

# SOCIETY



## SOCIAL CONFLICTS AS SEEN BY RESIDENTS OF SAINT PETERSBURG: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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*This article describes the attitudes of Saint Petersburg residents to social conflicts. The author analyses their assessments of danger associated with social tension in the Russian society. This tension becomes particularly pronounced during the time of economic, social, and political turbulence. The research aims to examine the existing threats and identify opportunities for reducing social tension. The article makes a practical contribution to the development of social policy and civil society. The author describes the attitudes of Saint Petersburg residents to various social conflicts. They believe that religious and ethnic conflicts are the most dangerous ones and consider 'conflicts over property and status' a minor threat. Residents, associating themselves with the middle class, are more inclined to stress the danger of religious conflicts compared to those who associate themselves with the lower class, which is corroborated by a comparison of real incomes. The intensity of personal anxiety, experienced in the presence of people differing from the respondents, can be described in the following way: the most acute anxiety is caused by people of a different nationality, followed by nationals of other countries and members of other religions, then people with differing political views, and compatriots from other Russian regions. These data make it possible to identify hidden connections and patterns in the socio-demographic structure of these attitudes, which can be instrumental in obtaining a comprehensive picture of threats and emerging social conflicts and, hence, in preventing them.*

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*Submitted on July 10, 2015.*

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2016-1-7

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*Key words:* public opinion, mass consciousness, social conflicts, social tensions, sociodemographic characteristics, settings, Russian society, Saint Petersburg

This article focuses on the attitudes of Saint Petersburgers to social conflicts, expressed primarily in assessments of danger associated with social disagreements between different parts of Russian society. The study is based on the empirical political survey 'The features of political consciousness of residents of Russian metropolises in a systemic economic crisis: The case of Saint Petersburg' ('Political Petersburg-2015'). The survey was conducted by the Centre for Social and Internet Research of Saint Petersburg State University in March-April 2015<sup>1</sup> (the Centre is headed by Dr S. M. Snopov). It was carried out by telephone. The sample totalled 1.250 people permanently residing in Saint Petersburg. Sampling was random and non-repeated. The quota controls were gender, age, education, and district of residence.

Before discussing the attitudes of Saint Petersburgers to social conflicts, it is worth considering the phenomenon of conflict perception. The US scholar C. W. Mills pointed out that development was always based on a conflict rather than conformism, cohesion, or integration. [5] A society is never stable because of the constant struggle between different social groups pursuing disparate interests. Moreover, based on the ideas of K. Marx, M. Weber, V. Pareto, and G. Mosca, Mills argued that the ultimate manifestation of this conflict was the struggle for power. Another conflict theorist, the German sociologist R. Dahrendorf believed that all complex organisations are based on redistribution of authority. [2] In his opinion, conflicts are caused by political rather than economic reasons. The source of conflicts is the so-called *homo politicus*. Classifying conflicts (between parties of the same level, a superior and a subordinate, and a part and the whole), he distinguished between 15 types, analysed them in detail, and considered opportunities for their resolution. Another proponent of this theory, the US sociologist L. Coser, defined a social conflict as an ideological phenomenon reflecting the ambitions and feelings of social groups in their struggle for power, a change in social status, income redistribution, revaluation of values, etc. [4] Most advocates of this approach stress the significance of conflicts for preventing the ossification of society, opening the way for innovations, and facilitating development and improvement. This approach rejects the spontaneity of conflicts and insists on the possibility of and the need for their resolution. From this perspective, the results of this study are of not only theoretical, but also practical significance.

Contemporary sociological literature abounds with numerous classifications based on different criteria. By agents participating in a conflict, one can distinguish between four types of conflicts: intrapersonal, interpersonal, between a person and a group, and between groups. Conflicts can be classed by different fields of activity into political, socioeconomic, ethnic, etc. Accor-

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<sup>1</sup> The project was supervised by Prof. O. V. Popova, the head of the Department of Political Institutions and Applied Political Research, Faculty of Political Science, Saint Petersburg State University. The research team consisted of Dr. O. V. Lagutin, Dr. E. O. Negrov, Dr D. A. Budko, Lecturer A. V. Shentyakov, PhD student R. K. Kuchakov, and PhD student S. I. Suslov.

