

WORKPLACE CONFLICT: EVIDENCE FROM BULGARIA²

The paper presents the results of a study on workplace conflict in Bulgarian organizations. The data were collected by means of a questionnaire among 708 employees. Findings reveal that most Bulgarian employees have to deal with conflict at work to some extent and two in ten employees do so always or frequently. Conflict is most common between entry-level/front-line roles and between managers and their reports. The primary causes leading to disagreements at work are stress, personal clashes and heavy workloads. Employees in Bulgaria mostly often spend 2.5 hours per week dealing with conflict, equating to approximately \$1.4 billion in paid hours in 2020. The paper provides original findings on workplace conflict, and therefore, it contributes to the research of conflict in Bulgarian organizations.

Keywords: conflict management; workplace conflict; Bulgaria

JEL: M12; M19

1. Introduction

Conflict is an essential aspect of organizational life. Various types of conflicts arise within every organization, regardless of its size, sector, organizational structure, etc. They are due to the interactions between individuals and groups in the process of their joint activities and communication.

Workplace conflict should not be ignored as it has a considerable impact on individuals, groups and the organization as a whole. Unmanaged or poorly managed conflict can result in significant financial, human and credibility cost to organizations, their employees and their clients (Buss, 2011). On the other hand, when addressed with the appropriate tools and expertise, conflict can lead to positive outcomes, such as improved problem-solving, better understanding of others and innovative thinking (CPP, 2008).

Since conflict is unavoidable, in order to achieve their goals, organizations have to learn to live with it and manage it in an appropriate manner. The issue of conflict management is a significant and relevant topic for any organization. To deal with conflict effectively, organizations and their managers need to have a better understanding of the conflict.

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² This paper should be cited as: Mihaylova, I. (2022). *Workplace Conflict: Evidence from Bulgaria*. – *Economic Studies (Ikonomicheski Izsledvania)*, 31 (2), pp. 115-136.

Analyzing and understanding workplace conflict is the first and perhaps the most important step that has to be taken before any other conflict management activities are carried out. It appears necessary that managers learn more about the organizational conflict before taking any concrete action to manage it. The more they are aware of workplace conflict – the levels at which it occurs, the causes of it, its constructive and destructive potential, the more confident they will be in dealing with it (Mihaylova, 2020).

The objective of the paper is to examine the incidence of workplace conflict, the levels at which it occurs, the causes of it and the time spent on dealing with it in Bulgarian organizations. In other words, we want to explore employees' perceptions on how common conflict is in their organizations, which working relationships are most exposed to conflict, what are the main sources of conflict and what is the cost of conflict in terms of wasted time. We are also interested in comparing our findings with the results of studies on workplace conflict in other countries.

While several studies have been conducted on workplace conflict in different countries (CIPD, 2015, 2020; CPP, 2008; OPP, 2008; Psychometrics Canada, 2009), there is a lack of empirical research on the conflict at work in Bulgaria.

The present study is the first we know of to provide empirical evidence on workplace conflict in Bulgarian organizations from various economic sectors, and therefore, it contributes to the research of conflict by investigating its unique nature, causes and impact in the Bulgarian working environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Conflict in the Organization

There is no single definition of conflict. Rashid and Archer (Rashid and Archer, 1983, p. 311) view conflict as “the pursuit by two different persons of goals that are incompatible so that gains by one person must inevitably come about at the expense of the other”. Robbins' definition of conflict acknowledges awareness (perception), opposition, scarcity, and blockage (Robbins, 1991). The author also assumes that conflict is a determined action that can exist at either latent or overt levels. Robbins (Robbins, 1991, p. 428) defines conflict as “a process in which an effort is purposely made by A to offset the efforts of B by some form of blocking that will result in frustrating B in attaining his or her goals or furthering his or her interests”. Rahim (Rahim, 2001, p. 18) conceptualizes conflict as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.)”. Dimitrov associates conflict with a form of manifestation of contradictions. The author describes it as a universal and eternal human and social phenomenon based on a dynamic interaction between at least two opposing parties and caused by different interests, needs, goals, values, motives, and lack of resources. Means of various kinds are used for achieving the objectives and satisfying the interests of the parties (Dimitrov, 2004, pp. 39-40). According to Wilmot and Hocker (Wilmot and Hocker, 2011, p. 11), conflict is a felt struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or over differences in desires

for esteem, control, and connectedness. Paunov, Paunova and Paunov specify that conflict in organizations is related to the power relations, distribution of resources, social positions, and differences in value systems (Paunov, Paunova and Paunov, 2019, p. 255). In accordance with their view, the conflicts arise in connection with the organizational goals or the methods of achieving them. Bankova describes conflict as “an open form of confrontation of opposing values and interests arising in the process of interaction of organizational members in solving problems of official and personal nature” (Bankova, 2019a, p. 26).

Based on the review of different definitions, we can highlight several common aspects of the conflict:

- Conflict is a confrontation of two or more parties (individuals and groups).
- Conflict is associated with an interaction between the parties.
- There needs to be some kind of interdependence between the parties.
- Conflict is a process, and it changes over time.
- The confrontation is based on differences between the parties (in their interests, goals, values, needs, opinions or in resources, power, control, etc.) that are considered to be incompatible.
- Conflict exists if the differences are perceived by the parties.
- The confrontation is realized through specific conflict behaviour by each of the parties.

In the current paper, conflict is defined as a dynamic process of open confrontation arising in the interaction of two or more interdependent parties (individuals and groups) over perceived incompatible differences (in interests, needs, goals, values, opinions or in resources, power, control, etc.).

2.2. *Levels of Conflict in the Organization*

A starting point for examining organizational conflict is to determine the levels at which it may originate³. Four main levels of conflict are usually discussed in the literature: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup (Gordon, 1993; Rahim, 2001; Vedar, 2014; Georgieva, 2016). A brief description of these five levels of conflict is as follows (Rahim, 2001):

- Intrapersonal conflict occurs when an organizational member is required to perform certain tasks and roles that do not match his or her expertise, interests, goals, and values.

