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The Perceived Social Conflicts in Poland, 1988-2023: A Discontinuity or a Growing Trend in Popular Perception?

Krystyna Janicka
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology,
Polish Academy of Sciences
Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland
e-mail: krystyna.janicka@ifispan.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4355-2011

Abstract The objective of this paper is to explore the stability and change of social conflict perceptions in Poland between 1988 and 2023. The research focused on four key domains of social life—wealth, labor, managerial roles, and political power — and aimed to trace how public perceptions of conflict in these areas shifted across two fifteen- year periods of Polish history — late socialist and early post-socialist (1988-2003) — and the ups and downs of Western-style democracy and market capitalism (2008-2023), interspaced by Poland's entry into the European Union, from referendum to full legal adjustment (2003-2008). The analysis is based on examination of the extent to which these perceptions were consistent over time and how they might have been institutionalized following significant political and economic transformations.

INTRODUCTION

The main issues of this paper pertain to the "awareness of conflicts." This concept was introduced into Polish sociology in the 1960s (Wesołowski 1966), and was used for studying class structure and the theory of group interests (Adamski 1986). As seen from a theoretical perspective, most problems involving awareness of social conflicts pertain to the public's legitimization of the political order. During the last decades of state socialism in Poland, the realization of conflicts in the

social structure constituted an essential part of empirical studies of psychological functioning (Nowak 1969, 1989; Słomczyński and Wesołowski 1973; Koralewicz 1987; Domański 1987; Janicka 1987). In the initial transformation of the political and economic system, they were studied in the context of mental adjustment to radical social change (Adamski 1993; Janicka 1993, 2000; see also Słomczyński, Janicka, Mach and Zaborowski 1999).

In one of the papers it has been argued (Janicka 2000, p. 77) that the basic pattern of the common perception of social divisions was not developed during the post-1989 transition but some years earlier, at the beginning of the 1980s, as an effect of the processes that triggered the formation of Solidarity and the introduction of martial law (for review, see Słomczynski, Janicka, and Wesołowski 1994). At the time of Solidarity's formation, there had already occurred a steep rise in the common perception of power relations as a source of conflicts, manifested in everyday language by continuous references to "them versus us." In addition, at the beginning of the post-1989 transition, opinions about income as a source of conflict became common nationwide. "Them versus us" started to refer not only to politics but also to economic division.

This paper's starting point of observation is 1988, the last phase of state socialism in Poland. I distinguished two fifteen-year periods: 1988-2003 as a period of the pre-accession of Poland to the European Union, and 2008-2023 as a period of relatively consolidated democracy and market economy. Between the two periods, we have a short period of 2003-2008. On June 7-8, 2003, 17 million Poles turned out to vote in the country's referendum on joining (or not) the European Union. The next year, 2004, Poland's accession to the European Union had immediate consequences not only for political and economic conditions but also for social consciousness. In this period discontent with high unemployment, government spending cuts on health and welfare, corruption and affairs led to the defeat of the leftist (post-communist) government. This short period, with parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2007, was marked by intense political struggles between populists and liberal groupings.

The core objective of this article is to reconstruct the perception of social divisions and to determine the degree of perceived potential for conflict-generation. One way to get through to this sphere of social awareness is to address people directly, asking them to assess the relations between various social groups in terms of conflicts between them. The perception of conflicts generated by social divisions with respect to wealth (rich vs. poor), the type of work (manual vs. non-manual labor), managerial roles (supervisors vs. subordinates), and political power (the rulers vs. the ruled) are examined. These are important dimensions of social inequality to which the mass public actually and potentially reacts. Research in Poland (e.g. Nowak, 1969; 1989; Janicka, 2000; 2002) and other countries (Hertel

& Schöneck, 2019: Spruyt, Van Droogenbroeck, Van Noord, 2018; Hadler, 2017) shows that people perceive conflicts in these dimensions to varying degrees.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Besides the descriptive value of the presented data on perception of social conflicts in important domains of social life, this article raises research questions important for social theory and our understanding of social changes during the systemic transformation of a society. The research addresses the following core questions:

1. To what extent do perceptions of conflict differ across such domains of social life as wealth, labor, managerial roles, and political power? Could these perceptions be aggregated into some meaningful concept?
2. How has the perception of social conflicts evolved in Poland from the late period of state socialism through the post-accession democratic phase? Was there a significant shift in public consciousness following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, or did it reinforce previously established conflict lines?