ding to D. Katz, conflicts arise between subgroups competing directly and indirectly, within a hierarchy, and as regards rewards. [4, p. 127—129] M. Deutsch distinguishes between the following types of conflict: vertical (having a defined cause and being perceived by others that way), contingent (depending on an easy to alter environmental feature that can spur the conflict), displaced (parties having a misconception of the disputed issues), misattributed (incorrect assignment of causes), latent, and false. [ibid, pp. 130—132] The idea that some conflicts are not only possible but they also can be desirable is gaining wide currency. Thus, two types of conflicts are identified: 1) functional conflicts increasing the efficiency of an organisation, and 2) dysfunctional conflicts reducing personal satisfaction and the organisation's efficiency and adversely affecting team collaboration. Our study focuses on interpersonal and intergroup conflicts with a certain constructive or destructive potential (for more information on the methodology, see. [1; 3; 6—9]) Therefore, the academic problem to be addressed in the study is an assessment of different potentials of social conflicts in Russian society based on the attitudes of individuals living in the country's second largest city — Saint Petersburg. The research takes into account the features of social conflicts between different groups. These tensions can be considered typical of Russia, since they are closely related to the transitional condition and underlying disagreements. Some of them, rooted in the past, aggravated during the transition to market relations. The formation of new social groups — entrepreneurs and the owning class — and the increasing inequality between different social groups have laid foundations for new conflicts.

Empirically, this study is an analysis and interpretation of the frequency distribution and connection between the sociodemographic characteristics of certain groups of respondents and their assessment of the danger associated with real and potential social conflicts studied through an analysis of standardised residuals. The sociodemographic profile of respondents was established using a questionnaire asking about their age (18—29, 30—39, 40—49, 50—59, over 60 years of age); education (primary and incomplete secondary, secondary, vocational, incomplete higher, higher education); occupation (worker, engineer, administrative employee, manager, cultural worker, commercial worker, entrepreneur, military personnel, services worker, homemaker, student, non-working pensioner, unemployed, other); social self-identification (upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, or lower class); and monthly income per one family member (under 5 thousand, 5—10 thousand, 10—13 thousand, 13—18 thousand, 18—28 thousand, over 28 thousand roubles, refusal to answer).

Table 1 shows the data reflecting the opinions of respondents about the danger associated with different social groups. The questions were formulated as follows, 'Please could you tell how dangerous conflicts between the following groups are: public officials and ordinary citizens/company owners and ordinary citizens/Orthodox Christians and Muslims/the rich and the poor/Russians and non-Russians (not dangerous, not very dangerous, somewhat dangerous, very dangerous)'.

Table 1

**Danger of conflicts between different social groups**

Danger	Public officials vs ordinary citizens	Company owners vs ordinary citizens	Orthodox Christians vs Muslims	The rich vs the poor	Russians vs non-Russians
1 (not dangerous)	11.6	10.7	11.5	12.2	10.5
2 (not very dangerous)	27.0	27.7	15.0	20.3	17.3
3 (somewhat dangerous)	35.9	37.2	31.0	34.2	34.6
4 (very dangerous)	16.3	14.5	33.9	25.4	29.2
No answer	9.2	10.0	8.6	7.8	8.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Therefore, more than half of Saint Petersburgers believe that potential conflicts between public officials and ordinary citizens are dangerous (52.2 %), whereas 38.6 % insist on the opposite and almost each tenth respondent gives no answer (9.2 %). Detailed information can be derived from an analysis of standardised residuals for each column. Men are inclined to see this problem as insignificant (a standardised residue of +3.1), whereas women have an opposite opinion (-2.7). In terms of age, there is a clear difference between the youth (18-29 years of age) and elderly people. The former have a clear opinion (-2.2), believing that such conflicts are not dangerous (+2.6 and -2.3), the latter have strong doubts (+4.9), considering such conflicts a threat (+2.1). Respondents with primary and secondary education often give no answer to the question (+2.5 and +1.7 respectively), whereas respondents with incomplete higher education (students) are certain of their position (-2.0), believing that the danger associated with such conflicts is not considerable (+2.2). People with secondary education show a negative correlation (-2.3). As to the occupation, the results are as follows: commercial workers believe that conflicts between public officials and ordinary citizens (themselves) are not very dangerous (+2.7), pensioners often give no answer (+4.7), entrepreneurs and students show a negative correlation, describing the problem as somewhat dangerous or very dangerous (-1.8 and -2.2 respectively). The unemployed expectedly do not consider such conflicts harmless (-2.0). Finally, respondents identifying themselves as the working class see such conflicts as dangerous (+2.9). Those who cannot clearly identify their social status, although wavering (+4.1), do not consider a conflict between public officials and ordinary citizens dangerous (+3.2 and -3.1 respectively). Moreover, these conclusions do not contradict the data on monthly income.

