



SOURCES AND RESOLUTION STRATEGIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN THE SERBIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: This paper investigates the nature, frequency, sources, and resolution strategies of organizational conflicts in Serbia's private and public sectors. Using a structured questionnaire and a sample of 128 respondents, the study applies descriptive statistics to analyze perceptions about conflict types, causes, and resolution mechanisms. Findings indicate a predominance of horizontal conflicts and traditional perceptions of conflict as negative phenomena. Most respondents recognize the significance of joint problem-solving and overarching goals as effective resolution strategies. Personal distrust and task interdependence are identified as major sources of conflict. The study recommends institutionalized conflict management training and fostering constructive organizational climates.

Keywords: organizational conflict, conflict resolution, horizontal conflict, conflict perception, Serbia, empirical research

Introduction

Organizational conflicts are a common and unavoidable component of modern work environments, arising from differences in goals, interests, communication styles, values, or resource allocation. While early management theories predominantly viewed conflict as a negative phenomenon that disrupts efficiency and organizational harmony (Robbins & Judge, 2019), contemporary perspectives have shifted toward a more nuanced understanding. Modern theories suggest that, when appropriately managed, conflict can stimulate innovation, improve decision-making, and strengthen team cohesion (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Thus, conflict is no longer seen solely as a threat, but as a potential driver of positive organizational change.

The significance of studying organizational conflict is particularly relevant in transitional economies such as Serbia, where economic restructuring, cultural shifts, and institutional instability have profoundly influenced workplace dynamics. Serbian organizations—emerging from a socialist legacy—face unique challenges as they adapt to market-oriented practices, including increased competition, decentralized management, and the introduction of participative decision-making models (Bogicevic Milikic et al., 2012). Despite these transformations, research on how conflict manifests in Serbian organizations, and how it is managed in different sectors, remains limited.

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This study aims to address this gap by investigating the types, sources, and resolution strategies of organizational conflicts in both public and private sectors in Serbia.

This research seeks to: (1) assess the prevalence and typology of conflicts within organizations; (2) explore employees' perceptions of conflict resolution strategies; and (3) identify key personal and organizational sources of workplace conflict. The scope of this study encompasses a wide range of professional roles, organizational structures, and industry sectors, offering a comprehensive picture of how conflict is experienced and addressed in contemporary Serbian workplaces.

A review of relevant literature reveals two dominant approaches to conflict resolution: traditional conflict avoidance—common in hierarchical, bureaucratic systems—and constructive conflict engagement, which emphasizes collaboration, negotiation, and open communication (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Serbian organizations, particularly those in the public sector, often remain anchored in the former model due to cultural resistance and structural rigidity (Hollinshead & Maclean, 2007). Theoretical models such as Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Organizational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1987), and the Affective Conflict Model (Pelled, 1996) provide useful frameworks for interpreting conflict dynamics and employee behavior in this context.

To empirically explore these phenomena, this study employed a descriptive survey methodology, utilizing a structured online questionnaire administered to 128 respondents across various sectors. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square testing, and correlation analysis to identify patterns and relationships between conflict variables. The results reveal that horizontal conflicts are the most prevalent, with private-sector organizations demonstrating a higher tolerance for cognitive (constructive) conflicts, while public-sector entities tend to experience more affective (dysfunctional) conflicts. Key sources of conflict include personal distrust and task interdependence, while the most frequently used resolution strategies involve alignment around common goals and collaborative problem-solving.

These findings not only contribute to the theoretical understanding of conflict in post-transition societies but also offer practical insights for improving organizational conflict management practices in Serbia. By institutionalizing training programs and fostering a culture of transparency and trust, organizations can harness the constructive potential of workplace conflict and support sustainable performance and employee well-being.

Literature Review

Organizational conflict has long been a subject of scholarly attention in the fields of management, organizational behavior, and industrial relations. Early studies predominantly viewed conflict as a dysfunctional force, associated with reduced productivity and organizational inefficiency (Robbins & Judge, 2019). This perspective was aligned with traditional, hierarchical organizational structures that prioritized stability and control.

However, contemporary research highlights that conflict, when managed constructively, can play a vital role in enhancing organizational effectiveness. Scholars such as De Dreu and Weingart (2003) and Tjosvold (2008) argue that certain types of conflict, especially cognitive conflict centered on ideas and tasks, can stimulate innovation, enhance team performance, and lead to more effective decision-making.



This shift in perspective has led to the emergence of conflict as a potentially functional component of organizational dynamics.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in understanding how conflict manifests and is resolved across different cultural and institutional contexts. Research has shown that conflict resolution strategies are often influenced by national culture, organizational norms, and institutional legacies (Rahim, 2011; Gelfand et al., 2012). In transitional economies such as Serbia, these factors are particularly salient. The legacy of centralized planning, the dominance of hierarchical structures, and the cultural emphasis on authority and consensus continue to shape conflict behaviors in Serbian organizations (Bogicevic Milikic et al., 2012; Sljukic & Sljukic, 2019).

