

### **Perception of social conflicts. What has changed and why?**

Social conflicts may appear in various forms. Some of them, such as wars and uprisings, are radical and violent. However, soft types of social conflict appear even in well integrated societies, where they reflect the existing social inequalities and desires, or efforts to mitigate them. That is why social conflicts are not always a negative phenomenon; they can also have important functions, such as adaptation and social integration. If they are not repressed, if they can be freely expressed, and if they have a non-violent nature, they can support and be conducive to elastic coordination of a social system. Through such conflicts, the social system “learns” how to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances (Turner 2004, p. 188, 202).

One of the topics of the POLPAN project was the perception of conflicts and their intensity in Polish society. The last quarter century, during which the POLPAN project has been conducted, has been a time of dynamic structural changes in Poland. They occurred in the political, economic and demographic sphere, as well as in the domain of social attitudes and opinions. The questions that appear in POLPAN questionnaires can indicate which spheres trigger the most conflicts, and which are relatively free from conflicts. Respondents’ perception of conflicts also reflect their trust in the social, economic and legal systems.

POLPAN questions also focus on the antagonisms in the economic sphere (the rich and the poor, the employers and the employed), and in the political sphere (supporters of certain political options, those in power and the rest of society). The analysis of opinions and beliefs about social conflicts also shows the adaptive competences of respondents – that is, individuals’ ability to adapt psychologically to situations of radical systemic change, such as that which occurred in Poland (Janicka 2000; Słomczyński, Janicka, Mach, Zaborowski 1999). The research on the perception of social conflicts allows one to characterize subjective awareness of social inequalities and individual fears concerning social injustice. It also helps identify phenomena that are perceived as threats to social cohesion.

In the latest wave of POLPAN, as in earlier editions, the block of questions devoted to conflicts was asked at the beginning of the questionnaire. As a result, there were no specific perspectives or biases that might influence answers. This approach (asking questions about opinions before questions about behaviours) facilitates more precise measurement of the real evaluations and attitudes among respondents.

#### **Selected results: political divisions as most antagonizing**

Conflicts in the political sphere are perceived to be the strongest. This includes antagonisms between those in power and the rest of society (84,1% of respondents stated that they are strong or very strong) as well as conflicts between supporters of different parties and political options (85,2% of respondents declared that they are strong or very strong). This perception of political conflicts as especially strong reflects not only a low level of legitimization of power, but also a lack of satisfaction with those who manage state institutions. It also exposes

that, in Poland, people's political opinions and voting behaviours are a very antagonizing element of social relations. Such beliefs among POLPAN respondents explain people's harsh criticism of opposite political groups and involvement in various forms of opposition and anti-government protest.

From the respondents' perspectives, divisions and differences resulting from demographic determinants are not very alienating. Only 17.5% of respondents stated that conflicts between city dwellers and country people are strong. Similarly low conflict potential is found in case of educational divisions (18,9% stated that conflicts between the more and the less educated people are strong). Antagonisms between different generations ("the young and the old") are also relatively minor.

Table 1. Perception of social conflict in the POLPAN 2013 survey

	Conflicts perceived as strong (%)	Mean value	Standard deviation
Conflicts between the rich and the poor	58,0	2,67	0,74
Conflicts between manual and non-manual workers	31,8	2,34	0,73
Conflicts between managers and supervisees	47,8	2,66	0,77
Conflicts between city dwellers and country people	17,5	2,00	0,75
Conflicts between believers and nonbelievers	40,4	2,37	0,90
Conflicts between those in power and the rest of society	84,1	3,23	0,73
Conflicts between firm owners and employees	48,1	2,67	0,78
Conflicts between more and less educated people	18,9	2,06	0,72
Conflicts between supporters of different parties and political options	85,2	3,32	0,73
Conflicts between the younger and older generation	30,2	2,22	0,77

Source: POLPAN data 2013

POLPAN interviewers visit the same group of respondents in each edition of the survey. It can therefore be established whether individuals change their views about intra-group tensions. The next chart is devoted to the group of respondents who completed the survey in

both 1998 and 2013. It indicates the dynamics of answers to identical questions about social conflicts in consecutive waves of POLPAN.

The stability of opinions about inter-group conflicts can be observed in the case of respondents who declared intensive conflicts in the 1998 wave. On the other hand, respondents who stated (in 1998) that conflicts between those in power and the rest of society are weak or do not exist were more prone to have changed their minds 15 years later. Among those respondents who declared in the 1998 survey that the conflict between the rich and the poor is strong or rather strong, 67,6% respondents reiterated this view in 2013. Among respondents who, in 1998, perceived as strong the conflict between those in power and the rest of society, 87% said the same thing in 2013.