As to employment conflicts, the opinions of Saint Petersburgers are distributed in a similar way. More than half of Saint Petersburgers see potential conflicts between company owners and employees as dangers (51.7 %), whereas 38.4 % of respondents expressed an opposite opinion, 10 % gave no answer. An analysis of standardised residuals provides more detail. Men have fewer doubts when answering this question (−2.0), most of them believe that conflicts between ‘capitalists’ and ‘proletarians’ are not very dangerous (+2.9). Women hold an opposite position in both cases (+1.8 and −2.5 respectively). Respondents aged 18–49 are also certain of their position (−3.4, −1.7 and −1.7 respectively), whereas pensioners have significant doubts (+7.2). Moreover, young respondents (under 39 years of age) are not inclined to overestimate the danger associated with such conflicts (+3.2 and −2.0 at 18–29 and +1.7 at 30–39 years of age) and elderly respondents to underestimate it (−3.6). As to the education criterion, respondents with primary and incomplete secondary education waver (+2.8) when answering the question, showing a negative correlation with a high level of danger (−1.8), whereas respondents with incomplete higher education (mostly students) have no doubts (−1.9). Therefore, pensioners often give no answer (+6.8), whereas managers, commercial workers and students rarely doubt (−2.0, −2.0 and −2.8 respectively). However, workers surprisingly agree with employers, believing that conflicts between company owners and employees are not dangerous (+1.7). This position is also shared by students (+3.4 and −2.4). An opposite opinion is held by pensioners and the unemployed (−3.8 and +1.7 respectively). People identifying themselves as the lower middle class (−1.7) and those with an income of over 28,000 roubles (−3.1) usually do not waver. On the contrary, doubts are often entertained by members of the lower class (+2.9) and those with an income of 10–13 thousand roubles (+2.1). Naturally, the members of the upper middle class do not exaggerate the danger of conflicts between company owners and employees, and those of lower middle class do not underestimate it (both +2.9).

As to religious conflicts, the situation is less ambiguous and more complicated. Almost two thirds of respondents consider the danger of religious conflicts as very serious (64.9 %), slightly over one fourth believe that it is serious (26.5 %), and 8.6 % did not express any views. An analysis of standardised residuals shows the following. Women more often than men consider conflicts between Orthodox Christians and Muslims as dangerous (−2.0 against +2.4). The youth have widely varying opinions, whereas middle-aged respondents (40–49 years of age) are more inclined than pensioners to see such conflicts as dangerous (−2.3 and +3.0 respectively). Less educated respondents have more doubts about their position and, surprisingly, estimate the threat of religious conflicts as insignificant (+3.3 and +1.8 respectively). It is worth noting that administrative employees see such threats as considerable (+2.1) and entertain little doubt (−1.7). Pensioners, on the contrary, do not think that the threat is significant (+2.9 and −2.0 respectively). The position of commercial workers is ambiguous (+2.9 and −2.1 respectively). As to the social status, respondents identifying themselves as the middle class consider the threat of religious conflicts much higher than the

members of the lower class do ( $-1.9/+2.5$  and  $+1.9/-2.3$  respectively). This is corroborated by a comparison of actual income. Those with a monthly income of under 5,000 roubles are not inclined to see such threat as considerable ( $-1.7$ ), probably because they are faced with more serious and urgent problems.

Answers to the question about the conflict between the rich and the poor were as follows. 59.6 % of respondents consider such conflicts as very dangerous and somewhat dangerous, 32.5 % do not see them as a considerable threat. Each twelfth resident of Saint Petersburg (7.8 %) does not express any view. Women more often than men consider this threat as significant ( $-1.7$  against  $+2.0$ ). The youth and pensioners also have opposite opinions on the issue. The former do not see the gap between the rich and the poor as a serious threat ( $+4.0$  and  $-1.4$  respectively), the latter think that it is rather significant ( $-3.1$ ). Respondents with primary and incomplete secondary education ( $-2.1$ ) and homemakers ( $+2.1$ ) express opinions similar to those of pensioners. Similar results are obtained when considering the occupations of respondents. Students are convinced that there is no danger ( $+3.3$  and  $-1.9$  respectively), non-working pensioners often waver ( $+3.1$ ), but consider the danger as serious ( $-2.7$ ).

Finally, Saint Petersburgers assess the potential ethnic conflicts (between Russians and non-Russians) as follows. Almost two thirds of respondents (63.8 %) think that this problem is considerable, one-fourth (27.8 %) believe that it is not serious, and 8.5 % do not express any views. Men, elderly people, non-working pensioners, and people with a monthly income of under 5,000 roubles believe that this threat is not significant ( $+1.7$ ,  $+2.4$ , 3.3 % and 2.8 % respectively). Students aged 18—19 and managers see this danger as serious ( $+1.7$ ,  $+2.3$  and  $+2.5$  respectively).