Despite these unique conditions, relatively few empirical studies have explored organizational conflict in Serbia, especially from a comparative, sector-based perspective. Existing literature tends to focus on general HRM practices or leadership styles without a detailed examination of how workplace conflict is perceived, experienced, and resolved. This study seeks to address that gap by providing empirical data on conflict sources and resolution strategies in both public and private sectors.

Furthermore, research in similar post-socialist or post-transition contexts—such as Poland, Hungary, or Croatia—suggests that conflict resolution often relies on informal mechanisms, with limited institutional support for structured mediation or collaborative decision-making (Hollinshead & Maclean, 2007; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). These findings offer a valuable comparative backdrop for analyzing the Serbian case and highlight the importance of organizational culture and leadership in shaping conflict dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates several complementary models that explain the emergence and management of organizational conflict:

- Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) posits that workplace relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges. When individuals perceive inequity in the distribution of rewards, recognition, or support, tensions may arise. In the Serbian context, perceptions of favoritism, lack of transparency, or inconsistent management behaviors often trigger interpersonal conflict.
- Organizational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1987) explores how fairness in decision-making processes affects employee attitudes and behaviors. The theory identifies three key dimensions of justice—distributive, procedural, and interactional—which can directly influence how conflicts are perceived and how likely employees are to accept resolutions. This framework is particularly relevant in public sector organizations in Serbia, where rigid procedures often clash with employee expectations for fairness and voice.
- The Affective Conflict Model (Pelled, 1996) distinguishes between cognitive conflict—which involves differences in ideas or viewpoints and can enhance team performance—and affective conflict, which stems from personal incompatibilities and emotional discord, often leading to dysfunction. This distinction underpins our analysis of how conflict is perceived differently across sectors and organizational cultures.



- Additionally, Thomas and Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument (1974) offers a typology of conflict-handling styles—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—which provides a conceptual basis for understanding the preferred strategies used by employees in different organizational settings.

By combining these theories, the study offers a multidimensional understanding of conflict in Serbian organizations. It seeks to identify whether conflict resolution approaches are shaped more by individual perceptions (justice and fairness), relational dynamics (exchange), emotional triggers (affective conflict), or organizational norms (hierarchical vs. participatory cultures).

To guide the empirical investigation, a conceptual model (Figure 1) was developed. It illustrates the hypothesized relationships between conflict sources, perceived conflict types, and adopted resolution strategies within organizational contexts.

Current Debates in Conflict Management

Recent scholarship highlights a growing divergence between traditional and contemporary approaches to conflict management. Traditional models, particularly in hierarchical or bureaucratic organizations, often favor conflict suppression through strict policies and top-down decisions (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). These approaches aim to maintain order but frequently lead to unresolved tensions and reduced employee morale.

Conversely, modern conflict management emphasizes **constructive engagement**—fostering open communication, joint problem-solving, and participatory decision-making (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). This perspective aligns with the **functional view of conflict**, which suggests that when managed correctly, conflict can enhance organizational learning, creativity, and adaptability.

In Serbia, these debates are particularly relevant. Research suggests that despite structural reforms, many organizations still adhere to traditional, hierarchical conflict handling practices due to cultural inertia and skepticism toward participatory methods (Hollinshead & Maclean, 2007). As a result, modern strategies are often underutilized, especially in the public sector.

Materials and Methods

Research Design and Objectives

This study applied a **descriptive survey design**, which is widely used in social sciences to systematically collect information about a population's characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes. The descriptive approach was chosen because it allows for **quantitative assessment of workplace conflicts** without manipulating variables, making it suitable for capturing real-world organizational dynamics.

The primary objectives were:

- **To determine the prevalence and types of organizational conflict** across different sectors.
- **To explore employees' perceptions of conflict resolution strategies** and their effectiveness.
- **To assess the significance of personal and organizational sources of conflict** in shaping workplace interactions.

Alternative research designs, such as **experimental or longitudinal studies**, were considered but deemed less appropriate. Experimental designs require controlled environments that do not reflect natural



workplace settings, while longitudinal studies demand extended timeframes that were beyond the scope of this research.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected using an **anonymous online questionnaire**, ensuring confidentiality and reducing response bias. The questionnaire was structured into three sections:

- **Demographic and workplace characteristics** (age, gender, sector, job position).
- **Frequency and nature of conflicts** (types of conflicts, frequency of occurrence).
- **Sources and resolution strategies** (organizational vs. personal factors, preferred resolution methods).

