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'We want bread and work': patterns of labour protest and union involvement in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

The end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe resulted in wide-ranging social change, with established practices and relations being overturned in a relatively short period. Labour relations were an area that saw considerable upheaval as unions were released from state control and clandestine worker bodies were able to emerge. This article considers the medium-term effects of these changes by examining the characteristics of labour focused contention in Bulgaria from 2000 to 2019. This was a period during which the uncertainty that characterised the post-transition decade was settling, with new challenges and opportunities in the form of accession to the European Union, the global financial crisis, and the anti-government protests of 2013–2014 shaping the context for labour relations. This article draws on a unique dataset of labour protests to examine the claims, actors, and actions adopted to identify how the labour movement responded to these changes and the degree of trade union involvement in contentious events. The findings suggest there has been a shift from economic claims to encompass broader rights-based issues. They also suggest that unions have been visible in contentious actions but have been joined by a more diverse group of actors in advancing workers' claims.

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Introduction

In March 2013 3500 mine workers from around Bulgaria converged on Sofia for a march from the National Assembly to the offices of the State Energy and Water Regulatory Committee. Protesters carried signs saying 'We want bread and work' and chanted 'We don't trust you' as they gathered. The protest was organised by the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) and the Podkrepa Labour Confederation (BTA 2013). This event was significant, as it was coordinated by the two main labour bodies in the country and took place during a period of heightened national contention (Velinova and Tomov 2020). The adoption of direct action in this form raises a question about those involved in pursuing labour rights. Luce (2014) has argued that trade unions are in decline globally, challenged by the drive for efficiency and individualism that has resulted from neoliberalism. The

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outcome being that the ability of workers to collaborate and press their claims to employers and the state is more tightly controlled than in the past (Mann 2014). These pressures were amplified in peripheral regions following the 2008 global financial crisis, as capital movements generated further uncertainty (Sen 2011). Faced with this challenging environment, trade unions and workers have had to reassess and adjust their tactics to maintain viability.

Central and Eastern Europe saw the effects of the 2008 crisis disrupt efforts by the European Union to support incorporation of new members and at the same time increase labour tensions. While the uncertainty of the 1990s provided fertile ground for industrial action, this changed in the following decade as unions struggled and lost self-confidence (Vandaele 2011). The promise of EU membership encouraged reform, but as Greskovits (2015, 272) notes, following the crisis a pattern emerged where 'industrial democracy was hollowing out and backsliding'. Declines in union density saw the labour movement weakened, which was capitalised on by states to exert control by removing rights and diluting agreements (Soulsby et al. 2017). The resulting situation has been described as zombie socialism, whereby anti-communism is blended with neoliberal hegemony to discipline opposition (Chelcea and Druță 2016). Faced with this pressure from above, there has been an attempt to build grassroots resistance, which has seen 'workers express their grievances by protest actions: strikes, demonstrations, or petitions' (Greskovits 2015, 271; Meardi 2007). Examining these expressions of unrest may help identify the development of the character of labour relations in the region.

This article examines the character of labour protest in Bulgaria over the 2000–2019 period. The two questions addressed are: (1) to what extent did labour protest reflect wider social, political, and economic developments? (2) Did union involvement in labour protest increase or decrease? The analysis draws on a unique catalogue of labour protest that captures the issues, actions, actors, settings of events during 2000–2019. The remainder of the article is divided into five sections. The first section considers the nature of labour protest through an examination of the intersections and tensions in the study of trade unions and social movements. The development of labour conditions in Bulgaria since 1989 is outlined in the second section, identifying the key actors and the shifts in the regulation of labour politics. The third section introduces the methodology used to collect the protest event data and discusses the limitations. The fourth section presents the findings from the protest catalogue over the 2000–2019 period to identify the character of labour-focused protest. Finally, the article draws on the findings to address the nature of labour contention in Bulgaria.

Social movements and unions

Trade unions are in decline internationally, squeezed by practices associated with new public management and neoliberalisation (Luce 2014). Vachon et al. (2016) further note that processes of economic globalisation and greater financialisation have contributed to declining union density in affluent democracies. Despite this decline, trade unions present an opportunity for organisation and resistance. Unlike many social movement organisations, they have the advantage of permanent, formalised, hierarchical structures that enable the co-ordination of resources in defence of their members' interests.

Considering the interaction and overlap between trade unions and social movements, Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2017, 9) argue that:

It is common to contrast trade unions, with their elaborate formal decision-making structures and more spontaneous, often activist-led social movements and NGOs. Such a dichotomy is, however, questionable. Unions are themselves – or surely ought to be – non-governmental organisations and commonly they emerged as forms of collective resistance that challenged key principles of the prevailing social and economic order.