Table 2 shows data on the anxiety felt when in the presence of people from other social and ethnic backgrounds. The questions were formulated as follows: 'Please could you tell how anxious you feel in the presence of people of a different nationality/with differing political views/of another faith/from other Russian regions/from other countries?'

Table 2

**Anxiety felt in the presence of people with a different social and ethnic background**

Degree of anxiety	Another nationality	Differing political views	Another faith	From other Russian regions	Nationals of another state
1 (no anxiety)	49.2	87.7	79.3	87.7	73.5
2 (moderate anxiety)	40.3	8.8	15.3	8.8	18.0
3 (considerable anxiety)	8.8	1.7	3.2	1.7	3.8
No answer	1.7	1.7	2.2	1.7	4.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Therefore, most Saint Petersburgers give an unambiguous answer to this question — only 1.7 % of respondents do not express any views. However, opinions divided over this issue. 49.2 % do not feel anxious, and 49.1 % feel very or somewhat anxious. An analysis of standardised residuals conducted for each question shows that non-working pensioners over 60 years of age do not feel anxiety in such situations (+1.9 and +2.4 respectively). Homemakers say that they feel anxious (+2.1). The strongest emotions are experienced primarily by workers (+2.0), whereas engineers, on the contrary, feel much calmer in the presence of nationals of other states (–2.1).

As to people with differing political views, most respondents (87.7 %) say that they do not feel anxiety in the presence of such individuals. Only each tenth (10.5 %) feels very or somewhat anxious. It is worth noting that men feel rather calm (+1.7 and –2.3), whereas women are often anxious (+2.0) in this situation. As to the age breakdown, the results are also unambiguous — the youth remain calm in the presence of political opponents (+2.0 and –2.3) and the strongest emotions are experienced by people aged 50–59 (+2.6). It is of interest that respondents identifying themselves as military personnel and those with a monthly income of 12–18 thousand roubles also feel certain anxiety (+1.9).

In most cases, Saint Petersburgers are very tolerant of people of other faiths. Almost four fifths of respondents (79.3 %) say that they feel no anxiety in the presence of people of another faith, only 18.5 % say the opposite. It is of interest that workers and the unemployed feel somewhat anxious (+2.2 and +2.8 respectively), whereas engineers and businesspeople, on the contrary, do not feel any anxiety (–1.7 and –1.7 respectively).

The attitudes of respondents towards people from other Russian regions are even more homogeneous. Almost nine out of ten Saint Petersburgers do not feel any anxiety when in the presence of such individuals. Only one in ten respondents feels very or somewhat anxious in such situations. Anxiety increases with the age of respondents (+2.1 and –2.0 in respondents aged 40–49 and +1.7 in those over 60 years of age). The same holds true for the level of education (+2.9 in respondents with primary and incomplete secondary, +2.2 with vocational and –1.7 with higher education) and income (lowest income — +1.7, 13,000–18,000 roubles — +2.4, over 28,000 roubles — –2.0).

The structure of attitudes towards people from other states is more complex. Almost three thirds (73.5 %) say that they are not disturbed by the presence of such individuals and only one fifth feels very or somewhat anxious (21.8 %). A significant proportion of respondents did not express any views (4.7 %). The presence of people from other states causes most anxiety in respondents with primary and incomplete secondary education and workers (+2.2 and +1.7 respectively), whereas managers and students do not feel very anxious (–1.9 and –1.8 respectively).

The overall picture is rather compelling. As to differences in assessing the danger associated with conflicts between disparate social groups, Saint Petersburgers rank religious conflicts as most dangerous. These conflicts are followed by ethnic tensions and conflicts between the rich and the poor, and public officials and ordinary citizens. The final position on the list is con-

flicts between company owners and employees. Women, more than men, are frightened of potential conflicts between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. As to the youth, the information is equivocal, whereas middle-aged respondents (40—49 years of age) are more inclined than pensioners to consider such conflicts dangerous. Respondents with low levels of education often waver but they surprisingly do not see religious conflicts a threat. It is worth noting that administrative workers think that such threats are serious and they are certain of their position, whereas pensioners, on the contrary, do not consider religious conflicts dangerous. As to the social status, respondents identifying themselves as the middle class are more inclined than members of the lower class to consider religious conflicts a serious threat. This is also corroborated by the income breakdown. Those with a monthly income of under 5,000 roubles do not think that this danger is great (–1.7), probably, because they are faced with more serious and urgent problems.