To address these questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perception Consistency Hypothesis. This hypothesis postulates that perceptions of conflicts are significantly related to each other. If a person sees strong conflict in one domain, it is likely that this person sees strong conflict in another domain; the feelings with respect to the lack of conflicts also go together. A justification of this hypothesis stems from social identity theory, proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), suggesting that individuals derive part of their identity from their group affiliations, leading to favoritism towards in-group members and prejudice against out-group members. As it is argued in the literature, this bias can enhance consistent perceptions of conflict between groups. In addition, the framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007) stipulates that media influence public perception about the nature and extent of these conflicts, providing consistent images.

To further justify the Perception Consistency Hypothesis (H1), we can delve deeper into the psychological and sociocultural processes at play, using both social identity theory and framing theory. According to the identity theory, the ingroup bias manifests itself in the way individuals perceive and interpret conflicts. If individuals from group A perceive a strong conflict in one area, they are likely to view different types of conflicts similarly through the lens of their A-group's perspective, which simplifies their worldview. The process in group B may deal with the consistent view of a low level of conflicts in different domains. Group perspectives favor consistency between domains of conflict on different levels.

I claim that this process is intensified by the way issues are framed by external sources (media, news outlets, political leaders). When media outlets frame conflicts

between specific social or political groups in a manner that emphasizes animosity or division, people's perceptions of conflicts in other domains may also align with this framing. This can lead to perceptual consistency across various domains of conflict because once individuals are exposed to certain frames, their worldview becomes aligned in a way that amplifies similar conflicts across domains.

For testing this hypothesis, the researcher should assume the criteria for rejecting the null hypothesis in statistical terms. In our case, the null hypothesis means that one cannot reject the hypothesis that correlations between perceptions of conflicts in different domains are equal to zero and that the pattern of these correlations does not allow for data reduction in the form of creating a new summary construct. Rejecting the null hypothesis confirms the substantive hypothesis, in our case, the hypothesis stipulating the consistency of conflict perceptions.

H2: Conflict institutionalization hypothesis. This hypothesis is grounded in the idea that conflicts, whether political, economic, or social, can be managed and transformed by stable institutions over time, and this is noted by the public. Over time, conflict may move away from unregulated clashes over scarce resources to being channeled through institutional mechanisms, governance policies in particular, so that it is viewed not just as something to be eradicated, but as something to be managed. Management of wealth inequality, provision of better allocation of people to jobs, involvement of trade unions in labor disputes, and ensuring that a variety of views and interests can be expressed and contested through formal channels are examples of conflict institutionalization. According to the hypothesis, in the long run, people assume the state institutionalizes conflicts and these become more and more stable. Regularized processes for managing conflicts lead to predictable outcomes and reduce uncertainty (Stryker, 1994; Clemens & Cook, 1999).

Conflict institutionalization is a complex process. Indeed, "it is important to remember that institutionalization does not mean just to increase the density of the network of relations between actors or to change the relative 'positions' of the actors in the conflict system. Rather, it aims at an *ameliorative transformation* of whole conflict processes, including their cognitive context, and extends over the whole setting of conflict relations" (Siedschlag, 2000: 14). The whole setting of conflict relations includes conflict perception by the public.

Empirically, we expect that the intertime correlations of perceived conflict would increase. In particular, the initial interval 1988-1993 correlation should be low since this was a period of turbulence in the political and economic realm. Another period with low correlation could be just after the accession of Poland to the European Union, in our case, reflected in the interval 2002-2008. I call these "breakthrough periods." After these periods, the conflict institutionalization hypothesis stipulates an increase in correlation over time.

DATA

The data from the Polish Panel Survey, POLPAN, 1989-2023, constitute an empirical basis for the analysis presented in this article. POLPAN is a unique program of panel surveys carried out since 1988 in 5-year intervals, and focused on describing the social structure and its change during the last 35 years in Poland (see, polpan.org; Słomczyński, Tomescu-Dubrow, Dubrow, 2015; Tomescu-Dubrow et al., 2022). The initial study was based on a representative sample of the population of men and women residing in Poland, aged 21-65. Since 1998, each wave has contained the renewal sample of the youngest cohort. With appropriate post-stratification weights, each wave provides information for a sample representative for people aged 21-65, which I use in this article. Thus, the paper focuses on examining the perception of conflicts among comparable representative samples for which a core is composed of individuals interviewed at least two times.