³ A broader classification includes two types of organizational conflict: *intraorganizational* (i.e., conflict within an organization) and *interorganizational* (i.e., conflict between two or more organizations) (Rahim, 2001). Intraorganizational conflict is categorized on the basis of levels (individual, group, etc.) at which it occurs.

- Interpersonal conflict refers to conflict between two or more organizational members of the same or different hierarchical levels or units. The disagreements between a superior and subordinates are related to this type of conflict.
- Intragroup conflict refers to conflict among members of a group or between two or more subgroups within a group in connection with its goals, tasks, procedures, and so on. It may also occur as a result of incompatibilities or disagreements between some or all the members of a group and its leader.
- Intergroup conflict is a conflict between two or more units or groups within an organization. Examples of this type of conflict are conflicts between line and staff, production and marketing, and headquarters and field staffs.

Gordon (Gordon, 1993) discussed the fifth level of conflict and defined it as intra organizational. It encompasses all the previous levels and is diagnosed when conflict characterizes overall organizational functioning (Gordon, 1993, p. 451).

2.3. Causes of Organizational Conflict

Various antecedent conditions (events, problems, etc.) may lead to conflict. Identifying and understanding the possible causes of conflict is essential for dealing with it effectively.

The variety of potential causes of organizational conflict does not allow their systematization in a single classification. Yulk and Wexley (Yulk and Wexley, 1985) determine six major categories of causes of conflict: competition for resources, task interdependence, jurisdictional ambiguity, status problems, communication barriers, and individual traits. Many conflicts involve more than one of these antecedent conditions, and the categories are not always mutually exclusive (Yulk and Wexley, 1985, p. 87). Robbins (Robbins, 1991) identifies three general categories of factors that can lead to conflict: communication, structural and personal factors. A large proportion of the conflicts that arise in the organizations are due to semantic difficulties, misunderstandings, and “noise” in the communication channels. Structural factors refer to organizational size, degree of specialization in the task assigned to group members, jurisdictional clarity, member goal compatibility, leadership styles, reward system, and the degree of dependence between groups. Personal behaviour factors include the individual value system that each person has and the individual characteristics of employees. According to Kreitner and Kinicki (Kreitner and Kinicki, 1995), among some of the situations that tend to produce conflict are: incompatible personalities or values, overlapping or unclear job boundaries, competition for limited resources, inadequate communication, interdependent tasks, organizational complexity, unreasonable or unclear policies, standards, or rules, unreasonable deadlines or extreme pressure, unmet expectations, unresolved or suppressed conflict. Paunov, Paunova and Paunov systematize the main general preconditions for conflict as mostly personal and mostly organizational (Paunov, Paunova and Paunov, 2019, pp. 255-256). The personal preconditions are associated with incompatible personal characteristics, divergent value orientations and ethics, threat to individual status and unrealistic expectations. The organizational preconditions are unclear or overlapping job boundaries, unreasonable or unclear organizational rules and policies, unreasonable deadlines, task interdependence,

competition for scarce resources, inadequate communication system, collective decision making, organizational complexity, organizational change, etc. Other authors identify seven main causes of organizational conflict: scarce resources, task interdependence, goal differences, differences in ideas and values, differences in behaviour and life experience, poor communication, and managerial chaos (Panayotov, 2003; Leonov, 2006).

Although the foregoing shows that there is a wide range of possible causes of organizational conflict, the similarities in the views of different authors are obvious. The discussed views do not encompass all the possible factors that can precipitate organizational conflict, but they can help to build readiness to anticipate conflict and to take steps to handle it.

2.4. Time Spent on Conflict – a Hidden Cost of Conflict

Managing conflict is both a huge challenge and a responsibility for organizations. Unmanaged or badly managed conflict can lead to significant costs to an organization. Direct costs such as legal fees, insurances, theft, and sabotage are the most visible and easy to measure (Ford, 2017). The “hidden” costs of conflict are also significant and should not be underestimated. They include time spent on conflict, absenteeism, turnover and grievance filing (Ford, 2017).

One of the “hidden” costs – the time spent on dealing with conflict – frequently goes unnoticed by organizations. Conflict is a considerable time consumer. Previous research has shown that managers spend a significant amount of time per day (over a third) resolving conflicts and dealing with their consequences (Thomas and Schmidt, 1976; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). The financial cost of time spent unproductively on conflict can be calculated by using various measurement tools (Mediation Training Institute, 2016; Ford, 2017). In addition to the monetary cost, there are opportunity costs for the organizations. While dealing with dysfunctional conflict, managers and employees get distracted and are not focusing on their work. In business organizations, this lost time could result in lost revenue (Mediation Training Institute, 2016).

It has to be noted that not all time spent on conflict is unproductive. Clarifying issues, exploring options, and developing solutions are constructive responses to organizational conflicts (Mediation Training Institute, 2016).

2.5. Research on Conflict in Bulgaria

There is a lack of empirical research on workplace conflict in Bulgaria. Previous research on conflict is mainly focused on the styles of handling conflicts based on the models of Rahim and Bonoma (Krumov and Ilieva, 1995; Krumov, Ilieva and Andonova, 1994, 1996; Rahim et al., 2000; Mitevaska-Encheva, 2013, 2015; Ilieva, 2000) and Thomas and Kilmann (Raykova, Semerdjieva and Tornyova, 2020; Todorova and Mihaylova-Alakidi, 2010).

Other publications are dedicated to managerial interventions in employees’ conflict (Mihaylova, 2017), managers’ attitudes towards conflicts (Mihaylova, 2018) and the outcomes from conflict (Mihaylova, 2019; Raykova, Semerdjieva and Yordanov, 2012;

Raykova et al., 2015). Recent studies examine the relationship between conflict management training and managers' confidence in their conflict knowledge (Mihaylova, 2020) and approaches for dealing with conflict in medical teams (Raykova et al., 2021).

