If they [senior management] live and let others live, it is fine by me'.

One can therefore argue that the culture of formal voice which was developed at Belarusian enterprises straight after the fall of the Soviet Union, has been gradually substituted by the culture of loyalty in Hirschman's (1970) terms, as the state when workers passively suffer in silence hoping for the conditions to improve in future. Few take the exit option due to fear of not being able of securing another job with at least similar pay and social guarantees.

The second important finding from the data is that decreased levels of formal voice have not led to a significant increase in informal voice at Belarusian workplaces. The reason for this is a gradually diminishing workers' control over the labour process. While in the Soviet Union workers had considerable control over the labour process and the fulfilment of the production plan, in modern Belarus the plan is no longer a target and the labour process is heavily regulated, the workers have literally nothing to bargain with. Moreover, any attempt to assume control over the labour process may be regarded by the management as the violation of labour discipline and lead to an immediate dismissal.

Belarusian legislation contributes heavily to the suppression of employee voice at every level. The country's Labour Code is often superseded by Presidential Decrees (Danilovich and Croucher, 2011; 2015) which management prefers to follow in order to avoid problems with the government controlling bodies. The following legal acts have been especially damaging for employee voice over the years.

1. The Presidential Decree No. 29 'On additional measures on the improvement of labour relations, strengthening of labour and performance discipline' (26.07.1999) Supplemented by the Enactment of the Council of Ministers 'on the order of the contract employment between employers and employees' No.1476 (25.09.1999) abolishes termless contracts for every category of personnel and *de facto* justified the introduction of precarious employment and dismissal at will in Belarus. The Decree has been widely used to legally dismiss independent trade union activists.

2. A Directive of the President of the Republic of Belarus No.1. 'On the measures on strengthening public safety and discipline' (11.03.2004, amended 14.10.2015). The document gives senior management of enterprises the right to maintain labour discipline by any means necessary including the dismissal of the employee guilty of a disciplinary offense. As the interviewed 'democratic' labour

unions activists point out, the Directive is widely used as the persecution tool, since the state of the machinery and equipment at most enterprises makes it impossible to keep up with every health and safety rule. Five of the interviewed workers support this opinion. In their view, the directive is widely used by the managers to blame the workers for received traumas in order not to pay compensation.

3. The Presidential Decree No.9 ‘On additional measures to support the wood processing industry’ (7.12.2012), cancelled by the Presidential Decree No.182 (27.05.2016) which *de facto* introduced bonded labour in the wood-processing industry, stimulating informality and corruption at the workplace. Two workers from a wood-processing plant admitted bribing personnel managers to keep their worker record books in place while going to Russia as irregular labour migrants for a period of time.

4. The Presidential Decree No. 5 ‘On the intensification of requirements to senior managers and workers in organisations’ (15.12.2014). The Decree gives employers the right to significantly alter working conditions according to production, organisational or economic needs without consulting the workers or the unions. An employer may also fully or partially withhold workers’ bonuses for up to 12 months as a disciplinary measure; suspend or dismiss the worker immediately if the worker violates labour discipline and his actions cause (or may potentially cause) damage to the organisation or if any other ‘discrediting circumstances’ are identified. The dismissal may occur before the end of the contract. Individuals may be denied employment if the characteristics from the previous place of employment may contain anything a potential employer may not like. Employee voice, under these conditions, becomes impossible, since any formal expression of dissatisfaction can be counted as misconduct. One of the worst effects of the Decree is that it prevents a dismissed employee from obtaining any managerial position (including lower management) in any state-owned or private organisation without the explicit permission of the head of the local executive committee, which is virtually impossible to obtain. Hence low and middle managers as well as technical specialists who can, in theory occupy managerial positions, have the voice option withdrawn from them.

