

Social conflicts in Romania and the EU*

Ioan Mărginean

Universitatea din București

In this papers we intend to reveal to what extent social relations are conflicting, respectively, consensual in Romanian society. The analysis focuses on Romania but we also make a comparison with European countries. The data are taken from national and international surveys. The analysis shows that Romanian population perceives particularly the existence of vertical conflicts in society like those between the poor and the rich and those between employees and managers. These findings do not justify predictions of the unavailability of major open social conflicts, but emphasize the characteristics of the social life. The actions required in such cases should be aimed at smoothing the conflicting states in the society. Such measures include targeted public policies as well as a certain behaviour of the social actors and population aiming to enhance consensus, rather than dissensus. This should happen because a society ridden by many conflicts cannot function even though there is no society with no conflicts at all.

Keywords: social relations, conflicts, groups

Cuvinte-cheie: relații sociale, conflicte, grupuri

Perceptions of social conflicts in Romania

The existence of social conflicts in a society reveals negative aspects of that society and, therefore, of the quality of life of the population. The higher the level of indicators expressing the existence of social conflicts, the weaker are the social cohesion, solidarity and inclusion. On the contrary, the low values or the lack of conflicts are associated with high values of the social cohesion, solidarity and inclusion, with positive effects on the quality of life of the population.

In an attempt to give a definition, as comprehensive as possible, we defined the quality of life as a multidimensional domain

consisting of the „assembly of elements referring to the physical, economic, social, cultural, politic, health situation in which people live, the content and nature of their activities, the characteristics of the social relations and processes in which they participate, the goods and services to which they have access, the consumption patterns they adopted, the way of life and life style, the evaluation of the circumstances and results of the activities related to their expectations, as well as the subjective states of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, happiness, frustration, etc.” (I. Mărginean, A. Bălașa, 2002, 2005). In this incomplete listing of quality of life elements, the social conflicts are part of the sphere of social processes and relations. In this analysis the issue of social

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conflicts is approached through the evaluations and perceptions which people have of particular phenomena. The social conflicts, as macrosocial phenomena, are usually approached by their identification and characterization from the exterior, but for a satisfactory analysis we need to rely on evaluations by the population. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that they have a latent dimension, at the same time, which can't be determined without evaluations and perceptions.

The Quality of Life Diagnosis surveys, conducted by The Research Institute for Quality of Life on representative national samples, starting in 1991, used indicators for six types of social conflicts, either vertical, such as the conflicts between *the poor and the rich*, between *employees and enterprise managers*, or horizontal, between the *young and the elder*; *between people with different political opinions*; *between people of different religions*; and between *the Romanians and the inhabitants of other nationalities*.

This listing is not exhaustive, other surveys like European Quality of Life Survey 2003 of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions also includes another type of conflict like that between women and men. Nevertheless, the six categories of conflicts included in our survey are undoubtedly important for the analysis of the level of social cohesion and solidarity existing within the society.

The possible vertical conflicts appear within the relations between the social groups which hold positions arranged hierarchically. They are structured according to the rather different interests of those groups, but based on the nature of the relations between them. In other words, the vertical conflicts are displayed especially if the groups from the bottom of the social hierarchy don't have adequate economic, social and political situations which are close to their expectations. The horizontal conflicts appear between groups of quite close social positions, possible with different social statuses and roles, which are labelled according to stereotypes, social representations etc.

These six categories of conflicts, with the typology of vertical conflicts and horizontal conflicts, don't manifest in an isolated way; often they overlap and amplify mutually because the same persons belong concomitantly to several of the groups considered here, and the conflictualist states build up because of the aggregation of the disfavoured and favoured positions. For instance, the horizontal conflicts can be fuelled by the different hierarchical positions: elder, manager, rich *versus* young, employee, poor.

Returning to the actual survey, to the question: Is the Romanian society perceived as a conflictualist one, the answer is clear cut, as long as an important part of the surveyed individuals indicate the existence of conflicts within the society (table 1).