These apparent similarities between unions and other actors have been identified as increasing in the contemporary era. Accornero and Ramos Pinto (2015, 492) note that the ‘boundaries between material and economic protest are increasingly blurred’. The driver of this change is captured in Pilati and Perra’s (2022a, 40) point that the growth in political strikes ‘protesting against government policies and decisions or actions’ represent a growth in such actions going beyond interests to target rights. Examining labour protests from a social movement perspective can potentially help capture what may lie behind this broadening of scope in labour movement claims.

The relationship between social movement studies and labour relations is complicated. Social movements identify a range of perspectives regarding mobilisation and organisation in the presentation of claims, with much of the focus on the state as an opponent, potential supporter or regulator (Tilly 2008). By contrast, when discussing the outline of the labour movement, Meardi (2013, 1) notes that it generally refers to ‘the collective action of workers within social relations of production, opposing them to *management* and the controllers ... of the means of production.’ The distinction is also captured in Claus Offe’s (1985) distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ movements. The former is presented as operating in a relatively stable system based around class interests whereby ‘capitalism as a growth machine was complemented by organized labor as a distribution and social-security machine’ (Offe 1985, 822). Liu (2015, 16) reiterates the structured character of labour relations pointing to the source of labour power, whereby:

Leverage is rooted at the economic-corporate level, where the very location of a collective actor in an interdependent relationship with its opponents provides the foundation for its exercise of power.

In contrast, ‘The space of action of the new movements is a space of *noninstitutional politics* which is not provided for in the doctrines and practices of liberal democracy and the welfare state’ (Offe 1985, 826). This binary is useful in identifying the origins and power bases of movement types, but as Liu (2015) argues, labour movements can broaden their appeal by strengthening their ideological appeal and blurring the boundaries between ‘old’ and ‘new’. The challenge facing such a movement is the shift from particularistic goals around economic concerns to a position that can attract broader support from society.

Trade unions, by their nature, are conservative actors, focused on securing the interests of their members. Comparing trade unions and emerging groups, Pilati and Perra (2022b, 1301) found that unions ‘give greater support to institutional, large-scale action and economic claims than other actors.’ Increasing pressure on and consolidation of unions may therefore lead to a more conservative approach, focused on securing and protecting the interests of their members. As Fantasia and Stephan-

Norris (2004, 557) argue, 'the character of a labour movement at any point in time is the result of a complex set of decisions, actors, and struggles ... within the movement itself' as well as outside. This means that where interests are threatened, workers can take actions that circumvent official channels to seek redress (Bizyukov and Dollbaum 2021; Sil and Wright 2018). Considering what this means in the current period, Andretta et al. (2016, 296–297) note:

trade unions currently under siege from neoliberal attacks on labour rights and social policies are responding with, among other things, attempts to go back to (or step up) reliance on protest activities and movement-like strategies.

The result is that examining manifestations of labour protest can help uncover the extent to which a labour movement is shifting to manage the pressures placed on it.

In turning to contentious forms of action, the labour movement can potentially emerge as a key component of the wider social space. Nöwak (2021, 1342) argues that recognising such a move is required to evaluate the 'effectiveness and political character of labour conflict' in shaping social formations. This point is echoed by Lambert (2013, 89) in that such engagement is necessary in supporting 'political revitalization, activating and synchronizing struggle in the workplace and civil society, whilst also extending the spatial reach of unionism.' Engaging in labour protests therefore recognises the reality of the loss of union hegemony in representing the interests of workers (Pilati and Perra 2022a) and 'the growing heterogeneity of workers' representative bodies' (Pilati and Perra 2022b, 1284). Increased cooperation between unions and other civil society actors in this space remains complicated by different organising principles and underlying motivations (Heery et al. 2012). Labour protest and the adoption of direct action beyond strikes to include 'Corporate campaigns, civil disobedience and public protest' (Engeman 2015, 456; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2017) represents a potential means to bridge these differences. However, Helbrecht et al. (2017, 108) note such broadening can have a 'paradoxical effect ... [as] festive forms of protest clearly draw a much more depoliticised crowd', making shared objectives more difficult to identify.

Assessing the nature of labour protest and the extent to which it can broaden the potential contribution of labour requires examination of the reality on the ground. As Jansson and Uba (2023, 841) argue, 'only a systematic long-term analysis of labour protests can reveal the more general patterns of unions' protest mobilisation'. This systematic approach also needs to consider the specific national traditions and models of interest representation that can play an important role in shaping outcomes (Andretta et al. 2016). Success or otherwise depends on the actions and decisions of unions and other representative bodies in navigating the constraints imposed by institutional structures (Burawoy 2008). The exercise of agency can be seen in the move to incorporate disruptive behaviour alongside more contained forms of action, as well as in ceding such opportunities to other actors. The next section introduces the case of Bulgaria, considering the key features of post-communist labour relations.