Enterprise documentation shows an increasing number of dismissals due to disciplinary violations in the last two years. 90 percent of the democratic unions’

representatives interviewed for the study admitted being threatened with dismissal. A few of them lost their jobs during that period due to their political and social activities. The representative of the Free Union of Metalworkers, established at the Minsk Automobile Plant, one of the largest employers in the country, openly spoke of persecution by the management and prosecution by the authorities. He stated that the actions against the unions started as early as 1998 when their request to have a meeting on the territory of the plant was denied by Minsk city executive committee because 'the plant's products were used in the defence complex of the Republic of Belarus...therefore any arrangements of the sort could not be allowed on its territory'. As he put it, 'this is all a bitter irony. So we can't have anything there, no meetings, nothing but what about the official unions? Why can they? So, you see, we are like enemies, like some agent 007 spies. I worked there for almost 30 years and it was hard for me to hear all that at first, to be treated like that'.

To summarise, the results of the empirical study show a gradual devolution of formal and informal employee voice in Belarus during the second Ramsay (1977) cycle of control. Despite high levels of conflict at the workplace, the system of direct control imposed by the management together with the repressive measures against independent trade unions successfully prevented workers from expressing their voice via formal channels. Informal channels also shrank due to a decreased workers' control over the labour process and a consequent loss of leverage over the management. State-recognised trade unions which are the part of the government mechanism did not prevent the devolution of employee voice and the independent unions had few opportunities to counteract it due to their semi-legal status.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The chapter aimed to reveal distinctive features of employee voice in Belarus, one of the economies of post-Soviet transitional periphery. Following the labour process theory, employee voice was viewed as the product of antagonistic employment relations between capitalist employers and the workforce. The works of Ramsay (1977), Friedman (1977), Edwards (1979) and Burawoy (1979) were

used as the points of reference for the theoretical framework. Voice was analysed the concepts of conflict, control and consent. The historical approach was applied to account for the influence of the Soviet past as well as to conduct a direct comparison between the evolution of voice in Belarus and in developed Western economies, the object of the 'classic' labour process theory.

The data clearly demonstrate that employee voice in Belarus evolved in line with Ramsay's cycles of control theory. Ramsay saw employee voice as the result of fluctuations of the relative power of capitalist employers and the workforce which, in turn, largely depended on broad economic and social conditions. When employers are put under pressure by these conditions, they are more eager to allow concessions to the workforce, while at the times of crisis (high unemployment) their resistance to voice is much stronger.

The evolution of employee voice in Belarus and its state at the beginning of the 21st century largely matches Ramsay's description of voice in European capitalist economies at the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th century. The rise of independent employee voice in the country historically coincides with the time periods when external economic, social and political conditions (first a rapid industrialisation at the beginning of the 20th century and then the easing of the Soviet regime at the end of the century) force employers to take into account the demands of the workforce for a larger participation in enterprise management and the improvement of working conditions. In both cycles, a monopolistic employer (in this case the state) manages to suppress formal employee voice through the system of direct bureaucratic control and the diversification of the workforce as soon as the socio-economic and political situation turn in its favour. Ultimately, the implementation of a direct control strategy by both Soviet government and Belarusian government after 1994 has resulted in people *de facto* 'working as machines manipulated by centralised planning departments' (Friedman, 1977: 50).

The study also found that the actual degree of direct control over voice in modern Belarus is even larger than it was in the Soviet Union. The explanation may lie in decreased opportunities for informal voice due to the workers losing control over the labour process which results in the disappearance of any leverage they might've had over the management in the past.

The historical approach necessarily meant an inquest into the effect of path-dependence, and specifically, Soviet institutional, cultural and ideological legacies. These were found to have exhibited considerable influence on the formation of the system of personnel management and workplace ideology of modern Belarus. Main principles of Soviet bureaucratic pluralism were carefully preserved and adapted to current socio-economic and political conditions which allowed the Belarusian government to largely avoid social tensions and obtain workers consent for further exploitation despite growing levels of conflict at the workplace.