Table 1. *Perceptions of the existence of conflicts within the Romanian society % (the difference to 100% are non-answers)*

Conflict intensity	Social conflicts between:					
	Poor and rich	Employees and managers	Young and elderly	People with different political views	People of different religions	Romanians of different nationalities
1. To a very great extent	26	19	15	43	16	9
2. To a great extent	34	41	35	35	23	22
3. To a certain extent	26	28	34	14	33	38
4. To a low extent	8	6	9	3	14	18
5. Not at all	5	5	6	3	13	12
Total	99	99	99	98	99	99

Source: Quality of life Diagnosis, Research Institute for Quality of Life, 2006

Indeed, the survey data converge towards indicating the perception of a conflictualist society over the average intensity, particularly concerning the *conflicts between people with different political views*; there is a true political overheating of the Romanian society: 2 persons out of 5 perceive a very high intensity of these conflicts.

After the political conflicts with quite high values, follow the *conflicts between the poor and rich, and between the employees and managers*. If we consider the cumulated values of the levels of high conflict intensity (presence to a very great extent + presence a great extent), we reach values of 78% (4 persons out of 5) for the political conflicts and 60% (3 persons out of 5) for the vertical

conflicts (poor-rich; employees-managers). The conflicts between different generations also have significant perceived values: the top two intensities cumulate 50% of the answers (one person out of two). Finally, it may be said that, without being ignored, the religious and ethnical conflicts are perceived as having a lower intensity. The top two levels of intensities sum 38% of the answers for the religious conflicts and 31% for the ethnical conflicts.

For the period covered by *Quality of Life Diagnosis* surveys (1991-2006) the perception of conflicts in the Romanian society remained at quite close values for each domain. The most critical situation is with the political conflicts followed by the work relations (table 2).

Table 2. Perceptions of the existence of conflicts within the Romanian society, average values – scale from 1 (to a very great extent) to 5 (not at all)

Conflicts	2006	2003	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992	1991
Poor-rich	2.3	2.4	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5
Employees-managers	2.4	2.2	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.4	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.3
Young-elder	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.8
People with different political views	1.8	2.1	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.3	2.0	1.9	2.1	2.0	1.9
People of different religions	2.9	3.0	2.7	2.6	3.0	3.2	3.1	3.1	3.3	3.1	2.9
Romanians and ethnic minorities	3.0	3.2	2.9	2.7	3.0	3.5	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.0	2.5

Source: Quality of Life Diagnosis, Research Institute for Quality of Life, 1991-2006.

The higher (closer to 5) are the average values, the less conflicting are the relations and vice versa, the more these values tend towards 1, the higher is the degree of conflictuality. As it can be seen, only the ethnic and religious conflicts have values above the theoretical mean of the scale of 5 levels of intensity (i.e. 3), but they are still quite far from the desirable value, (5), showing the lack of conflicts. The political and work relations conflicts are evaluated as the most critical.

Surprisingly, striking low values of the no-conflict perceptions were noticed for all six categories analysed here. Thus, in 2006, the „not at all” option scored under 5% for

the political and work relations. The Romanian society doesn't seem to be highly cohesive and solidary, therefore inclusive and these perceptions are in accordance with the objective data on the very unequal distribution of population incomes, with the values of the deprivation indicators, etc.

On the other hand, at least part of the political disputes plays the part of concealing the vertical conflicts, alleviating their pressure. Other conflicts, such as the ethnic ones, although have the lowest intensity, seem to be amplified by political means, through the support which some political actors of the majority of the political spectrum give to nationalist, xenophobe, populist,