Labour relations in Bulgaria

Labour relations in Bulgaria have changed significantly over the past four decades as the country moved from communist regime to market-based democracy. Prior to the end of the communist regime in November 1989 labour activities were tightly controlled by the state. Zic (1998, 156) argues that:

The ruling communist party maintained a strict monopoly of power and a ban on and intolerance of alternative political parties and movements, including labour unions or workers' organizations other than officially sponsored ones.

This control reflected the broader pattern in Bulgaria, restricting and closing space for the operation of civil society organisations, making it one of the most closed states in the region (see Linz and Stepan 1996). The area of labour was particularly important to the regime, serving as 'a "transmission belt" for carrying through government policies, but also acted as provider of social welfare benefits and as protector of employee interests', giving the official Central Council of Bulgarian Trade Unions (BTU) a prominent position (Martin et al. 1996, 14). In an attempt to challenge this control, the independent union Podkrepa was formed in February 1989 'by a group of dissident intellectuals' (Zic 1998, 156), but the repressive character of the regime meant that it was forced to operate clandestinely.

The regime change presented opportunities and challenges for the labour in general and the two key unions in particular. Podkrepa was able to emerge as a legal entity in December 1989 following the removal of the communist regime and align with the anti-communist actors and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) party (Martin et al. 1996). The BTU, by contrast, faced a more difficult challenge due to its ties to the communist regime and reconstituted itself in January 1990 as the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) (Zic 1998). In the turmoil of the initial transition, both unions sought to establish their legitimacy as representatives of labour. The European Trade Union Institute reports that in 2012 there were estimated to be around 400,000 trade union members, with the two main union confederations, CITUB (275,762) and Podkrepa (88,329) representing approximately 18% of all employees (Fulton 2015; see also Bernaciak 2013).

The adversarial nature of relations meant that the actions of the two key labour confederations have been important in shaping developments in a space of uncertainty. Prior to the regime change in 1989, Podkrepa had been instrumental in initiating strikes that challenged the communist government after November (Iankova 2000). Having managed to reform and create a new identity, CITUB distanced itself from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) after the latter was formed from elements of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Zic 1998). The threat of politicisation of the labour movement also led Podkrepa to cease formal participation in UDF politics in October 1991 (Martin et al. 1996, 16). Distancing themselves from politics provided space for Podkrepa and CITUB to more directly challenge the state during the transition period and subsequently, mobilising large numbers of workers to force the resignation BSP governments in 1991 and 1997 (Zic 1998). These actions were driven by perceptions of economic mismanagement that were harmful to the interests of their members.

A similar phenomenon was identified by Markova (2012) when the unions were involved in a challenge to the government led by the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) from late 2011.

The formal industrial relations system is based around a form of tripartism and social partnership. Defining the scope of the social partnership model, Iankova and Turner (2004, 77) argue that it entails:

regularised bargaining relationships between organised business and labour, often tripartite (with the state playing more or less engaged roles), to set basic wage and employment standards as well as to influence broader social and economic policy.

Outlining the specific characteristics of the system in Bulgaria, Spasova and Tomini (2013, 13) identify that 'following the establishment of a new Labour Code [in 1993] a new consultative body on social dialogue issues was created: the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation (NCTC).' The NCTC consists of government representatives and representatives of national employee and employer organisations (Iankova 2000). The main focus of the NCTC has been in encouraging cooperation over labour, social security and living standards. While the formal architecture is in place, 'the social partners' involvement in some of these structures is nothing more than a formality' and is further undermined 'due to the high level of power and resources centralization within the Government' (Markova 2012, 22). The opening of accession negotiations with the EU in 2000 resulted in pressure to improve the character of the social partnership to meet membership requirements. Despite this, progress continued to be criticised, and the unions left the NCTC in 2009 over a 'long-term lack of consensus on salient wage and price issues and the impossibility of real negotiations with the government' (Spasova and Tomini 2013, 16).

The situation in Bulgaria demonstrates the challenge faced by labour actors working through formal channels in a highly centralised political system. The wider context of the post-communist environment further complicated matters as political and economic instability worked against the consolidation and implementation of measures to create a more collaborative approach. Reflecting on the situation, Kirov (2019, 89) notes the 'eroding of collective bargaining in Bulgaria reflects the falling trade union membership and union weakness in many industries and companies.' In this context, it is expected that labour organisations may choose to draw on unconventional, contentious actions as a way of pressing claims on behalf of their members. The remainder of this paper examines patterns of labour activism in Bulgaria, tracking how the issues and actors involved have shifted and how this feeds into and reflects wider patterns of labour relations in Bulgaria.