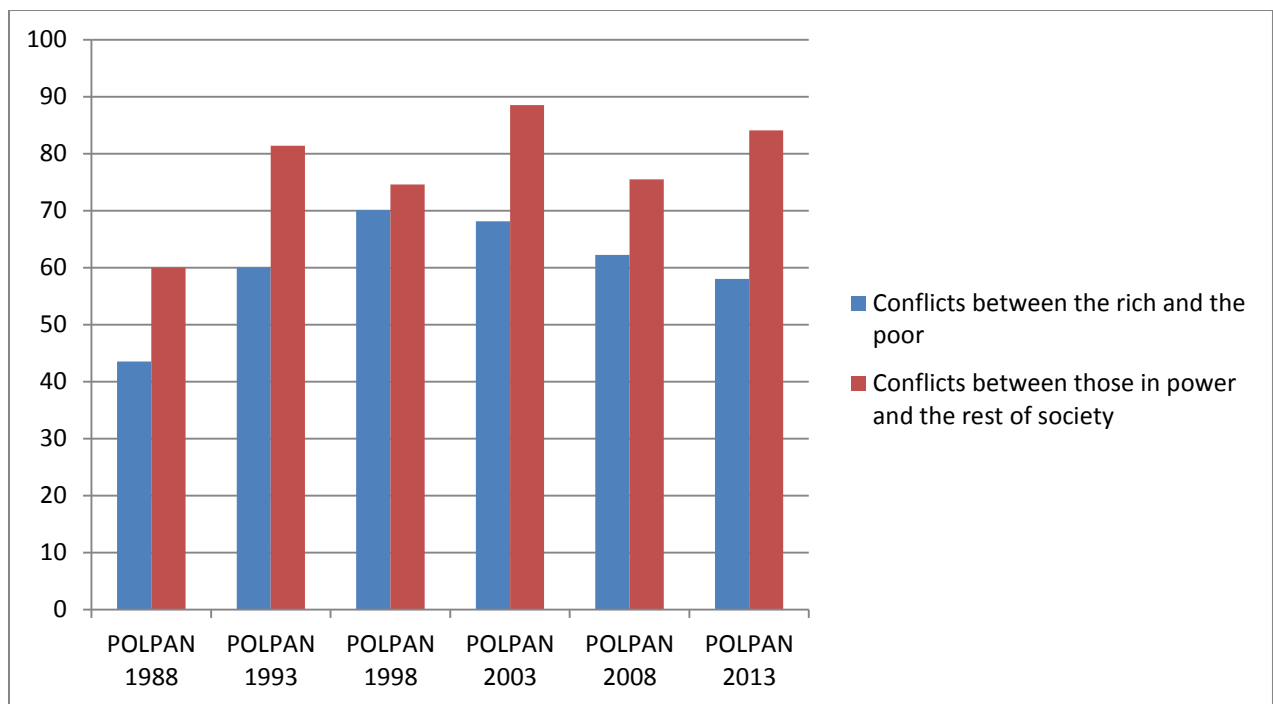
Table 2. Stability of answers to a question about conflicts between the rich and the poor and conflicts between those in power and the rest of society

Conflicts in 1998	Conflicts in 2013		
	Weak or do not exist (%)	Very strong or rather strong (%)	N=100%
Conflicts between the rich and the poor			
Very strong or rather strong	32,4	67,6	747
Weak or do not exist	50,3	49,7	318
Conflicts between those in power and the rest of society			
Very strong or rather strong	13	87	794
Weak or do not exist	22,8	77,3	264

Source: POLPAN 1998 and POLPAN 2013

The dynamics of respondents' perceptions of conflicts between the rich and the poor as well as between those in power and the rest of society is shown in detail in the chart below.

Figure 1. Dynamics of conflict perception, POLPAN 1988-2013



Source: POLPAN data 1988-2013

## Summary

The results of POLPAN 1988-2013 indicate differences in the perception of social conflicts in the political, economic and ideological spheres. The conflicts between those in power and the rest of society, as well as antagonisms between supporters of different parties, are perceived as especially intense. This may suggest a rather low level of legitimacy of political power in Poland. Perception of these conflicts varies substantially by year, which means that the changes may be influenced by concurrent changes in the political environment. Regardless of the POLPAN year, however, these conflicts are seen as sharper than demographic and economic antagonisms. This may partially be a result of the fundamental rules of the democratic system, in which political disputes are carried out and settled publicly. Observing conflicts in the political dimension is an inherent element of a democratic system, and articulating such conflicts facilitates changes and elastic adaptation of the system.

The analysis of results of the successive editions of POLPAN shows that the social transformation during the late 1980s and early 1990s definitely strengthened social perception of inequalities and inter-group antagonisms, in both the political and economic dimensions. After the systemic changes, more respondents believe that inter-group conflicts are strong or very strong. According to the latest editions of POLPAN, conducted between 2003-2013, perception of social conflicts stabilized at more or less the same level. This means that even significant institutional changes (accession to the European Union, changes of the governing parties and political programmes after consecutive elections), if they appear in the context of a democratic system, do not lead to radicalization of opinions and political attitudes.

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