I take advantage of the fact that people were interviewed at times t and t-1. In this case, the data includes older people, with the upper age limit increasing by 5 years for each wave. For 2023 data, the upper age limit is 100. I use panel data, and the upper age limit changes dependently on whether I use only two consecutive waves or more.

Popular opinions on social conflicts are examined by utilizing the following questionnaire item: *In all countries, there appear to be differences and conflicts among various population groups. I will name various groups of people and then ask you to tell me whether the conflicts between these groups are very strong, strong, rather weak, or if there are no conflicts at all.* For the sake of overtime comparability, in this article, I discuss only those dimensions of the potential conflict that are shared by all surveys, 1988-2023. These dimensions correspond to the following social divisions: rich vs. poor, non-manual versus manual labor, supervisors vs. subordinates, and rulers (authority) versus ruled (society). One can argue that social differentiation in wealth, nature of work, position in the organization of work, and access to power define the main dimensions of social structure.

Each respondent's opinion on the intensity of social conflicts between groups in each dimension is measured on a four-point scale, from 1 (denoting the minimal level, "no conflicts at all"), through 2 ("rather week conflicts") and 3 ("strong conflicts") to 4 (denoting the maximal level, "very strong conflicts"). This unbalanced scale has been tested extensively since 1987 in the International Social Survey Project (module on social inequality) and works well in the international context, including Poland (Hadler, 2017).

In presenting the data in percentage form, I combine answers 3 and 4, indicating the perception of conflicts as intense (strong). I follow the practice of treating

answers 1, 2, 3, and 4 as having the property of an interval scale (Zagórski, 2006; Hadler, 2017). Thus, I provide the conflict-perception variables' means, standard deviations, and standard correlations and subject these variables to principal component analysis. Treating answers 1, 2, 3, and 4 as an ordinal scale, and relying on medians, absolute differences, tetrachoric correlations, and optimal factoring, does not change the substantive results.

PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL CONFLICTS DURING THE PRE-ACCESSION OF POLAND TO THE EUROPEAN UNION, 1988-2003

This section will look at the 'first transition period' of 1988–1993 and the subsequent stages of Poland's modern socio-economic history before accession to the European Union. The basic data is presented in Table 1.

In 1988, at the final stage of the communist system, which had neither the proper legitimization nor a high degree of social acceptance, belief in the strong conflict-generating potential of the *rulers vs. ruled* was expressed by nearly 2/3 of the respondents (60.0%). However, when the state regained its sovereignty and the aspirations toward self-determination were fulfilled, the belief in the conflict-generating role of government unexpectedly rose to 81.4% in 1993 (a difference of 21.4% in comparison with the previous period); it fell to 73.1% in 1998 and rose to 88.0% in 2003 (the highest level in the initial period of the transformation).

Between 1988 and 2003, public perception of social conflict among people aged 21–65 generally increased across all categories. Conflict between "the rich vs. the poor" showed a steady rise, reflecting growing concern about economic inequality. Similarly, conflict between "supervisors and subordinates" intensified over time, indicating increased awareness of workplace hierarchies.

The perception of conflict between "manual vs. non-manual labor" also grew, though more moderately, suggesting that occupational class divisions became more visible. However, the most striking trend was in the "rulers vs. the ruled" category. By 2003, it had the highest mean conflict rating (3.43) and the highest percentage of positive responses (88%), pointing to a significant surge in perceived political or authority-related tension.

Summarizing the data on change in perception of conflicts, it is worthwhile to point out a steady increase in perceived conflict for "supervisors vs. subordinates" and "rich vs. poor," a sharp spike in "rulers vs. ruled" in 2003, indicating a surge in perceived political or authority-related conflict. Occupational conflicts ("manual vs. non-manual labor") rose modestly but steadily. This is consistent with another study (Derczyński, 2003).