Methodology

There are various ways of measuring the level of labour contention, often focused around strike actions. The absence of strike data for Bulgaria (see European Trade Union Institute 2015) requires the identification of an alternative source of data. This article uses a unique catalogue of protest events to identify the extent of protest around labour issues over 2000–2019.¹ Drawing on media reports of protest events provides a relatively consistent data series, assuming no significant change in reporting practices or the range of news sources consulted (see Earl et al. 2004). Describing the strengths of such an approach,

Koopmans and Rucht (2002, 231) argue that ‘PEA provides a more solid empirical ground for observing protest activities in large geographical areas over considerable spans of time’. A key limitation of the method is the inability to access the motivations and beliefs of those involved in contentious actions. It is also generally unable to capture non-disruptive interactions and behaviours between contending parties. By focusing ‘on moments in which people gathered to make visible, public claims’ (Tilly 2005, 62) the data can be used to map the range of actions and actors involved, as well as access claims through the examination of detail on the content of placards, chants, and banners, as well as where the reports capture the voices of participants. In this way, the data can provide a foundation on which future research can build.

Events in the catalogue were identified from a search of the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA) via Factiva (on the use of electronic archives see Strawn 2010). The BTA is a national newswire and carries stories in English (Bulgarian News Agency n.d.). In addition to reporting events, it also carries summaries of other Bulgarian language newspapers. Considering the use of BTA, Dinev (2022, 9) argues that using the ‘international section of the Bulgarian Press Agency’ generates a lower number of results. This is acknowledged as a limitation but still allows a pattern of events to be discerned. A search of the electronic records was conducted using the term ‘protest*’ to identify events. This search strategy returned 7115 stories resulting in 1258 unique events following a manual scan of each story. Each event was considered to identify details such as location, issue, actions, participants and targets.

The article draws on a subset of the larger dataset to identify labour-focused contention. Use of a single search term (‘protest*’) may mean some events were overlooked, such as where they are referred to as a strike or by another more specific term. The decision to focus on one term was made to ensure consistency across the series, as the term ‘protest’ is less open to interpretation over time and across issue areas. It was also suitable to capture events that were sufficiently notable for the media to report on them. Relevant events were drawn from a focused search of the larger dataset to identify events listed as ‘employment’ in the ‘issue’ field. This was supplemented through the identification of all events captured that involved trade unions as actors, including those that were not explicitly targeting employment issues (such as around privatisation, rights, and governance). This search returned a set of 433 events over the 2000–2019 period, which form the basis of the analysis that follows. Given the relatively fragmentary character of media reporting of such events, each reported occurrence is recorded as a distinct event even where an extended campaign took place. With these limitations in mind, it is argued that careful consideration of protest data gathered in this way can provide a means to unearth and assess the extent and character of labour protest.

Patterns of labour protest in Bulgaria²

Protest actions have played a significant role in the recent politics of Bulgaria, leading to the resignation of the government in 2013 and ongoing opposition to its replacements (Blackington et al. 2024; Damyanova 2023; Velinova and Tomov 2020). Figure 1 presents the total number of protest events recorded in the catalogue this article draws on over the 2000–2019 period, as well as those focused on labour-related issues. It also shows the level of GDP and the unemployment rate over the same period. Labour protests tended to

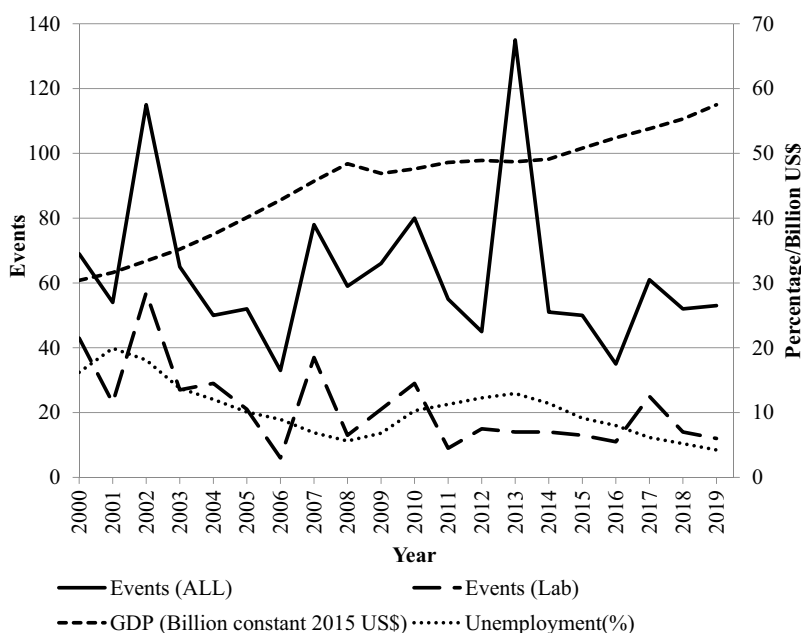


Figure 1. GDP, unemployment and protest (2000–2019). GDP and Unemployment data from World Development Indicators (World Bank)

