1. Introduction

The transition from school to work represents a significant shift in young adulthood, which affects both later labor market careers and transitions in other life domains. Numerous studies have shown that, in Western societies, the process of entering working life is systematically shaped by educational systems and labor markets (cf. Shavit/Müller 1998; Müller/Gangl 2004). However, the picture we currently have of transitions from school to work in Central and Eastern European (CEE) societies is much less clear. After the breakdown of socialism, these countries followed quite different strategies of institutional development, implementation of market mechanisms, and processing of socialist legacies (Szelenyi/Kostello 1996; Stark/Bruszt 1998). As a consequence, different patterns in the transition from school to work have been emerging (Saar et al. 2008; Kogan/Unt 2005).

The aim of our study is to provide an account of the long-term changes in the transition from school to work in one of the CEE countries. We focus on the Russian case due to the availability of appropriate retrospective life course data and because the process of system transformation in Russia has differed significantly from that of other transition societies (King 2007). The latter is very much caused by the contradictory forces of capitalist and traditional authoritarian socialist institutions that have shaped the country's transformation process. The Russian route to capitalism is also specific because of its distinct legacy. As Gerber/Hout (1995: 612) point out, in the Soviet Union "state socialism had a longer life (...) and was homegrown rather than imposed by a foreign occupying power."

Previous studies on the transition from school to work in the USSR and Russia (Gerber 2003; Titma et al. 2003; Kitaev 1994) either focus on the period after the breakdown of socialism or compare selected aspects of the process during socialism and the transition period.

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Our aim is to give a more comprehensive account of changes in the timing of entering working life, the employment situation after graduation, and the first job over a period of four decades (from 1966 to 2005).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Models of economic coordination and the transition from school to work

In order to analyze the transition from school to work during Russia’s periods of socialism and transition, a general comparative theoretical framework is needed. One possible approach is to adopt the perspective that the general character of the transition from school to work is an expression of different forms of economic coordination.

Modern societies differ systematically with respect to the types of economic coordination they practice. Following Polanyi (1944) and the ‘varieties of capitalism’ framework (Hall/Soskice 2001), we distinguish in ideal-type manner systems of economic redistribution from liberal or coordinated market economies. All three systems induce specific strategies of investments in human capital, which again are reflected by system-specific education and employment structures (cf. Bühler/Konietzka 2008 for a more detailed discussion).

In liberal market economies, educational systems mainly provide general skills. Employers train school leavers according to their own workplace-specific needs. In this institutional setting, selection processes into firm-specific labor markets are of central significance for the transition from school to work. Early careers are characterized by more or less extended periods of job search, unstable and temporary jobs, episodes of unemployment, and frequent returns to the educational system.

In coordinated market economies, the educational and employment systems are closely tied by coordinating relationships. Educational systems are highly standardized and stratified, and in many cases they are occupationally oriented. Pupils are placed on either academic or occupational tracks and vocational training institutions are explicitly designed to equip job starters with occupation-specific skills. In such an institutional context, vocational qualifications significantly predetermine the content and status of the first job and subsequent careers. Entering working life typically entails short periods of job search, long durations of initial jobs, and less frequent returns to the educational system.

In redistributive socialist economies, investments in human capital reflect above all political and macroeconomic needs (Rychlewski 1973; Littlejohn 1988). Central planning authorities define skill profiles and control the supply of vocational qualifications, which are highly standardized, stratified, and vocationally