The questionnaire was **pilot-tested** with a small group of employees to ensure clarity and reliability. Responses were gathered over a **four-week period**, with reminders sent to participants to maximize response rates.

Alternative data collection methods, such as **interviews or focus groups**, were considered but not selected due to time constraints and the need for standardized responses. While interviews provide deeper insights, they are resource-intensive and may introduce interviewer bias. Focus groups allow for dynamic discussions but can be influenced by dominant voices within the group.

Sample

The study included **128 employees** from both **public and private sectors** in Serbia, aged **18–65**. The sample was selected using **stratified random sampling** to ensure representation across different organizational levels.

- **Gender distribution:** Women made up **59%** of the sample.
- **Job positions:** Respondents ranged from **entry-level workers to top management**.
- **Sector representation:** Participants were drawn from **manufacturing, services, education, and government institutions**.

Alternative sampling techniques, such as **purposive sampling**, were considered but not used, as they could introduce selection bias. Stratified random sampling was preferred because it ensures **balanced representation** across different organizational structures.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics**, including **mean, frequency distributions, and percentages**. Graphs and frequency tables were used to visualize trends in workplace conflicts.

- **Chi-square tests** were applied to examine relationships between demographic variables and conflict perceptions.
- **Correlation analysis** was conducted to assess the link between conflict resolution strategies and employee satisfaction.

Alternative analytical methods, such as **regression analysis**, were considered but not included due to the exploratory nature of the study. While regression models could provide predictive insights, the primary goal was to **describe existing patterns** rather than establish causal relationships.



Results

Conflict Nature and Frequency

The analysis reveals that organizational conflicts are a widespread phenomenon across Serbian workplaces, with **61% of employees reporting conflict on a daily or weekly basis**. Horizontal conflicts, or disputes among colleagues at similar hierarchical levels, were most commonly reported in both sectors. Vertical conflicts, occurring between subordinates and superiors, were **significantly more frequent in public sector organizations**, suggesting that rigid bureaucratic structures and centralized authority may be contributing factors.

Table 1. presents the frequency of conflicts among respondents:

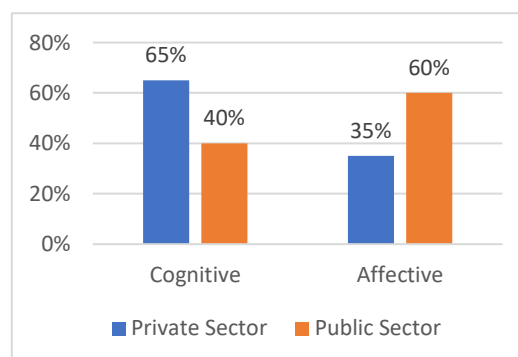
Conflict Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
Daily	25%
Weekly	36%
Monthly	22%
Rarely	17%

These findings suggest a high level of workplace tension, reinforcing the need for structured and context-sensitive conflict resolution strategies.

Conflict Perception by Sector

A clear divergence was observed in how employees from different sectors perceive workplace conflict. **Private-sector respondents were more likely to recognize cognitive (constructive) conflict**—characterized by task-related disagreements that can enhance decision-making—while **public-sector employees predominantly reported affective (dysfunctional) conflict**, associated with personal animosity and emotional strain.

Figure 1: Distribution of Cognitive vs. Affective Conflict by Sector



This indicates that organizational culture and structure significantly shape not only the emergence of conflict but also its interpretation.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

When asked about preferred resolution mechanisms, respondents favored **internal strategies** such as joint problem-solving (38%) and superordinate goal alignment (45%). These approaches were viewed as fostering cooperation and focusing attention on common objectives. However, **third-party**



interventions (e.g., mediation) were used by only 17% of participants, indicating either a lack of institutional mechanisms or cultural hesitation toward external conflict facilitation.

However, **third-party interventions** (e.g., mediation or arbitration) were **rarely utilized**, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2:

Conflict Resolution Strategy	Usage Frequency (%)
Superordinate goal alignment	45%
Joint problem-solving	38%
Third-party intervention	17%

This indicates a preference for **internal resolution mechanisms** over external mediation. The low reliance on third-party interventions may reflect a lack of formalized conflict resolution frameworks within organizations or a cultural inclination toward resolving disputes informally.

Sources of Conflict

Conflicts were attributed to both personal and organizational factors. A comparative analysis shows a slight predominance of interpersonal issues:

- Personal Sources (55%): lack of trust, poor communication, and emotional stress.
- Organizational Sources (45%): task interdependence, unclear roles, and perceived unfairness in resource allocation.