Another explanation for the Belarusian government's success in suppressing independent employee voice may stem from its ability to re-integrate the majority of trade union organisations into its structures using the Soviet 'blueprint'. The organisations that refused to become the part of the executive 'vertical' were reduced to semi-legal entities and openly persecuted. Enforced membership in the official unions and persecution by management of those who dare leave them makes it hard for independent unions to recruit further reducing their influence on voice-related matters.

However, an increase in workers' protest actions does not allow accepting Ashwin's (1998) argument on workers' patience with regards to Belarus. Despite not being organised by formal unions, the protests demonstrate the ability of the Belarusian workforce to express voice. Although workers' appeal to local officials for mediation does show a certain degree of trust in the authorities, the government's unwillingness to radically change the situation in workers' favour may result in larger collective actions in the future.

Belarus is not unique in its suppression of employee voice. Similar state practices were reported earlier in other countries of transitional periphery, particularly in authoritarian economies of central Asia (e.g, Pomfret, 2012). Government suppression of independent trade unions is common in China (e.g., Xu, 2013; Fu, 2016). Cooke and Sainti (2015) report that Indian government fails to ensure fair treatment of workers' grievances, leaving employees at management's mercy. Thus, despite having some distinctive features, such as the extent of direct control over the workforce or the ability to obtain workers consent for the suppression of formal voice at the workplace, the policy towards the independent employee voice in Belarus seems to be largely similar to that in other transitional and developing countries.

NOTES

1. 7 is the lowest possible score in the Freedom House ranking
2. *Ryazryad* is the Soviet term for the worker's skill grade. There were six skill grades for manual workers and those operating machinery, with the six *ryazryad* being the highest. Workers' pay, benefits and working conditions often depended on their *ryazryad*.
3. See e.g., Articles 21, 52, 53 of the Labour Code of Russian Federation; Article 11 of the Labour Code of the Republic of the republic of Belarus; Article 425 of the Labour Code of the republic of Ukraine; Article 22 of the Labour code of the Republic of Kazakhstan; Article 9 of the labour Code of the republic of Moldova.
4. The data on this proxy was obtained from 'democratic' trade unions and hence may not be fully accurate as these unions treat even the smallest event as the form of protest
5. It is a usual practice at Belarusian enterprises (inherited from the Soviet personnel management) when the workers signs not only the contract and the collective agreement but also signs a statement that they were made aware of their job description and agree to fulfil its every point. In many cases these documents include the point stating that the workers agrees to follow the rules of the labour discipline accepted at the enterprise and accepts the punishment that may follow if they don't (in many cases this means agreeing to the culture of employee silence).
6. The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus was changed three times in 10 years. The first change took place on 15 March 1994, right after the presidential elections. According to that change, the President received significant credentials, the most important of which were: the right to amend the Constitution, determine the dates for elections and referendums, the exclusive right to appoint the judges, including the ones for the Supreme and the Constitutional Courts, the General Prosecutor, and other leading persons in judicial system, the exclusive right to appoint the Head of the Central Bank, establish and dismiss ministries, has the right to cancel the decisions of local authorities in case they are recognized as violat-

ing the law. In other words, the 1994 amendment has subordinated the executive and the judicial powers to the President. The only branch that remained independent was the legislative branch (the parliament). It lost its independence in 1996 when Lukashenka forced it to self-liquidate and then re-introduced it as a National Assembly which was subordinate to him, as after the second amendment of the Constitution which he initiated in 1996 and which led to the destruction of the parliament, he received the right to appoint the chairmen for the both houses of the parliament. Thus, all three branches of power lost their independence and became subordinate to one man who now could stop the reforms and change the country into an overly regulated Soviet-type economy with even more central planning than the USSR (which he did). The second period in the reform stage of involutory retrogression finished in 2004 after the third amendment of the Constitution has removed a two-term limit for the president to be in power, making Lukashenka a lifelong dictator.

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