Table 1. Perception of conflicts of people aged 21-65 in 1988, 1993, 1998, and 2003

	Percentage of positive responses	Mean (scale: from 1= no conflict, to 4= strong conflict)	Standard deviation	Loadings from principal component analysis
Perception of conflicts in 1988				
The rich vs. the poor	43.5	2.43	0.81	0.552
Manual vs. non-manual labor	32.6	2.27	0.78	0.581
Supervisors vs. subordinates	37.0	2.34	0.79	0.526
The rulers vs. the ruled	60.0	2.86	0.84	0.386
Perception of conflicts in 1993				
The rich vs. the poor	60.0	2.71	0.82	0.552
Manual vs. non-manual labor	35.3	2.30	0.78	0.615
Supervisors vs. subordinates	39.3	2.42	0.78	0.552
The rulers vs. the ruled	81.4	2.21	0.73	0.365
Perception of conflict in 1998				
The rich vs. the poor	67.5	2.84	0.76	0.684
Manual vs. non-manual labor	44.2	2.45	0.71	0.790
Supervisors vs. subordinates	49.6	2.57	0.75	0.765
The rulers vs. the ruled	73.1	2.96	0.74	0.585
Perception of conflicts in 2003				
The rich vs. the poor	67.9	2.85	0.79	0.554
Manual vs. non-manual labor	45.8	2.47	0.78	0.627
Supervisors vs. subordinates	56.8	2.70	0.79	0.571
The rulers vs. the ruled	88.0	3.43	0.70	0.220

PCA 1988: KMO = 0.661, Bartlett's sphericity = 882.8 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 51.1
PCA 1993: KMO = 0.683, Bartlett's sphericity = 776.0 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 50.5
PCA 1998: KMO = 0.687, Bartlett's sphericity = 1049.4 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 50.4
PCA 2003: KMO = 0.673, Bartlett's sphericity = 586.7 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 49.3

Inter-item correlations for each wave are of medium size, in the majority ranging from 0.3 to 0.5. To check whether responses for all questions on conflicts obtained in a given time can be aggregated into one summary variable I use principal component analysis (PCA) as a reduction of data technique, rather than confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which assumes the existence of a latent construct "explaining" answers to the questions. In the PCA application, answers to the questions are treated as error-free indicators that "define" or "establish" the construct. To what extent the summary construct is valid and reliable, one can infer from its relationships to its indicators and from the overall PCA statistics.

The last column of Table 1 contains loadings that indicate the extent to which a construct ("factor") is linked to a given indicator. The loadings are of a moderate size, all above 0.3, with one exception. Some results are surprising. For example, while this category of power was highly salient, its PCA loading declined in 2003, suggesting that political conflict may have become a distinct dimension of concern, somewhat separate from class and workplace-related tensions.

In Table 1, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, measuring how suited data is for factor analysis, shows that the proportion of variance among variables that might be common variance is far from ideal (1.00), and ranges from 0.661 to 0.687. Usually, such values are considered just above the lowest accepted value (0.600). However, Bartlett's test of sphericity, comparing an observed correlation matrix to the identity matrix, confirms that there is enough redundancy between the variables that we can summarize them with a meaningful factor. Strictly speaking, we can reject a null hypothesis that the variables are orthogonal, with a great degree of confidence ($p < 0.001$). Thus, the perception consistency hypothesis, H1, is confirmed.

I rely on a factor created by PCA, expressed as a summary of four variables weighted by appropriate PCA scores. I name this factor "perceived conflict intensity." For each wave, it is standardized with the mean equal 0 and the standard deviation equal 1. Table 2 provides the correlations between interwave conflict intensity. Pair-wise deletion (above the diagonal) informs us about the correlation between two consecutive waves, while least-wise deletion (below the diagonal) refers to inter-wave correlation for the panelists, persons who participated in all first waves of the POLPAN study.

Table 2. Correlation between perceived conflict intensity in 1988, 1993, 1998, and 2003, with pair-wise deletion (above the diagonal) and least-wise deletion (below the diagonal)

	Conflict intensity, 1988	Conflict intensity, 1993	Conflict intensity, 1998	Conflict intensity, 2003
Conflict intensity, 1988	1.000	0.116	0.155	0.130
Conflict intensity, 1993	0.131	1.000	0.307	0.229
Conflict intensity, 1998	0.178	0.271	1.000	0.332
Conflict intensity, 2003	0.150	0.246	0.383	1.000

There is a very weak positive correlation between conflict intensity in 1988 and in1993, suggesting some breakthrough in how people assess the conflict intensity in the period of political and economic turbulence. The difference between

pairwise and leastwise correlation (r = 0.116 vs. r = 0.130) shows that the long-term panelists are a little more stable in their opinions in this period.

From the point of view of the test of the conflict institutionalization hypothesis, the most important correlations are those close to the main diagonal. We observe a noticeable increase in correlations: 0.116 and 0.130 for 1988-1993, 0.271 and 0.307 for 1993-1998, and 0.332 and 0.388 for 1998-2003. We conclude that conflict intensity in the earlier years (1988, 1993) is weakly related to later years (1998, 2003), though the relationships strengthen between 1993 and 1998, and 1998 and 2003. Overall, this pattern is in agreement with the conflict institutionalization hypothesis, H2.