stands, and also by the isolationist stands overbidding the acquirement of advantages and so-called positive discriminations displayed by representatives of the ethnic minorities. Actually, the politicisation of the economic and social life in Romania is quite obvious, starting with the presence of politicians in the Boards of Administration of the state companies, to their involvement in Monitoring Boards from the governance of the various public services; from the top level to the local interest; the existence of the ethnic political parties (and ethnic organisations assimilated to the political parties); unions, professional and entrepreneur associations politicisation; even NGOs politicisation. It is no matter of coincidence that the population considers that the politicians have been the most favoured by the period of transition while in the same they are the least trusted by the people. We may say that while the state „withdraws” the politicians remain strongly involved in very diverse areas, where they should normally not be involved. The idea according to which the politicians in such positions, created artificially by law, are state representatives doesn't stand the day by day test of truth; they are the representatives of political parties and, in the last instance, they represent themselves. Without being recruited on the basis of the professional competency, these politicians succeed to manage various public agencies and institutions, directorates and their corresponding services, with often mediocre, if not disastrous results, which affect the efficacy and efficiency of these institutions while people's problems remain unsolved. In order to achieve a better balance in the society, the politicians are expected to self-limit in substituting to the state's organisms, beyond their natural area of competence, and to improve the performance in their own area of activity, which is so important in the modern society.

Looking at the pattern described by conflicts by socio-demographic variables, we find consensus rather than a dissensus in the perceptions of the conflict in the Romanian

society. For instance, there is a quasitotal consensus between *men and women* regarding the existence of conflicts. The other socio-demographic characteristics have relevance only in the case of some categories of conflict. The *age* matters in the perception of the ethnic conflicts: the young and adults indicate in a higher proportion the existence of conflicts than the elder. Also, the *occupation and professional status* matter in differentiating the perceptions for the religious conflicts (the unemployed and agricultural workers and the self-employed perceive less religious conflicts than the workers, housewives and employees).

The *education* is relevant to the values recorded for two categories of conflicts: the persons without education perceive less the existence of political and religious conflicts compared with the people who graduated at least the gymnasium. The *residential area* also differentiates the perception of three categories of conflicts. On the one hand, the rural population perceives less the existence of political and ethnic conflicts than the urban population. On the other hand, the rural is stronger associated with the perception of poor-rich conflicts than the urban.

Special mentions have to be made about the perceptions of intergenerational, poor and rich and ethical conflicts by relevant groups. We noticed that intergenerational conflicts are perceived at the same level by the different age groups. In fact, we have here a kind of reciprocal prejudice: the older people do not give enough credit to young people while the young reject the older generation by pushing them into retirement.

Looking at the perceptions of poor-rich conflicts we find they register higher values in case of low income categories in comparison to that of higher income groupings. Mean value is 2.1 for the category with self-estimated low income (those who place themselves on the first two positions of a 10 point scale from very poor to very rich) while the mean for category with a self-estimated high income (those who place themselves on the last two positions of a 10 point scale from very poor to very rich) is 2.56.

The ethnic status differentiates significantly only the perceptions of conflicts of ethnical type: Romanian population registers a mean 3.06 for the existence of such conflicts, while for the Magyar population the mean is 2.67.

When analyzing the categories of conflict, we notice that the values of the *employee-manager* and *young-elder* conflicts do not vary by socio-demographic categories. Other types of conflicts vary according to certain socio-demographic characteristics.

The *social conflicts are a source of fears* particularly for the employees and for the housewives, while according to the age structure, rather for the young. Overall population, the perception of the social conflicts in Romania is strongly associated with the fear of the subjects of the social conflicts for them and their families. The strongest associations, such as those mentioned here, occur in the case of political conflicts (84% of the subjects who fear much the conflicts within the society perceive the existence of high intensity conflicts between the people with different political views); followed by poor-rich and employees-managers conflicts (71% coincidence of response between the fear and the existence of the conflict); and by the conflicts between young-elderly (65%); the last positions are occupied by the religious (43%) and ethnic conflicts (33%). To complete the picture, we must add that the people who don't fear the conflicts also perceive the existence of social conflicts in the Romanian society, particularly political

conflicts (75%); conflicts between the poor and rich (54%); between employees and managers (52%); the lowest values were recorded for the religious (36%) and ethnic and intergenerational (27% each) conflicts.