follow the pattern of general protest for much of the period, with the obvious exception of 2013 and the cycle of large-scale anti-government protests (O'Brien 2019). Increases in levels of labour protest between 2007 and 2010 may be linked to the financial crisis, reflected in a slowing of GDP growth and an increase in unemployment (Soulsby et al. 2017). Accession to the EU in 2007 presented opportunities and likely raised expectations regarding the rate of change. However, as Noutcheva and Bechev (2008) argued at the time, Bulgaria struggled to meet the expectations placed on it by the EU. The subsequent smoothing of labour-focused contention may suggest a growing ability to manage expectations through institutionalisation of labour relations, as well as the effects of the end of the cycle of protest that forced the resignation of the GERB government.

The issues that have animated labour protests in Bulgaria have shifted since 2000. Figure 2 shows the summary issue categories, ranging from more particularistic issues of unpaid wages and wage rates, through to employer governance and broader issues regarding regulations that impact work. The specific claims presented varied considerably, encompassing issues as diverse as rights at work, privatisation, conflict of interests on boards, corruption and wages. This was captured in diverse slogans such as 'We want bread and work!', 'Stop the privatisation in education', 'Banana republic does not need science', and 'Don't force us to emigrate'. The fall in the number of protests over unpaid wages may reflect some stabilisation of the economic situation following turmoil during the earlier transition and accession periods, although ongoing structural challenges remained (Mladenova 2012). This fall was replaced to some extent by increased contention over wage rates rather than their payment, although protests over unpaid wages resurfaced following the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007–2008. Rights in the

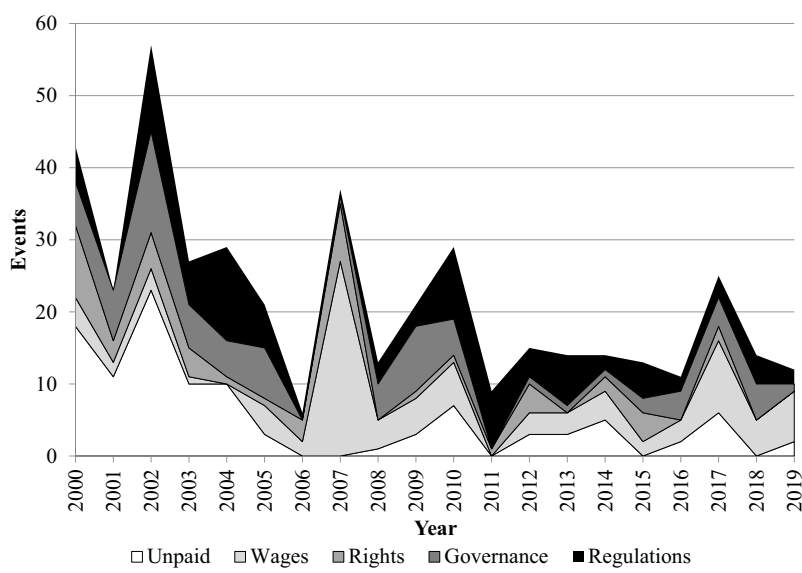


Figure 2. Labour protests by issue (2000–2019).

workplace were relatively limited as an issue of contention throughout, but there was a shift from governance (firm level) towards broader regulatory issues. This is illustrated by a July 2017 protest of doctors in Sofia calling for greater protection of health workers from violent patients and relatives. This shift coincided with the anti-government protest wave of 2013–2014 (Figure 1), potentially opening the space for presentation of claims by other actors. The overall trend suggests a move from economic issues towards issues of rights, governance, and regulation, although this remains vulnerable to shocks, as observed following the global financial crisis.