PERCEPTION OF CONFLICTS 2003-2008

The years from 2003 to 2008 separate two periods: pre-accession of Poland to the European Union and "normal" development of society integrating with Western Europe. The accession brought about economic opportunities but also challenges related to governance and national identity. The party that came to power in 2005 under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński (Law and Justice Party, PiS) promoted a conservative agenda and often clashed with liberal factions within Polish society and politics. Debates over issues such as abortion rights and LGBT rights became particularly contentious, reflecting broader societal divisions. Social conflicts during this period were primarily driven by economic inequality, youth unemployment, and differing views on social policies. It is important, however, that at the end of this period, in 2007, new elections were held and the government of Civic Platform was formed.

Surprisingly, for this turbulent period, 2003-2008, the intensity of perceived conflicts diminished significantly in both statistical and substantive terms: from 67.9% to 58.7% for rich vs. poor, from 45.8% to 40.3% for manual vs. non-manual labor, from 56.8% to 53.8% for supervisors vs. subordinates, and from 88.0% to 74.8% for the rulers vs. the ruled. The diminished intensity of perceived conflicts with respect to wealth (9.2%) and political power (13.2%) is particularly noticeable. However, the expectation that the correlation between the overall perception of conflicts in 2003 and 2008 given below is supported by our data. This correlation (r = 0.128) is almost as low as that between 1988 and 1993 (r = 0.116). Thus, this period can be treated as a discontinuity, after which evolutionary changes in the conflict perception are expected.

PERCEPTION OF CONFLICTS DURING THE STABILIZED PHASE OF TRANSFORMATION, 2008-2023

As shown in Table 3, in 2008, the most strongly perceived conflict was between "the rulers vs. the ruled," with 74.8% of respondents identifying it as a significant conflict, though its PCA loading indicates that it was less closely tied to the overall perception of conflicts. "Manual vs. non-manual labor" and "supervisors vs. subordinates" had moderately high PCA loadings, suggesting that these types of conflicts were more strongly tied to the general perception of conflict in society at that time.

Table 3. Perception of conflicts of persons aged 21-65 in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2023

	Percentage of positive responses	Mean (scale: from 1= no conflict, to 4= strong conflict)	Standard deviation	Loadings from principal component analysis
Perception of conflicts in 2008				
The rich vs. the poor	58.7	2.68	0.79	0.564
Manual vs. non-manual labor	40.3	2.39	0.72	0.621
Supervisors vs. subordinates	53.6	2.62	0.74	0.594
The rulers vs. the ruled	74.8	2.99	0.75	0.377
Perception of conflicts in 2013				
The rich vs. the poor	56.7	2.64	0.74	0.495
Manual vs. non-manual labor	35.5	2.35	0.71	0.582
Supervisors vs. subordinates	49.9	2.64	0.75	0.559
The rulers vs. the ruled	86,0	3.22	0.74	0.379
Perception of conflict in 2018				
The rich vs. the poor	49.4	2.54	0.72	0.578
Manual vs. non-manual labor	39.0	2.35	0.73	0.693
Supervisors vs. subordinates	48.7	2.53	0.74	0.622
The rulers vs. the ruled	72.4	2.94	0.78	0.273
Perception of conflicts in 2023				
The rich vs. the poor	44.8	2.46	0.69	0.455
Manual vs. non-manual labor	21.1	2.09	0.69	0.638
Supervisors vs. subordinates	28.6	2.24	0.68	0.631
The rulers vs. the ruled	74.4	2.96	0.72	0.388

PCA 2008: KMO = 0.710, Bartlett's sphericity = 1161.3 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 53.9
PCA 2013: KMO = 0.710, Bartlett's sphericity = 1313.1 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 50.1
PCA 2018: KMO = 0.708, Bartlett's sphericity = 1436.4 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 54.2
PCA 2023: KMO = 0.703, Bartlett's sphericity = 1168.8 (df =6), $p < 0.001$, % of variance = 50.1

In 2013, the "rich vs. poor" conflict declined slightly in perception (56.7% vs. 58.7% in 2008), but "the rulers vs. the ruled" became the most strongly perceived conflict (mean = 3.22). This suggests increasing societal tension between authority figures and the general populace. "White collars vs. blue collars" showed a decrease in perception compared to 2008, but still maintained a moderate PCA loading (0.582). The high standard deviation in the "rulers vs. the ruled" conflict reflects diverse opinions on the issue.