In recent years, however, there have been some publications, regarding the workplace conflict in hospitals in Bulgaria (Raykova, 2019; Raykova, Semerdjieva and Torniyova, 2011; Raykova et al., 2015; Raykova et al., 2017; Raykova and Semerdjieva, 2019). Other studies draw attention to the conflict in the public sector (Chorbadzhiyska, 2013a, 2013b; Bankova, 2019a, 2019b). There seems to be a need to extend the research on workplace conflict in organizations of all sizes and all industries in Bulgaria.

In 2008 CPP, Ltd.⁴ undertook a global survey on the conflict in the workplace. It questioned 5,000 employees in nine countries around Europe and the Americas (Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States) (CPP, 2008; OPP, 2008). With the aim to fill the identified research gap, we duplicated the CPP's research and conducted a study in organizations of all sizes and all industries in Bulgaria. Using the same methodology allows us to see the results alongside the results of the survey by CPP.

The question arises as to whether we can compare the results on workplace conflict from the nine countries in 2008 with the results from Bulgaria in 2021. We believe that the answer is positive, and two arguments can be given in support of this claim. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has led the global economy in an ongoing economic recession. Prior to it, the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2009 significantly affected the global economic and financial conditions. The effects of such crises can be examined at a macro level, at a firm-level and at a level of individual actors, including the experiences and views of employees (Johnstone, Saridakis and Wilkinson, 2019). Previous research indicates that an economic crisis is a threatening contextual circumstance that influences employees' approaches in life and evaluations of their work situations (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Mehri et al., 2011; Markovits, Boer and van Dick, 2013). Studies also suggest a range of negative consequences for employees as a result of an economic downturn, such as stress, anxiety, anger, job insecurity, and decreased motivation (Brockner et al., 1992; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1991; Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell, 1998; Mehri et al., 2011; Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1997; Sverke and Hellgren, 2001). All this might manifest in dysfunctional employee behaviours, including increased levels of conflicts and lowered the speed of conflict resolution (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1991; Hansson, 2008). As both surveys (the one by CPP and ours) are conducted during severe economic periods, we expect that the two crises would have a similar impact on the extent and nature of workplace conflict. Secondly, as we did not find any other recent global studies on workplace conflict, seeing our results alongside the common tendency in 2008 would enrich our analysis and contribute to a better understanding of where Bulgarian organizations stand in regard to conflicts.

⁴ The survey was conducted in partnership with OPP, Ltd. and Fellipelli that are leading business psychology firms, respectively in Europe and in South America.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 708 full-time employees from different Bulgarian organizations participated in the current study. Of these, 45% were male and 55% were female. Approximately two-thirds of respondents were up to 30 years old (29%) or between 31 and 40 years old (34%), 24% were between 41 and 50 years old and 13% were older than 51 years old. Regarding the educational background, most employees had a master's or a doctoral degree (65%), 22% had a bachelor's degree and 13% had a secondary level of education. 18% of respondents had work experience up to 5 years, 24% – from 6 to 10 years, 30% – from 11 to 20 years, 28% – from 21 and more years. Seven in ten respondents (70%) were non-managers and three in ten (30%) were managers. 11% of employees had worked in the organization for less than a year, 46% – between 1 and 5 years, 17% – between 6 and 10 years, 19% – between 11 and 20 years and 7% – more than 21 years. Respondents from large enterprises represented the biggest group of the sample (41%), followed by employees from medium enterprises (26%), from small enterprises (24%) and from micro-enterprises (9%). The greatest was the share of employees occupied in the service industry (54%), 15% worked in the commercial sector, 12% – in the manufacturing industry, 14% – in the public sector and 5% – in the voluntary sector. The majority of the employees' organizations were located in the capital of Bulgaria (77%), 16% – in district cities, 7% – in small cities or villages.

A limitation of the study is the convenience sample that included employees who happened to be most accessible to the researcher. Therefore, the sample is not representative, and we cannot provide generalizable results. Another potential weakness of the study is the choice to draw a parallel between our results and the CPP's results. As crises may have different characteristics in different countries, they also may have a different impact on workplace conflict. Even in less turbulent economic periods, there are economic, social, and cultural differences between Bulgaria and the nine countries that could be factors influencing the extent and nature of workplace conflict, and they are also not taken into account in our analysis. The comparison should therefore be considered carefully. Despite these limitations of the study, the paper provides original findings on workplace conflict in Bulgarian organizations and thus, it contributes to this under-researched area.

3.2. Procedure

The current paper is part of a research project on workplace conflict in Bulgarian organizations. The survey was conducted in 2021 using an online questionnaire in Google forms. The questionnaire was designed in accordance with the methodological framework of CPP (CPP, 2008). It included two sections. The first section consisted of questions about the incidence of conflict in the organization, the levels at which conflict is most common, the causes of conflict, the time spent on dealing with conflict, the positive and negative outcomes from conflict, the role of managers in managing conflicts and the value of training in conflict management. The second section included questions that aimed to gather information about the personal characteristics of the respondents (including gender, age, educational background, years of work experience, years of work experience in the organization and type

of position in the organizational hierarchy) and the characteristics of the organizations (including type of settlement, sector, and size).

Findings from the first four questions of the survey are presented in the current paper.

3.3. Measures

Incidence of conflict. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they have to deal with conflict in the workplace on a four-point Likert scale (1 – No, never, 2 – Yes, occasionally, 3 – Yes, frequently, 4 – Yes, always).

Levels of conflict. Levels of conflict were measured with a single-response question. Employees were asked to point the level of the organization at which conflict is most observed. The six levels of conflict were defined as follows: between entry-level/front-line roles, between line managers and their reports (the employees in the manager's team that directly report to him), between different levels of management, between middle managers, between first-line management/supervisors and between senior leadership/executives.