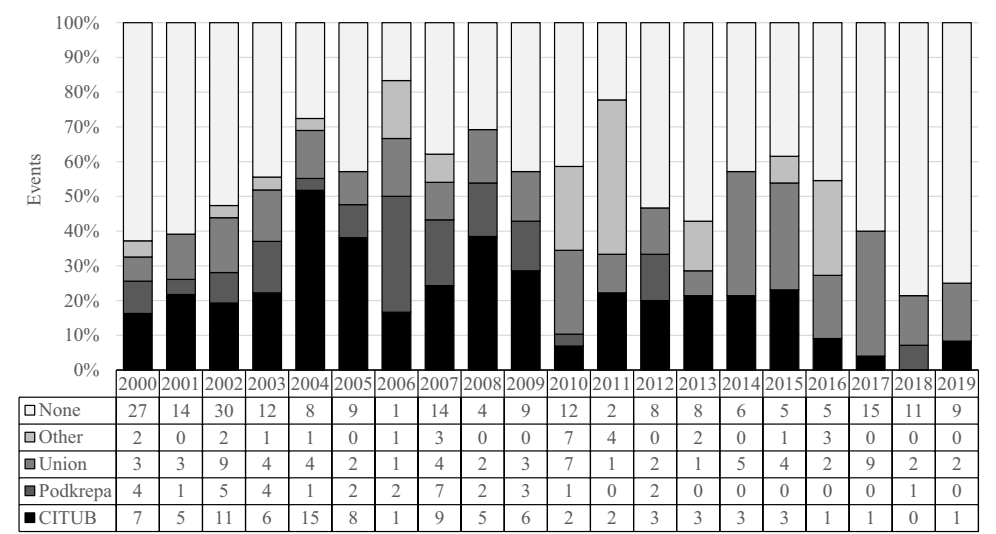


Figure 3. Key protest actors (2000–2019).

Turning to the question of who was behind the protests, further change can be discerned. [Figure 3](#) shows the number of protests where unions and other actors featured as the first or second identified participant. This highlights the fact that during periods of heightened contention, the unions occupied a prominent role in protest actions. As the largest union, CITUB was the most visible union actor in the labour protests, followed (and in some years overtaken) by Podkrepa. These events varied in focus and tactics, with an October 2013 action where 49 miners at the Cherno More coal mine in Bourgas refused to come up at the end of their shift in a protest over unpaid wages being followed in November with 8000 people marching to Parliament stating 'We want our rights, we want our money'. Earlier in the period, the proportion of events not featuring a named group (or type, such as 'trade union') were more prominent, making up over 50% of events in 2000–02. The rate subsequently fell below 50%, suggesting greater recognition of union involvement. The exceptional level of protest during the 2013–2014 wave appears to have impacted patterns of labour protest, leading to unions and other established groups playing a less prominent role (Kirov 2019). This may result from a contraction of space available for labour-focused actors, with anti-government claims taking the most prominent position. The other pattern that can be identified is the growth in the number of union actors other than CITUB and Podkrepa. Although their numbers are still relatively low, this may suggest diversification in the representation of labour interests.

Another aspect of the protests that needs to be examined is the protest repertoire and how this has varied between the type of actor and over time. [Table 1](#) shows the raw number of actions observed and the proportion of events that saw the specific action type and action category. Up to four actions were recorded in the catalogue for each event. Reading across the data, it is clear that the protests were overwhelmingly non-violent. However, within this broad picture, actions undertaken by groups other than unions or with unnamed groups saw a higher proportion of confrontational events. Much of the

Table 1. Actions recorded in labour protest events (2000–2019).

		Union		Other	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Appeal		56	28.4	30	12.7
	Address	44	22.3	24	10.2
	Present	14	7.1	7	3.0
Demonstrational		180	91.4	225	95.3
	Gather	172	87.3	215	91.1
	Display	21	10.7	17	7.2
	March	29	14.7	23	9.7
	Perform	18	9.1	26	11.0
	Rally	27	13.7	19	8.1
	Meet	6	3.0	7	3.0
Confrontational		50	25.4	88	37.3
	Strike	15	7.6	4	1.7
	Refuse	4	2.0	3	1.3
	Obstruct	16	8.1	60	25.4
	Chant	13	6.6	14	5.9
	Occupy	4	2.0	6	2.5
	Enter	1	0.5	2	0.8
Violent		1	0.5	0	0.0
	Attack	1	0.5	0	0.0
Actions Total		385		427	
Events		197		236	

difference in confrontational actions is driven by a higher number of obstructions in non-union actions, often involving roadblocks or blockades of the workplace. An example of this tactic was seen in April 2009 when road workers in Bourgas blocked the Sofia-Varna highway on consecutive days over unpaid wages. Few of these obstructive actions translated into occupations, possibly suggesting a limited capacity to sustain opposition in the absence of a focused organisation to coordinate. The other contrast is the greater number of union events involving an address to participants and/or observers, often in the form of restating claims. This was seen in November 2011 when port workers rallied in Bourgas and read a declaration in support of workers at the Kremikovtsi steel mill in Sofia Province. Examining change over time, appeals were highest in 2008 (46.2%) and 2009 (48.9%), during the global financial crisis, whereas confrontational actions peaked in 2013 (71.4%), when generalised anti-government mobilisations were at their height.