As to conflicts between Russians and non-Russians, the situation is as follows. Men, elderly people, non-working pensioners, and people with a very low monthly income (under 5,000) are likely to see this threat as insignificant. These conflicts are considered as a threat by students and the youth aged 18—29 and managers.

Conflicts between the poor and the rich are seen as dangerous by women. There is a dramatic difference between opinions expressed by the youth and pensioners. The former do not see it as a threat, the latter express an opposite view. Respondents with primary and incomplete secondary education and homemakers are also inclined to consider such conflicts a threat. This picture does not change when analysing the occupations of respondents. Students do not see any threat, non-working pensioners often do not have a clear position, but think that such tensions are very dangerous. As to conflicts between public officials and ordinary citizens, men see this threat as insignificant, whereas women, on the contrary, show a negative correlation. As to the age breakdown, there is significant difference between the youth (aged 18—29) and elderly respondents. The former have a clear opinion that such conflicts are not dangerous, the latter express doubts but believe that the threat is considerable. Respondents with primary and secondary education often have strong doubts, whereas those with incomplete higher education (students), on the contrary, are convinced that such conflicts are not dangerous. People with secondary education show a negative correlation. In terms of occupation, commercial workers believe that conflicts between public officials and ordinary people are not very dangerous. Pensioners do not always have a clear position. Businesspeople and students show a negative correlation, seeing the problem as dangerous or very dangerous. As expected, the unemployed do not see such conflicts as harmless. Finally, people identifying themselves as the lower class consider such tensions as dangerous. Those who cannot describe their social status have strong doubts, on the one hand, and do not see disagreements between public officials and ordinary citizens as a threat. These conclusions are not refuted by the income breakdown. As to conflicts between company owners and employees, men are not inclined to waver, believing that tensions between ‘capitalists’ and



‘proletarians’ are not very dangerous. Women hold an opposite position in both cases. People aged 18—49 have strong opinions, whereas pensioners often waver. At the same time, the youth (under 39 years of age) are not inclined to exaggerate the danger associated with such conflicts and elderly people to underestimate it. As to the level of education, respondents with primary and incomplete secondary education waver when answering the question, showing a negative correlation, whereas respondents with incomplete higher education (primarily, students), on the contrary, do not have doubts. In line with the above conclusions, pensioners express doubts, and managers, commercial workers, and students, on the contrary, have a clear position. Surprisingly, workers agree with employers (and students), seeing conflicts between company owners and employees as not dangerous. An opposite opinion is expressed by pensioners and the unemployed. Doubts are rarely expressed by people identifying themselves as the lower middle class and those with an income of over 28,000 roubles. Members of the lower class and those with an income of 10—13 thousand roubles often waver. Naturally, members of the upper middle class do not exaggerate the danger associated with conflicts between owners and employees, and members of the lower class do not underestimate it.

As to the second set of questions about personal anxiety felt in the presence of people with different backgrounds, the situation is as follows. Most often, anxiety is caused by the presence of people of other nationalities, followed by individuals from other states and of another faith. Finally, respondents feel the safest in the presence of people with differing political views and individuals from other Russian regions. An analysis of standardised residuals shows that the presence of people of other nationalities does not cause anxiety in non-working pensioners over 60 years of age. Homemakers often feel anxious, and workers very anxious, in such situations. Engineers, on the contrary, do not feel threatened by people of other nationalities. The presence of people from other states causes anxiety in people with primary and incomplete secondary education, and workers. The opposite situation is observed in the case of managers and students. Certain anxiety in the presence of people of another faith is felt by workers and the unemployed, whereas engineers and businesspeople do not feel threatened in such situations. As to people with differing political views, men often remain calm in their presence, whereas women are inclined to feel anxious. As to the age breakdown, the picture is unambiguous. The youth feel calm in the presence of political opponents. The most anxious group is respondents aged 50—59. It is worth noting that people identifying themselves as military personnel and respondents with an income of 13—18 thousand roubles are also inclined to feel anxious. Finally, elderly people often feel threatened by individuals from other regions. This also holds true for the respondent breakdown by level of education and income.

We managed to capture the attitudes of Saint Petersburgers to different social conflicts and identify implicit correlations and patterns in the socio-demographic structure of such attitudes. This helps to create a more comprehensive picture of threats and dangers associated with a possible increase in social conflicts in Russia and thus contributes to their prevention.

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### To cite this article:

*Negrov E. O.* 2016, Social conflicts as seen by residents of Saint Petersburg: An empirical study. Baltic region, Vol. 8, no. 1, p. 83—92. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2016-1-7