Causes of conflict. Causes of conflict were measured using a multiple-response question. Respondents were asked to indicate the main sources of conflict in the following categories: personality clashes, clash of values, lack of honesty and openness, lack of role clarity, lack of clarity about accountability, poor selection/pairing teams, poor line management, poor leadership from the top of the organization, poor performance management, heavy workloads, stress, discrimination, bullying/harassment, and taboo topics.

Time spent on dealing with conflict. Respondents were asked to rate how much time they spend a day dealing with conflict in the workplace on a three-point scale (1 – less than 30 minutes, 2 – between 30 and 60 minutes, 3 – more than 60 minutes).

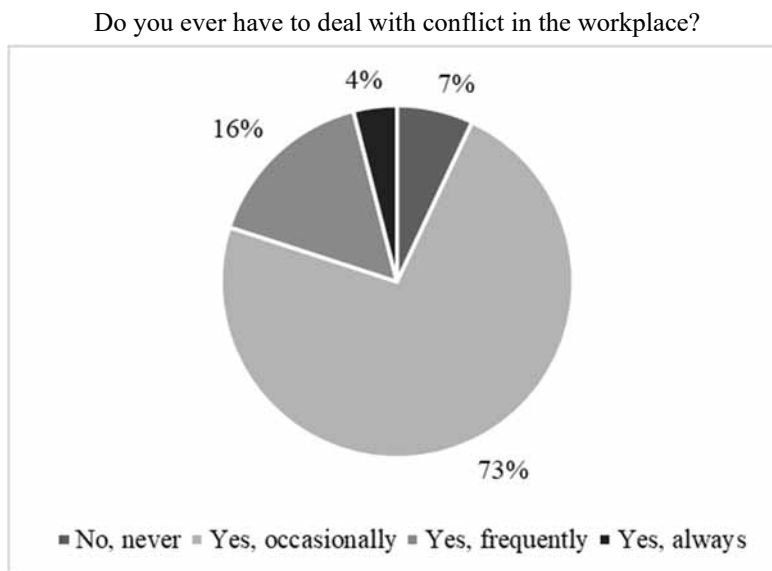
The data from the survey were processed in IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Incidence of Conflict in Organizations

The study found that the majority of employees had experienced conflict at work. One in five respondents (20%) considered conflict a common occurrence in their workplace (of these, 4% had to deal with conflict always) and seven in ten respondents (73%) had to deal with conflict occasionally. Only 7% of the employees reported an absence of conflict in the workplace (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study.

There were no significant differences in the incidence of workplace conflict across the gender, age and educational background of the respondents. Significant differences were found according to the work experience of respondents. Employees with work experience from 6 and more years (21% of employees with work experience from 6 to 10 years, 22% – from 11 to 20 years and 22% – from 21 and more years) were more likely to deal with conflict always or frequently than employees with work experience up to 5 years (11%) (Cramer's $V = 0.135$, Approx. Sig. = 0.000). This result suggests that younger workers who have just started their careers and are in a period of adaptation and socialization seem to avoid disagreements at work, while more experienced employees are more confident to raise issues. The years of work experience in the organization are also an influential factor. Employees who worked in the organization between 1 and 5 years (20%), between 6 and 10 years (20%) and for more than 21 years (27%) were more likely to handle conflict frequently or always than employees who were in the organization between 11 and 20 years and less than a year (20%) (Cramer's $V = 0.117$, Approx. Sig. = 0.013). Significant differences were also found in the proportion of non-manager and managers who reported experiencing conflict. Managers (28%) were more likely to say they had to deal with conflict frequently or always compared with non-managers (17%) (Cramer's $V = 0.154$, Approx. Sig. = 0.000). This result is not surprising given that managers often assume third-party roles to help employees resolve workplace disagreements (Sheppard, 1984; Shapiro and Rosen, 1994; Elangovan, 1995; Jameson, 1996; Nugent and Broedling, 2002; Mihaylova, 2017).

No significant differences were found across the characteristics of the organizations (type of settlement, sector, and size).

Findings suggest that the levels of workplace conflict are slightly higher in Bulgaria compared with the average result of the survey by CPP. According to the global survey, 85% of the employees had experienced conflict in their workplace (versus 93% of Bulgarian employees) (CPP, 2008). While one in seven respondents (14%) in the global survey said that they never had to deal with disagreements, only one in fourteen Bulgarians (7%) stated the same. A closer inspection of the incidence of conflict shows that the percentage of respondents that had to deal with conflict always or frequently is greater in the survey by CPP (29% versus 20% of Bulgarians). Moreover, Bulgarian employees face disagreements almost three times less than German employees who reported the highest levels of workplace conflict (with 56% of them having to deal with conflict always or frequently).

Our study confirms the existence of conflict in Bulgarian organizations. Conflict is typical for the Bulgarian working environment and there are signals that it is a major issue for organizations and needs to be addressed in order to achieve positive outcomes (such as better solutions to workplace problems, increased motivation, a better understanding of others).

4.2. Levels of Conflict

When asked to identify the levels of the organization at which conflict is most common, four out of ten (43%) employees stated conflicts arising between entry-level/front-line roles (Figure 2). As the report of CPP suggests, these employees are likely to have spent the least time at the organization and are therefore the least likely to have learned how best to deal with conflict situations (CPP, 2008). Significant differences were found in the proportion of groups with a different educational background, who reported conflicts arising between entry-level/front-line roles. Employees with a bachelor's degree (50%) were more likely to state such conflicts compared with the other groups (employees with high-school education (41%), a master's degree (42%) and a doctoral degree (23%) (Cramer's $V = 0.105$, Approx. Sig. = 0.049). Organizational size is another influential factor in the common occurrence of conflicts arising between entry-level/front-line roles. Employees in small enterprises (48%) and large enterprises (47%) were more likely to mention this conflict zone than employees in micro-enterprises (41%) and medium enterprises (34%) (Cramer's $V = 0.115$, Approx. Sig. = 0.025).