In 2018, the perception of conflict between "the rulers vs. the ruled" slightly decreased (72.4%) from 74.8% in 2008, but it still remained a key issue. The "rich vs. the poor" conflict also decreased slightly in perception compared to earlier years. The relatively high PCA loading for "manual vs. non-manual" (0.693) shows that this divide was now more central in the overall perception of conflict.

In 2023, "the rulers vs. the ruled" remained the most strongly perceived conflict (74.4%), with a mean score of 2.96, suggesting that social-political conflict between authority and citizens was still highly relevant. The perception of "manual vs. non-manual" dropped significantly to 21.1%, which suggests a reduced emphasis on this divide, possibly due to shifts in economic structures or employment patterns. PCA loadings for "supervisors vs. subordinates" and "white collars vs. blue collars" indicate that these conflicts are still somewhat important, but less central in the overall perception of conflict compared to previous years.

The loadings on the principal component suggest that social class conflicts (such as "rich vs. poor," "manual vs. non-manual labor") played a central role in shaping perceptions of conflict in earlier years but became less dominant by 2023. The rulers vs. the ruled conflict, however, consistently remained a key issue, suggesting a strong underlying political tension over the years.

In all years, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values were above 0.7 (indicating good sampling adequacy), and Bartlett's Sphericity Test was highly significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming the appropriateness of performing PCA. The percentage of variance explained ranged from 50.1% to 54.2%, showing that the conflicts analyzed were adequately explained by the principal components each year. This confirms hypothesis H1 on consistency of conflict perception.

Table 4. Correlation between perceived conflict intensity in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2023, with pair-wise deletion (above the diagonal) and least-wise deletion (below the diagonal)

	Conflict intensity, 2008	Conflict intensity, 2013	Conflict intensity, 2018	Conflict intensity, 2023
Conflict intensity, 2008	1.000	0.279	0.146	0.131
Conflict intensity, 2013	0.293	1.000	0.293	0.236
Conflict intensity, 2018	0.125	0.264	1.000	0.196
Conflict intensity, 2023	0.111	0.225	0.206	1.000

Let's begin an interpretation of Table 4 with an observation that the coefficients calculated using list-wise deletion are generally slightly different from those calculated with pairwise deletion. However, the differences are minimal, meaning that the exclusion of data points with missing values does not significantly change the overall interpretation of the data.

The table shows that the relationships between conflict intensity across the years are relatively weak, with the most consistent correlation appearing between 2013 and 2018. The rest of the years show weak to very weak relationships, suggesting that conflict intensity perceptions do not tend to change in a strongly consistent manner over time. A very weak positive correlation between conflict intensity in 2018 and 2023, the weakest in the table, suggests that conflict intensity between these two years has little relation. This counts against the hypothesis on conflict institutionalization.

The issue of the overtime relationship of the conflict perception is complex and requires additional analysis, since the coefficients in Table 4 account only for the linear component of association. Previous research on POLPAN data also shows that in 1993 and 1998 the inter-time auto-effect (in linear terms) was weak (Janicka, 2000; 2002). Presently, our analysis shows that, in reality, the relationship between perception of conflict intensity in time t and t+1 is U-shaped, as presented in Figure 1.