Perceptions of the existence of social conflicts in Romania and EU countries

The position of Romania with regard to social conflicts among European countries can be assigned by looking at the survey data conducted in 2003 under the aegis of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. The data (EQLS) supports the idea that important social conflicts are perceived in Romania. The above-mentioned survey uses the expression „tension” and as variants of response were: „a lot of tension”; „some tension” and „no tension”. Included were the vertical tensions (poor-rich; employees-managers) and horizontal tensions (women-men; young-elder; between different ethnic and racial groups).

The highest intergenerational tensions of all 27 surveyed countries (25 EU member states and two countries in process of accession: Romania and Bulgaria) was noticed in Romania – 29% (table 3). A closer value was recorded only in Greece (27%). High values were also recorded in France (23%), Austria (22%) and Belgium (21%).

Table 3. *Social tensions (proportion of persons reporting the existence of a „lot of tension” between the various social groups)*

	Poor-rich	Employees-managers	Women-men	Young-elder	Ethnic and racial groups
Romania	53	49	17	29	33
EU 25 average	35	36	11	16	45
Highest value of the tensions	62 (Lithuania)	61 (Greece)	27 (Greece)	29 (Romania)	62 (France)
Lowest value of the tensions	4 (Denmark)	6 (Denmark)	4 (Latvia)	3 (Denmark)	10 (Lithuania)

Source: European Quality of life Survey (EQLS), 2003.

For other three types of tensions, the values in Romania are higher than the EU average, too: poor-rich; employees-managers and women-men. Concerning the poor-rich conflicts, higher values than in Romania were recorded only in three other countries, besides Lithuania (Bulgaria – 54%, Greece – 58%, Hungary – 61%). Nearby with high values too, are Poland – 52%, Estonia – 50%, Slovakia – 49%, France – 46%, Latvia and the Czech Republic with 44% each, Slovenia – 43%. The value of employees-managers tensions in Romania is exceeded, besides Greece, by Poland and Lithuania with 53% each; Slovenia and France have similar values with Romania (49%), while Hungary with 47% is close. The women-men tensions recorded higher values than in Romania in three countries (Greece – 27%, Spain and Malta, with 20% each, Luxemburg – 18%), while the Great Britain recorded the same values as in Romania; Belgium is close with 16%. The social and ethnic conflicts, although with quite high values in Romania, are below the EU average having in front of it many countries except France, 19 countries in all. Particularly high values were recorded in The Netherlands (61%), Belgium (60%), Czechia (56%), Hungary (55%).

Trying to make a synthetic characterization of the situation from Romania, we may conclude that the values as such are a first signal of the seriousness of the social tensions in Romania and they follow the same pattern as in the national survey.

Comparing with the results recorded in other EU countries, we may determine not

just the place of Romania, but the size of the distance from the benchmarks.

Indeed, comparing the seriousness of the social tensions in Romania with the other EU countries, besides the fact that some types of tensions have similar or even higher values in other countries than in Romania, we observe the large distance from the average EU values for 4 such tensions (poor-rich; employees-managers, women-men and young-elder); a very large distance separates us from the countries with the lowest values for social tensions. Denmark is the country with the lowest social tensions, but one of the former socialist countries (Latvia) has the lowest level of women-men conflicts, while Lithuania holds both the most critical position (rich-poor conflicts) and the best position (ethnic and racial conflicts); Romania and France also have one most critical position each, while Greece has two such positions, being the country with the highest perceived conflictualist situation.

The quite high values of the perceptions of conflicts in the Romanian society is a strong signal which must be noticed by the authorities, by the various political and civil organisations, by the public at large and specialists with the purpose to identify those actions which will ease the conflictual states. The measures of intervention are more necessary as the perception of conflicts existence doesn't remain just an observation, but is strongly associated with the fears of the population.

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