The second most conflict zone is between managers and their reports (21%). This result is not surprising, considering that managers are often uncomfortable when communicating with employees (Solomon, 2016). Certain groups reported conflict between managers and their reports more often than others. Respondents with a secondary level of education (35%) and a bachelor's degree (23%) were more likely to observe the most conflict at this level of the organization compared with the respondents with a master's degree (18%) and a doctorate (19%) (Cramer's $V = 0.136$, Approx. Sig. = 0.004).

The third most cited conflict area is between different levels of management (16%). Employees were more likely to see the relations between managers from different levels as the most conflict zone if they worked in the voluntary sector or the manufacturing industry. Respectively, 28% and 26% of these employees reported conflict at this level, compared with

10% of public sector employees, 14% of commercial sector employees and 14% of service sector employees (Cramer's V = 0.142, Approx. Sig. = 0.007).

Figure 2

At what level of your organization do you observe the most conflict? (Bulgaria versus CPP's average)



Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study and the results of the CPP's global survey (CPP, 2008, p. 9).

The list continues with conflicts between middle managers (9%). There were significant differences in the proportion of groups with a different educational background who reported conflicts between middle managers. Employees with a master's degree (10%) and a doctorate (23%) were more likely to observe the most conflict at this level of the organization compared with high-school graduates (6%) and employees with a bachelor's degree (7%) (Cramer's V = 0.110, Approx. Sig. = 0.035). Significant differences were also found in conflicts between middle managers reported by respondents from organizations of different sizes. Employees in medium enterprises (14%) and large enterprises (10%) were more likely to mention this conflict zone than employees in micro-enterprises (2%) and small enterprises (5%) (Cramer's V = 0.135, Approx. Sig. = 0.005). A possible explanation for this result could be that the organizational structure of smaller companies is usually flat with few or no middle management levels between staff and executives.

The next most commonly mentioned conflict zone is between first-line management/supervisors (6%). Respondents with up to 5 five years of work experience (9%), with 11 and 20 years of work experience (8%) or with more than 21 years of work experience (7%) were more likely to observe conflict at this level than respondents with 6 and 10 years of work experience (2%) (Cramer's V = 0.110, Approx. Sig. = 0.036).

Only 5% of employees saw conflict took place mostly between senior leadership/executives. This may be due to lack of information – employees are not usually eyewitnesses of the

disagreements at senior levels. Executive managers (13%) were significantly more likely to perceive conflicts between them as the most observed in the organization than managers (4%) and non-managers (4%) (Cramer's $V = 0.101$, Approx. Sig. = 0.027). A possible explanation for this result may be that executives have a closer look at the working relationships at this level of the organization than managers and employees. Employees in micro-organizations (8%) and small organizations (8%) were more likely to mention conflicts between senior leadership/executives than employees in medium organizations (4%) and micro-organizations (3%) (Cramer's $V = 0.105$, Approx. Sig. = 0.049). These differences may be due to the flatter organizational structure in smaller organizations that makes the disagreements between senior managers more visible to employees.

Our findings for the levels at which conflict is most observed in Bulgarian organizations are consistent with the results of the survey by CPP (CPP, 2008). Employees to both surveys ranked the levels of conflict in the same order (Figure 2). It seems that employees in Bulgarian organizations see more conflict between entry-level/front line roles and between middle managers than their average foreign colleague. The comparison also shows that Bulgarian employees perceive similar levels of tension between middle managers, first-line management/supervisors and senior leadership/executives as employees in the global survey.

The results for the levels at which conflict is most common indicate the most widespread forms of workplace conflict in Bulgarian organizations that should be analyzed and addressed properly.

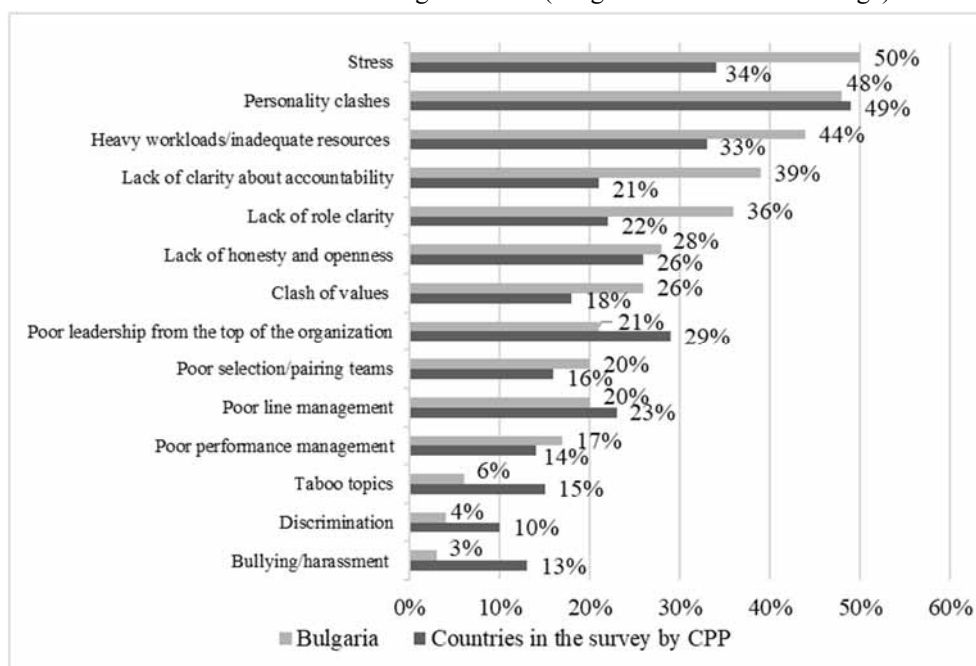
4.3. Causes of Conflict

Stress seems to be the most major issue for Bulgarian employees when it comes to conflict in the workplace. Half of the employees indicated stress (50%) as the primary cause of disagreements (Figure 3).