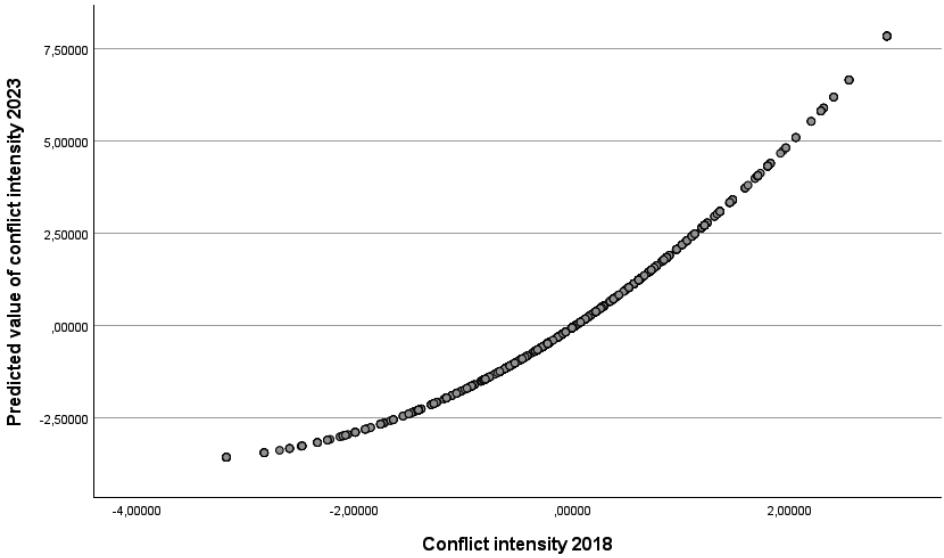

Figure 1. Predicted perceived conflict intensity 2023 by perceived conflict intensity in 2018

This figure shows a nonlinear, upward-curving relationship between perceived conflict intensity in 2018 (x-axis) and the predicted value of conflict intensity in 2023 (y-axis). Higher perceived conflict intensity in 2018 is associated with higher predicted conflict intensity in 2023. The points form a clear upward slope, meaning that perceptions of conflict tend to persist over time. The curve is convex (bends upward), suggesting the relationship is stronger at higher levels of conflict. At low 2018 conflict levels, changes in intensity have only modest effects on 2023 predictions. At higher 2018 conflict levels, small increases correspond to disproportionately large increases in 2023 predicted intensity. The curvature indicates amplification over time. The figure supports the idea that perceptions of conflict are not only stable but also become more polarized over time: high-conflict perceptions intensify, while low-conflict perceptions remain low or decline further. This might reflect reinforcing social, political, or media-driven processes that lock people into their earlier perceptions.

In examining the determinants of perceived intensity of conflicts, we should control the non-linearity of the overtime impact of perceived intensity of social conflict. Table 5 gives an example of such an analysis.

Table 5. Regression of the 2023 conflict intensity on age, gender, and education, controlling for the 2018 conflict intensity (lagged variable)

Variables	B	SE	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	0.499	0.135		3.699	<0.001
Conflict intensity, 2018	0.204	0.026	0.166	7.758	<0.001
(Conflict intensity 2018)²/100	0.272	0.146	0.040	1.859	0.063
Gender, male =1	-0.138	0.043	-0.069	-3.220	0.001
Age, 2023	-0.004	0.001	-0.068	-2.983	0.003
Years of schooling (8 to 18)	-0.019	0.007	-0.065	-2.852	0.004

$R^2 = 0.038$, $F = 16.99$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$

If all predictors are zero (which is mostly a statistical baseline rather than a real scenario), the predicted conflict intensity is about 0.50 on the variable with the mean value equaling 0 and standard deviation equaling 1. Linear term (2018 conflict intensity), $B = 0.204$ ($p < 0.001$) means that for each 1-point increase in 2018 conflict intensity, the 2023 intensity increases by 0.204 points, holding other variables constant. This is a moderate positive carry-over effect—people with higher past conflict perception tend to present higher future conflict intensity. The quadratic term, (2018 conflict intensity)² / 100), $B = 0.272$ ($p = 0.063$) indicates weak evidence for a nonlinear effect—the positive relationship between past and present conflict may be stronger at higher past levels. We should note that $p = 0.063$ is for a two-tailed test, while the null model assumes the U-shape and requires a one-tail test. Thus, it is reasonable to keep the quadratic term in the model.

Substantively, the impact of the sociodemographic determinants is weak. Males score only 0.14 points lower on conflict intensity than females, controlling for other factors. The standardized Beta (–0.069) suggests the effect is small but statistically reliable. As far as age is concerned, each additional year of age is associated with a 0.004-point decrease in conflict intensity; older individuals tend to report slightly lower conflict. In addition, we note that each additional year of schooling is associated with a 0.019-point decrease in conflict intensity. This is also a small but statistically significant negative effect.