The final factor to consider is the labour market position of those taking part in protest events. Figure 4 presents the proportion of protests by position of the workers involved over the period. Workers employed in manual work (miners, factory workers) featured strongly throughout but were more prominent during the period of stabilisation (2000–2004) and following the onset of the global financial crisis (2007–2008). An example was when timber workers in the Pazardjik region blocked roads in May 2000 over lumbering and timber rules favouring private firms. These periods also saw higher levels of protest by other groups or where none were identified, although this became less common as representatives consolidated (as noted with regard to Figure 3). Workers in service roles (such as teachers) were relatively consistent participants, possibly linked to their diversity and relatively stronger labour market position. A significant example of this potential was seen in October 2007 when 50,000 teachers gathered in Sofia over pay, calling for 'Teachers wages for all MPs!' Professional groups (doctors, vets, and scientists) were involved in a lower number of protests, probably also linked to the strength of their bargaining position derived from their professional standing and relative scarcity. As illustrated by the 2010 protests over the

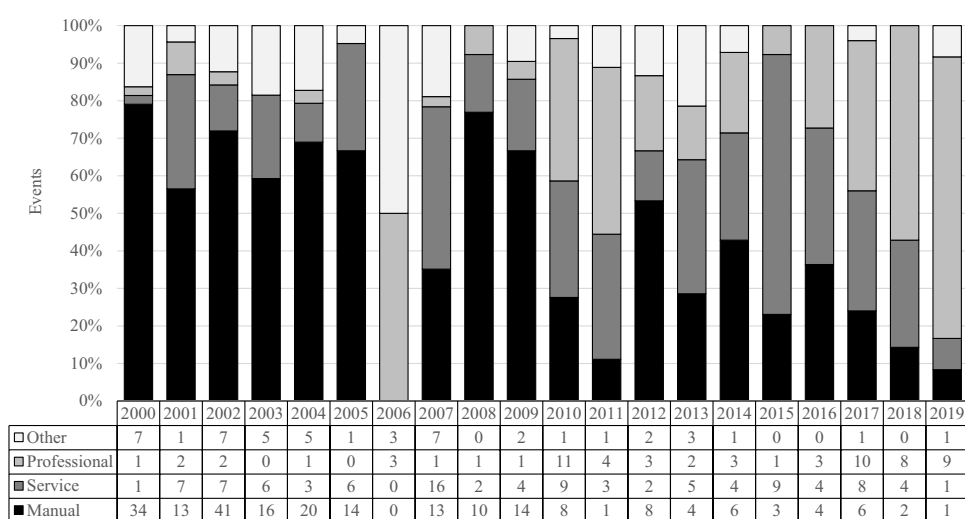


Figure 4. Protest by labour market position (2000–2019).

underfunding of the Bulgarian Academy of Scientists and the health service, they were capable of mobilising and connecting issues to increase their impact.

These data present a mixed picture when attempting to understand changes in levels and patterns of labour protest. The fall in the number of protest events over the period suggests a shift in the nature of contention, possibly reflecting higher levels of organisation and participation. This position is supported by the data showing that actions involving CITUB and Podkrepa were lower in the second half of the series, while other actors played a more prominent role. Stabilisation is also reflected in the shift from claims around unpaid wages towards broader regulatory issues, turning from the firm level to that of the state. Effects of the global financial crisis on labour contention were reflected in the slight re-emergence of protests over unpaid wages but were lower overall. Similarly, during the anti-government protests of 2012–14 labour contention remained low, possibly pointing to a weak link to broader social issues that were being presented more generally.

Discussion

Levels of labour protest in Bulgaria have seen a gradual decline over the 2000–2019 period. Within this broader trend there are some distinct elements that can be identified and considered. As noted previously, there has been a decline in trade union participation and influence globally (Luce 2014), which has been observed across Central and Eastern Europe (Soulsby et al. 2017; Vandaele 2011). In Bulgaria, the number of labour protest events has fallen at a faster rate than general levels of contention. This may be partially connected to economic conditions, as unemployment has fallen, and economic performance has stabilised after a period of considerable upheaval during the 1990s. The absence of a surge in labour protests during the anti-government protests of 2013–2014 suggests a certain distance from the issues that animated these events. As Kirov (2019, 85) notes 'unions did not take part in these spontaneous popular actions [early in 2013 but] ... in autumn 2013 trade unions organised protests and a national strike.' This would seem to echo Offe's (1985) argument that old social movements such as organised labour operate in a system that is relatively stable.