Personality clashes are the second most observed cause of conflict (cited by 48%). Employees who had worked in the organization between 11 and 20 years (60%) were more likely to report this key factor in generating conflict at work than the other groups (employees with less than a year of work experience in the organization (44%), with 1 and 5 years of work experience (47%), with 6 and 10 years of work experience (44%) and with more than 21 years of work experience (35%) (Cramer's $V = 0.131$, Approx. Sig. = 0.017). Respondents from organizations located in the capital (50%) were more likely to cite personality clashes than respondents from organizations in the district cities (41%) or small cities and villages (35%) (Cramer's $V = 0.099$, Approx. Sig. = 0.031). This result suggests that the working environment in the organizations in the capital is more stressful than in organizations in the smaller cities and villages.

Figure 3

Main causes of conflict in organizations (Bulgaria versus CPP's average)



Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study and the results of the CPP's global survey (CPP, 2008, p. 10).

Heavy workloads are third, cited by 44% as a source of conflict. Employees who were up to 30 years old (55%) and between 41 and 50 years old (47%) were more likely to see heavy workloads as a primary source of conflict than employees between 31 and 40 years old (39%) and employees older than 51 years old (29%) (Cramer's $V = 0.179$, Approx. Sig. = 0.000).

Lack of clarity also seems to be a major issue in Bulgarian organizations. The fourth most commonly mentioned cause of conflict is the lack of clarity about accountability (cited by 39%). Employees were more likely to cite it if they were younger – up to 30 years old or between 31 and 40 years old. Respectively, 47% and 41% of these employees reported this key factor for workplace disagreements, compared with 30% of employees between 41 and 50 years and 32% of employees older than 51 years (Cramer's $V = 0.139$, Approx. Sig. = 0.003). Respondents with less work experience (44% of these who worked up to 5 years and 46% of these who worked between 6 to 10 years) were also significantly more likely to see the lack of clarity about accountability as a primary source of conflict compared with respondents with more work experience (35% of these who worked between 11 and 20 years and 34% of these who worked more than 21 years) (Cramer's $V = 0.112$, Approx. Sig. = 0.032). All these results suggest that organizational policies and procedures are not clear enough to be easily understood by younger employees, who are usually those with less work experience. Providing clear guidance for employees, especially at the beginning of their

careers, may facilitate their inclusion and create a harmonious working environment. Managers must play a significant role in this process by properly communicating the organizational policies and procedures to employees. The last influential factor for the lack of clarity about accountability is the type of settlement of the organizations. Employees from organizations in the capital (41%) were more likely to report it than employees from organizations in the district cities (32%) and from small cities or villages (25%) (Cramer's $V = 0.103$, Approx. Sig. = 0.024).

The next most commonly cited key factor for conflict is the lack of role clarity (cited by 36%). Younger respondents (45% of these up to 30 years and 38% of these between 31 and 40 years) were more likely to mention it than older respondents (30% of these between 41 and 50 years and 22% of these older than 51 years) (Cramer's $V = 0.159$, Approx. Sig. = 0.000). Employees who had fewer years of work experience (40% of these who worked up to 5 years and 43% of those who worked between 6 to 10 years) were also significantly more likely to indicate the lack of role clarity as a main cause of conflict compared with employees with more work experience (35% of these who worked between 11 and 20 years and 28% of these who worked more than 21 years) (Cramer's $V = 0.119$, Approx. Sig. = 0.018). Respondents were more likely to cite this source of workplace disagreements if they had worked less in the organization – less than a year or from 1 to 5 years. Respectively, 42% and 40% of these respondents reported it, compared with 32% of employees with 6 to 10 years of work experience in the organization, 31% of employees with 11 to 20 years of work experience in the organization and 21% of employees with more than 21 years in the organization (Cramer's $V = 0.124$, Approx. Sig. = 0.028). All these results support our suggestion about the lack of clear organizational policies and procedures that can provide support for younger and inexperienced employees in the process of their effective orientation and socialization in the organization. Employees from organizations in the capital (38%) were significantly more likely to state the lack of role clarity than employees from organizations in the district cities (27%) and from small cities or villages (29%) (Cramer's $V = 0.095$, Approx. Sig. = 0.042).

The lack of honesty and openness is ranked as the sixth most commonly perceived cause of conflict (cited by 28%). Non-managers to our survey (30%) were significantly more likely to report it than managers (28%) and executives (10%) (Cramer's $V = 0.108$, Approx. Sig. = 0.016). These differences may be due to a perception gap between managers' and employees' views on the characteristics of the working environment. This can be seen as a signal of the need to create organizational cultures based on honesty and openness. Previous studies highlight the crucial role of corporate culture for the successful dealing with conflict in organizations in Bulgaria (Dimitrova, 2012; Ilieva, 2018). A culture of openness and cooperation in which any problems are addressed can build the understanding that conflicts can be used to guide organizational efforts and encourage the search for new methods⁵ of work.

⁵ For instance, Zlatinov (Zlatinov, 2018; Zlatinov and Kabatliyska, 2020) argues the challenges in this direction arising from the digital transformation in the context of Economy 4.0, while Madanski (Madanski, 2021) and Nedev (Nedev, 2018; 2019) discuss them in specific sectors (respectively customs activities and finance).

A quarter of employees (26%) name a clash of values as a main source of conflict at work. Respondents from organizations in the capital (29%) were more likely to mention it than respondents from organizations in district cities (18%) and small cities or villages (18%) (Cramer's $V = 0.098$, Approx. Sig. = 0.032).

Two out of ten employees identified poor leadership from the top of the organization, poor selection, and poor line management as the prime source of conflict (cited by 21%, 20% and 20%, respectively). There were no significant differences in the respondents' responses to poor leadership from the top of the organization according to the personal characteristics or the characteristics of the organizations.