Overall, conflict intensity is moderately persistent over time, with 2018 levels predicting 2023 levels. Higher past conflict may have a slightly stronger effect at very high levels, but that is only borderline significant. Men, older individuals, and those with more education tend to report *slightly* lower conflict intensity in 2023 than women or younger individuals with less education. These effects are statistically significant but small, and the model overall explains only a small

portion of the variation—meaning other factors outside this model play a much larger role. However, my investigation showed that other "objective" variables, such as social class or the size of the respondent's locality, do not have significant effects on perceived conflict intensity. Thus, the future research should include "subjective" variables, for example, life satisfaction or pro-democratic attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this article was to explore the evolution of social conflict perceptions in Poland between 1988 and 2023. The research focused on several key domains of social life —wealth, labor, managerial roles, and political power — and aimed to trace how public perceptions of conflict in these areas shifted across two distinct periods of Polish history: the late socialist period (1988-2003) and the post-accession phase following Poland's entry into the European Union (2008-2023). This analysis was based on examining the extent to which these perceptions were consistent over time and how they might have been institutionalized following significant political and economic transformations.

My findings suggest complex and multifaceted changes of conflict perceptions in Poland, driven by both structural changes and the broader social context. There is significant evidence to support the Perception Consistency Hypothesis (H1), which proposes that perceptions of conflict in one domain are significantly correlated with perceptions in others. This was particularly evident in the late socialist period (1988-2003), where the social fabric of Poland was marked by sharp divisions between different social classes and political groups. The correlation between these various domains was weak in the early post-socialist years (1988-1993), as Poland grappled with political and economic instability. However, the correlation between conflict perceptions gradually increased in later years, particularly post-2008, suggesting a stabilization of conflict awareness and an institutionalization of the mechanisms through which these conflicts were recognized and managed.

One of the key insights from this study is that the process of conflict institutionalization — the notion that conflicts are not only perceived but also managed through institutional mechanisms over time — appears to have played a significant role in shaping how people in Poland view social divisions. The shift from a period of intense turbulence and uncertainty (1988-2003) to a more stable, institutionally-regulated phase (2008-2023) coincided with stronger correlations in the perception of conflict across the different domains. This is consistent with the Conflict Institutionalization Hypothesis (H2), which posits that, over time, conflicts may shift from chaotic and unregulated struggles to more predictable, manageable issues within established frameworks. However, this hypothesis must be rejected for the 2008-2023 period since the inter-time correlations weakened.

The most striking change occurred after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. The discontinuity period between 2003-2008 marked a phase of rapid adjustment to the new political and economic order, where perceptions of conflict were in flux. This period was marked by the immediate impacts of EU membership, which brought about both opportunities (economic growth, political stabilization) and challenges (social inequality, regional disparities). Of course, I am against a monocausal approach and see the period of 2003-2008 as a time in which political turmoil occurred: two elections (in 2005 and 2007) resulting in changes of the government, accompanied by corruption and cuts in funds for health and welfare. However, following this period, there was a notable increase in the consistency of conflict perceptions across different domains, supporting the consistent conflict perception hypothesis, H1.

The increasing institutionalization of conflicts in 1988-2003 did not eliminate the sense of division between groups in society. On the contrary, the awareness of these conflicts —especially those related to wealth and political power, remained strong, particularly in times of economic downturns or political crises. The persistence of such divisions points to the limitations of institutional mechanisms in addressing deeper, structural inequalities. Despite the growing awareness and management of these conflicts, the actual resolution of underlying disparities — whether economic, political, or social — has not been fully achieved, and some tensions remain deeply ingrained in the social psyche.

CONCLUSION

The Perception Consistency Hypothesis (H1) was largely supported, with an increasing interconnection between perceptions of conflict in different domains over time. However, the Conflict Institutionalization Hypothesis (H2) found support for the period 1988-2003; but this hypothesis must be rejected for the period 2008-2023.

In conclusion, while Poland has made significant strides in consolidating democracy and creating a market economy, the perception of social conflicts remains a powerful force in shaping public consciousness. The changes of these perceptions — from fragmented and unregulated conflicts to more stable, institutionalized ones, and then again fluctuating over time — reveals the importance of understanding both the changing nature of social divisions and how they are managed.

Almost two decades ago, Zagórski (2006, p. 23) pointed out: "one should not overestimate the detrimental effect of social conflict and the perceived malfunctioning of current democratic institutions on the consolidation of democracy. The relations, though consistent with possible expectations, are

quite weak. The legitimacy of social conflicts as opposite to the notion that only one set of interests is legitimate … and may contribute to the consolidation of the democratic system, but not to a great extent. Such a positive contribution is facilitated by seeing social relations as a positive-sum rather than a zero-sum game." I agree. Moving forward, addressing the underlying causes of conflicts, particularly through inclusive policies and more equitable social reforms, will be crucial to fostering long-term social cohesion and political stability in Poland.

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