The relative absence of trade union bodies from the contestation of wider social issues in Bulgaria in this way is influenced to some extent by the need to focus on members' interests. As Greskovits (2015, 272) notes, this is shaped by a wider hollowing out, with:

workers' evaporating involvement in the institutions and processes of industrial democracy measured by declining union density or union members' declining participation in contentious and noncontentious forms of collective action.

In such an environment, trade unions in Bulgaria have attempted to safeguard their position by resisting efforts to undermine collective bargaining (Kirov 2019). Championing causes outside their core interests and building connections with other civil society actors could bring opportunities to shape the context in which workers' rights can be pursued. It also presents the risk of diluting the core mission of such bodies while also threatening the breakdown of relationships with employers and regulatory bodies. As Liu (2015) notes, labour's leverage rests on the maintenance of these interconnections. In the case of Bulgaria, union involvement in social movement-type issues has narrowed

rather than broadened in scope over the period being considered. As noted, the pattern over the longer-term appears to suggest that labour-focused contention is increasingly detached from general levels of protest, following a period in which they co-varied. To some extent, this may suggest a maturing of both, as unions focus on their members interests, while other civil society actors have in turn consolidated and strengthened their networks and ability to present claims to the state.

Trade unions featured as the most prominent form of actor involved in labour protests, as is to be expected. However, their involvement in contentious actions has fallen over the period, with labour protests with unnamed union involvement increasing as a proportion of the total. Other actors, like political parties and professional associations such as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, have also seen their rates of involvement in labour protests fall. In parallel with this pattern, there was a higher proportion of service and professional workers engaging in protest later in the time period, with actions by manual workers declining steadily. Increasingly, events have been staged where there was no specific actor identifiable as the target of claims. This shift may be linked to the lasting effects of the 2013–2014 anti-government protest wave, with social actors remaining mobilised or at least retaining the potential to do so, as seen in large-scale protests in 2018 and 2020 (Damyanova 2023; Velinova and Tomov 2020). In this way, the role of the representative unions may be challenged by self-organising groups, as individuals and groups come together to press claims independently. The growing distance from the end of the communist regime also means that the legacies of non-democratic governance continue to fade, opening the space for more creative and diverse forms of organisation alongside demands for stronger democratic representation (Blackington et al. 2024; Damyanova 2023). The shift in labour protest may therefore represent a pattern of normalisation, as issues around unpaid wages are replaced by more everyday, programmatic issues such as workers' rights that can be more effectively achieved through negotiation.

Conclusion

Organised labour faces an increasingly hostile environment globally, as unions are squeezed by the adoption of practices associated with neoliberalism (Chelcea and Druță 2016; Luce 2014). These pressures were amplified by 2007–2008 global financial crisis, particularly in Central and Eastern European states (Greskovits 2015; Soulsby et al. 2017). While unions have the advantage of formal, hierarchical structures to organise members to take direct action, their ability to do so is conditioned by the willingness of members to forego income. In such a challenging environment, the ability to adopt a broader perspective on social issues provides unions an opportunity to identify new allies and present a broader challenge to the state. The ability of unions to adopt such a stance is conditioned by the character of the civil society environment that surrounds them and their willingness to engage with new actors. Where unions do get involved in this way, they will also adopt novel approaches, more in line with protests undertaken by less organised social movement actors.

The end of the Bulgarian communist regime in November 1989 created new opportunities for social and political organising. However, it also left behind a flattened and underprepared civil society sphere, which limited the ability of groups

to organise effectively (Linz and Stepan 1996). In the field of labour relations, the formerly clandestine Podkrepa confederation and the previously state-organised CITUB emerged as key players. Faced with the uncertainty of the transitional period, these groups sought to distance themselves from the political system and focus on organising in the interests of their members, opposing damaging economic reforms. Attempts to develop a tripartite system foundered on the perceived inability of the parties to come to agreement. In such an environment, there were opportunities for the unions to move towards challenging the deeper structural concerns. Examining the pattern of protest in Bulgaria over the 2000–2019 period, it is apparent that there has been less of a shift from specific claims around wages to a greater focus on broader regulations and rights. Claims presented have not broadened significantly beyond the core concerns, with the payment of wages and rates continuing to feature. The apparent failure to adapt is also apparent in the relative absence of union actors during the period of heightened mobilisation in 2013–2014 that brought down the GERB government and challenged its BSP replacement.

Notes

1. Full data set and coding guide are available at: <https://doi.org/10.15124/7a66672e-6b59-4708-aca8-7b2f5a68f97d>.
2. Events reported in this section are derived from various Bulgarian News Agency stories.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the York Research Database at <https://doi.org/10.15124/7a66672e-6b59-4708-aca8-7b2f5a68f97d>.

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