Older respondents (26% of these between 41 and 50 years and 27% of these older than 51 years) were significantly more likely to see poor selection as a key issue for workplace disagreements than younger respondents (17% of these up to 30 years and 17% of these between 31 and 40 years) (Cramer's $V = 0.113$, Approx. Sig. = 0.029). Respondents with more than 21 years of work experience (27%) were also more likely to report this source of workplace disagreements compared with respondents with less work experience (19% of respondents with up to 5 years of work, 19% of respondents with 6 to 10 years of work experience and 16% of respondents with 11 to 20 years of work experience (Cramer's $V = 0.112$, Approx. Sig. = 0.030). A possible reason for these differences may be that older and more experienced employees sometimes underestimate the skills and the abilities of new hires, who are usually younger and less experienced than them. Employees were more likely to cite poor selection if they had a high-school education or a doctoral degree. Respectively, 28% and 42% of these respondents mentioned it, compared with 19% of employees with a bachelor' degree and 18% of employees with a master' degree (Cramer's $V = 0.138$, Approx. Sig. = 0.004).

It seems that managers' self-assessment of their managerial skills differs from the views of their reports. Non-managers (24%) were significantly more likely to report poor line management as a key factor for conflict at work than managers (11%) and executives (10%) (Cramer's $V = 0.150$, Approx. Sig. = 0.000).

Poor performance management is cited by 17% of employees as a significant factor in generating conflict at work. Taboo topics (6%), perceived discrimination (4%) and bullying (3%) were the least commonly observed areas that lead to conflict.

Female employees (6%) were significantly more likely to report discrimination as a main cause of conflict compared with male employees (2%) (Phi = 0.092, Approx. Sig. = 0.014). Respondents were more likely to report this source of workplace disagreements if they were up to 30 years or more than 51 years old. Respectively, 4% and 10% of these respondents cited discrimination, compared with 3% of respondents between 31 and 40 years old and 2% of respondents between 41 and 50 years (Cramer's $V = 0.110$, Approx. Sig. = 0.036).

The main causes of conflict in Bulgarian organizations differ from the results of the survey by CPP (CPP, 2008). A comparison of the results of our study and the survey by CPP shows that the three most commonly mentioned causes of workplace conflict are the same. Countries in the global survey, with the exception of Germany, ranked personality clashes at the top of the list, while Bulgarian employees ranked them second. Stress is the second most

cited cause of conflict in the overall average results for the nine countries and the first in our study. Heavy workloads appear to be the third key factor for conflict for both Bulgarian employees and their foreign colleagues. There are no other similarities in the results of the two studies. Bulgarian employees have different perceptions of the major areas that lead to disagreements in the workplace and rank them in a specific order.

Our findings seem to be consistent with the results of the survey by CPP (CPP, 2008), which indicated that the most observed causes of conflict differ between countries due to differences in working life. The research also highlighted the impact of cultural factors on conflict (CPP, 2008). Having this in mind, it is not surprising that employees from Bulgarian organizations ranked the causes of conflict in a different way.

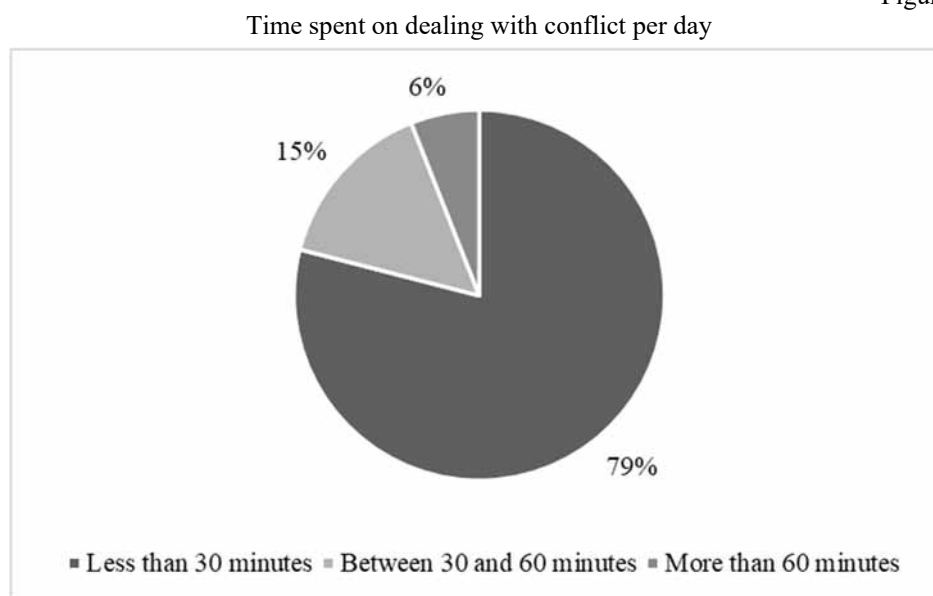
Employees to the global survey see more conflict arising from poor leadership from the top of the organization, poor line management, taboo topics, discrimination, and harassment than Bulgarian employees. Personality clashes are seen as a major causative factor by a similar percentage of respondents in both surveys. It should be pointed out that most of the key factors leading to an organizational conflict are more frequently reported by Bulgarian employees than by the employees in the survey by CPP. These results suggest that the working environment in Bulgaria generates more conflict than in the other nine countries and are indicative for the organizations to make efforts to create a healthy and harmonious working environment.

4.4. Time Spent on Dealing with Conflict

Given the levels of workplace conflict in Bulgaria organizations, it is not surprising that dealing with conflict takes considerable time. The majority of employees (79%) stated that they spent up to 30 minutes per day in a conflict situation (Figure 4). According to 15% of the respondents, conflict at work lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and 6% answered that they spent more than 60 minutes dealing with conflicts.