This dual nature of conflict etiology underscores the importance of integrated interventions that address both relational and structural components of organizational life.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the assertion that **organizational conflict is both frequent and multifaceted** in Serbian workplaces. The **high prevalence of horizontal conflict** reflects the complexity of peer interactions in task-dependent environments, particularly in organizations undergoing structural transformation. Public-sector dominance of vertical and affective conflicts suggests the lingering effects of **bureaucratic rigidity and centralized control**, consistent with earlier findings in post-transition economies (Hollinshead & Maclean, 2007).

Importantly, the **sectoral difference in conflict perception**—with private organizations recognizing more cognitive conflict—may indicate **higher openness to diverse perspectives**, more flexible structures, and a culture of innovation.

The results of this study can be interpreted through several theoretical frameworks. **Social Exchange Theory** (Blau, 1964) suggests that conflicts often arise when employees perceive an imbalance in workplace interactions, particularly in terms of fairness and reciprocity. This is evident in the findings related to **resource distribution fairness**, where employees in both sectors identified inequitable access to resources as a significant source of conflict.



Similarly, **Organizational Justice Theory** (Greenberg, 1987) provides insight into how perceptions of fairness influence workplace tensions. Employees who feel that decision-making processes lack transparency or equity are more likely to experience **affective conflicts**, which were found to be more prevalent in the public sector. This supports previous research indicating that bureaucratic structures often lead to dissatisfaction due to rigid hierarchies and limited employee participation in decision-making (Bogicevic Milikic et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the **Affective Conflict Model** (Pelled, 1996) helps differentiate between cognitive and affective conflicts. The study found that **private-sector employees** were more likely to recognize **constructive (cognitive) conflicts**, which aligns with Pelled's assertion that cognitive conflicts can enhance problem-solving and innovation. In contrast, **public-sector employees** reported a higher prevalence of **affective conflicts**, which tend to be emotionally charged and detrimental to workplace cohesion.

The preference for **internal resolution mechanisms** over third-party interventions suggests that organizations may benefit from **formalized conflict resolution frameworks** that encourage mediation and structured dialogue. Research on **conflict management styles** (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) highlights the importance of adapting resolution strategies to fit organizational culture. The findings indicate that **superordinate goal alignment** and **joint problem-solving** were the most accepted strategies, supporting the notion that collaborative approaches foster better workplace relationships (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Additionally, the study's results align with the **functional conflict perspective**, which argues that certain types of conflict can enhance organizational performance when managed effectively (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The prevalence of cognitive conflicts in the private sector suggests that organizations with **flexible structures** may be better equipped to harness the positive aspects of workplace disagreements.

Conclusion

This study confirms that conflicts are common in Serbian organizations, especially horizontal in nature. While conflict is predominantly viewed negatively, some respondents recognize its constructive potential. Promoting conflict resolution training, trust-building, and communication could shift organizational culture towards more adaptive conflict handling. The findings suggest several **key strategies** for improving conflict management in Serbian organizations:

- **Conflict Resolution Training:** Implementing structured training programs can equip employees with **negotiation, mediation, and problem-solving skills**, fostering a more constructive approach to workplace disputes (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Research indicates that organizations with formal conflict resolution training experience **higher employee satisfaction and productivity** (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).
- **Trust-Building Initiatives:** Establishing **transparent communication channels** and encouraging **collaborative decision-making** can reduce interpersonal tensions and enhance



workplace relationships (Greenberg, 1987). Studies show that trust-building efforts contribute to **lower turnover rates and improved organizational commitment** (Blau, 1964).

- **Adaptive Leadership Development:** Encouraging **adaptive leadership**—which emphasizes flexibility, stakeholder engagement, and proactive conflict resolution—can help organizations navigate complex workplace dynamics more effectively (Pelled, 1996).
- **Enhanced Communication Strategies:** Promoting **active listening, open dialogue, and structured feedback mechanisms** can mitigate misunderstandings and prevent conflicts from escalating (Robbins & Judge, 2019).

While this study provides valuable insights, further research is needed to explore:

- **Longitudinal Effects of Conflict Resolution Training:** Examining how structured training programs impact **employee behavior and organizational culture** over time (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).
- **Sector-Specific Conflict Dynamics:** Investigating how conflict resolution strategies differ across **industries such as healthcare, education, and technology** (Bogicevic Milikic et al., 2012).
- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Comparing conflict resolution approaches in Serbia with those in **other post-transition economies** to identify best practices (Sljukic & Sljukic, 2019).
- **Impact of Leadership Styles on Conflict Management:** Assessing how **transformational vs. transactional leadership** influences workplace conflict resolution (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

By integrating **structured conflict resolution frameworks**, Serbian organizations can **shift their workplace culture toward more adaptive conflict handling**, ultimately fostering a more **collaborative, innovative, and resilient workforce**.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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