In most of the responses, there were no significant differences across the personal characteristics of respondents as well as across the characteristics of the organizations. Significant differences were found in the time spent on dealing with conflict reported by groups with different work experiences. Employees were more likely to spend more than 1 hour a day in conflict if they had worked in the organization for more than 21 years. 11% of these employees reported this, compared with 4% of employees with up to 5 years of work experience, 3% of employees with 6 to 10 years of work experience and 6% of employees with 11 to 20 years of work experience (Cramer's $V = 0.145$, Approx. Sig. = 0.021). We can speculate about the reasons for these differences. Employees with more work experience usually occupy more responsible positions in the organizational hierarchy (like managers, supervisors, etc.) and have to deal more often with disagreements between other members of the organizations or between their reports.

Figure 4



Source: Created by the author on the basis of the results of the study.

The time that employees most often spend on conflict situations equals 2.5 hours per week (approximately one day a month). A possible explanation for this amount of time can be sought in the dimensions of national culture. According to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010), the masculinity-femininity dimension of culture affects the ways of handling conflicts in organizations (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). In masculine cultures, conflicts are resolved by a good fight and by letting the strongest win. In feminine cultures, conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation. Bulgaria is considered a relatively feminine society (with a score of 40⁶ on Hofstede's masculinity-femininity dimension) (Hofstede Insights, 2021), and we can assume that employees spend so much time in conflict because they are trying to reach a solution through compromise.

It is not difficult to put a cost on the wasted time on conflict of an employee. The total cost for an employee equals his hourly rate of pay multiplied by the hours spent on conflict (Ford, 2017). In the case of Bulgaria, it amounts to approximately €10.5 or \$13 (based on average hourly earnings of €4.2 or \$5.2)⁷ per week. The loss rises to €42 or \$52 per month and to €504 or \$624 per year. Based on these calculations, the total cost of conflict for the Bulgarian

⁶ For the purpose of the study, we chose to consider the score of Hofstede. According to other researchers the value of the dimension for Bulgaria is slightly high (Silgidzhiyan et al., 2007; Sotirova and Davidkov, 2005; Davidkov, 2009; 2019).

⁷ The result is obtained on the basis of the average annual wages and salaries of the employees under labour contract in 2020 (16642BGN, approximately 709EUR or 863USD per month) (National Statistical Institute, 2021) and the average working hours per month in 2020 (167 working hours, calculated for 250 working days).

economy equals to approximately €1 1.09 billion or \$1.4 billion in paid hours in 2020⁸. Certainly, we must take into consideration that perhaps not all that time spent on conflict is unproductive. Further research is needed to differentiate total time spent on conflict from unproductive time.

We can also calculate the approximate cost of a single hypothetical conflict that takes 2.5 hours per week of the parties involved in it. There are usually at least two employees in a conflict. A superior (the manager of the employees) and/or an HR professional⁹ often involves in setting the workplace conflict if the employees cannot achieve a resolution on their own. Having this information in mind, the sum of totals for all the employees involved equals the organization's total costs of the conflict per (4 x €10.5 / \$13 = €42 / \$52). This cost will increase if the conflict continues longer than a week or more employees get involved in it.

It should be noted that this calculation is not entirely accurate. Not all employees waste an equal amount of time on a given conflict. The measurement will be more accurate if the actual salary (including bonuses) and all the benefits of each employee are used in the calculation.

5. Conclusions

The current paper highlights the need for acknowledging the significance of conflict in organizations. It gives some valuable knowledge on workplace conflict in the Bulgarian context.

First, our findings reveal that conflict is typical for Bulgarian organizations. It goes without saying that this result is not surprising given the inherence of conflict within all human interactions. Most employees experience workplace conflict to some extent, and a fifth of them have to deal with conflict always or frequently.

Second, Bulgarian employees identify the conflict at all levels of the organization. Conflict is most common between entry-level/front-line roles and between managers and their reports. Our evidence appears to be in line with the overall average in the survey by CPP (CPP, 2008). Employees to both surveys ranked the levels of conflict in the same order. Conflicts between entry-level/front-line roles and between middle managers are more frequently reported by Bulgarian respondents than by their foreign colleagues. The results underline the importance of building supportive work relationships and effective communication at all levels of organizations.

Third, conflict in Bulgarian organizations occurs across a wide range of causes. Stress, personality clashes and heavy workloads are seen as the primary factors leading to disagreements at work. Although the first three causes of conflict are the same as in the survey

⁸ The result is obtained on the basis of the average annual number of employees under labour contract in 2020 (National Statistical Institute, 2021).

⁹ The calculation is made for organizations in which HR professionals are not formally involved in the process of dealing with conflicts in the workplace, their job responsibilities do not include resolving problems between employees and therefore they are not paid for it.

by CPP, Bulgarian employees have different perceptions of the major areas that lead to disagreements. Our findings reveal the specifics of the working environment in Bulgaria and draw attention to the key factors that need to be addressed in order to deal with workplace conflict.

Fourth, in terms of lost time, the conflict appears to be costly to Bulgarian organizations. Our evidence shows that Bulgarian employees mostly often spend 2.5 hours per week dealing with conflict. If all this wasted time is unproductive, the losses for the economy are significant – about €1 billion or \$1.4 billion in paid hours in 2020. The aggregate losses associated with conflict are even greater given the other direct and hidden costs to the organization resulting from the poorly managed conflict. Hence, the question for organizations is how they can reduce the costs of conflict and achieve a positive outcome from conflict.

The present study has several implications for organizations. First, it was shown that conflict is certain to occur in any organization, and therefore, it must be recognized as an integral part of working life. To learn how to live with conflict and achieve positive outcomes, organizations must foster organizational cultures that encourage constructive attitudes of employees to conflict. Second, to demonstrate their ability to handle conflict, organizations must provide employees with adequate conflict management training. Formal training is considered the most powerful tool for successfully dealing with organizational conflict.

The results of the study could also be useful for further research on workplace conflict in Bulgarian organizations.

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