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**A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS
OF VIOLENT CONFLICT**

Socio-economic uncertainty and violent conflicts

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Socio-economic uncertainty and violent conflicts¹

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Abstract: This paper, with reference to the literature on research on violent conflicts, discusses socio-economic uncertainty and characteristics of coping with it in the context of violent mass conflicts. Research results show that socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity are generated by violent mass conflicts in various ways. Certain groups of people during and following violent conflicts are specifically exposed to high levels of socio-economic uncertainty. Three aspects of coping with socio-economic uncertainty are addressed: risk taking, trust and the availability or lack of resources. In the context of violent conflicts an important characteristic of coping with socio-economic uncertainty is taking high risks. In conditions of violent mass conflicts both socio-economic uncertainty and the possible ways of coping with it are linked to the factors of conflicts themselves, including changes in aspects of social cohesion.

¹ This paper is a part of my PhD thesis on which I am still working. I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Michalis Lianos for his comments.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss socio-economic uncertainty and aspects of coping with it when violent mass conflicts take place. The first part of the paper discusses characteristics of socio-economic uncertainty and changes in socio-economic uncertainty in the context of violent mass conflicts. The second part of the paper focuses on three aspects of coping with socio-economic uncertainty in conditions of violent mass conflicts: risk taking, trust and the role of resources in overcoming situations of uncertainty. It also touches upon the question of changes in trust and intolerance during conflict and aspects of social cohesion.

Generation of socio-economic uncertainty is one of the negative consequences of violent mass conflicts. Violent conflicts have of course large destructive effects on the lives of people affected by them. People affected by violent conflicts face various threats to their lives, liberty, health, livelihood, property. Violent conflicts may impact on large proportions of population in the countries where they take place. In research commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2009 in eight countries where armed violence took place³ it was found that these conflicts affected 66% of the adult population (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 6). Besides their immediate impact on people's lives, conflicts have many long-term consequences, among which are their health-related consequences and population displacements. Violent mass conflicts are at the origin of immediate exposure to risks, uncertainty and insecurity and they also cause uncertainty concerning the more distant future, leading to questions such as whether it will be possible to move out of poverty, to live without the insecurity of everyday survival, or what will be the impact of violent conflict on people's lives and livelihood in the long run.

Violent conflict and change in uncertainty and insecurity

Analysing socio-economic uncertainty in the context of violent conflicts various questions arise: What role does socio-economic uncertainty play in the process of conflict, in its dynamic? Is it a consequence of violent conflicts? Does, and if so how, socio-economic uncertainty contribute to the onset and unfolding of conflicts? How does socio-economic uncertainty impact on the lives of people affected by violent conflicts? What are the possible

³ The countries where the opinion survey was conducted in 2009 are Afghanistan, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia and The Philippines (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 6).

choices of people who face socio-economic uncertainty caused by violent conflicts in overcoming such situations and what strategies do they follow?

According to Lianos, conflict as a social phenomenon is “a regular social process” (Lianos 2011: 3). When a conflict breaks out a “closure” of the spectrum across which the social bond organises itself” occurs and group belongingness becomes defined principally on the basis of enmity (Lianos 2011: 6-8). The possibility for such “closure” when there is uncertainty determines the propensity to conflict of a society (Lianos 2011:2). Brück, Justino, Verwimp and Avdeenko define violent mass conflict from a social point of view as “the systematic breakdown of the social contract resulting from and/or leading to changes in social norms, which involve violence instigated through collective action” (Brück, Justino, Verwimp and Avdeenko 2010: 3). Looking at violent mass conflicts with reference to the changing social context orients our attention also toward discussing socio-economic uncertainty in the context of violent mass conflicts in comparison with socio-economic uncertainty in situations preceding and following mass violent conflicts, or more generally under conditions of peace.

The notion of uncertainty and the related notions of insecurity and risk refer to situations and events touching upon the vulnerability⁴ of individuals. In sociology uncertainty and risk are often discussed in relation to modernization.⁵ Uncertainty denotes both the perception and feeling of uncertainty with regard to events in the immediate or in a more distant future. It refers to a lack of knowledge and to the decrease or lack of predictability regarding future events. In the context of violent conflicts due to the destructive effects of conflicts and because the unfolding of conflicts might depend on various factors, such as the power relations between the conflicting parties, the violence used, the experiences of injustice, the possibility of a successful revolution or resistance and so on, the perceptions and expectations concerning the future are interwoven with tension and volatility throughout the conflict cycle. In our analysis we focus on cases when both uncertainty and expected events are assessed as being undesired, negative phenomena. A specific form of uncertainty is insecurity, “fear over a threat that may be imminent” (Lianos 2008: 3). Violent conflicts might give rise to a permanent presence of insecurity for those affected by the conflict, felt and judged by them as such, or the situation considered by outsiders as being insecure, unsafe. “Civic insecurity” (Castel 2004: 2) might become everyday experience where violent mass conflicts take place. Complete lack of safety, existential uncertainty, fear, decreased level of

⁴ Vulnerability characterized by the damage caused by a possible event (Oyen 2006: 218).

⁵ For example Beck 1992, Giddens 1995, Lianos 2001, Luhmann 1993, Lianos, Bozatzis, Dobré and Vicsek 2005

predictability concerning future events under conditions of anomie and volatility caused by the conflict, the presence of imminent dangers and lack of positive prospects are some of the characteristics of specific situations occurring when violent conflicts take place. When a conflict breaks out expectations towards the future in many aspects of life, such as the economic situation, access to education, health care and so on, become more uncertain as compared to the calculability and projections that are possible when there is peace. In conditions of conflict there is a state of “*general uncertainty*” (Lianos 2008: 3).

At the micro-level, uncertainty in the context of conflicts leads to a decrease in the control of individuals over events and factors that determine their individual conditions as compared to the control they might have in this respect when there is peace (Lianos 2008: 2-3). In addition to this decreased level of control and to the lack of sufficient knowledge concerning the future, one’s personal experiences, including exposure to threats to one’s life might be at the root of fears linked to the violent conflict.

Since socio-economic uncertainty linked to the violent conflict is likely to last throughout the conflict cycle, the question that arises naturally is if socio-economic uncertainty contributes to the risk of conflict. Factors that proved to be related to the risk of conflict might also be at the origin of increased socio-economic uncertainty at the same time. Some of these factors are related to poverty and inequalities between groups. According to Murshed and Tadjoeeddin economic prosperity is significantly related to the risk of conflict (Murshed and Tadjoeeddin 2007: 34). According to Stewart in respect of civil wars “the evidence indicates that low incomes per capita, a recent fall in per capita incomes, proportionately large petroleum resources, and high horizontal inequalities raise the risk of conflict” (Stewart 2011: 18). Poverty and deterioration in people’s economic situations are factors that might be at the origin of socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity, especially when they affect people’s possibilities of everyday survival. ‘Horizontal inequalities’, defined by Stewart as “differences in groups’ access to economic, social and political resources” (Stewart in Stewart 2011: 12) might be at the source of socio-economic uncertainty. This is more obviously so when there are policies at work that maintain inequalities between groups and limited access to resources for the most disadvantaged, a condition that might generate difficulties with respect to both daily subsistence and long-term attainment.

The ICRC research that has been mentioned points to the various factors that are potentially at the origin of uncertainty and insecurity when armed conflicts take place: violence experienced personally or by the members of the family, death of family members, separation of members of families, limitation of one’s liberty, injuries, impacts on health,

impact on economic situation and on means necessary for survival (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 40-41).⁶ The most frequent sources of fear of the people in the countries where the research was carried out were fear for losing someone loved, economic difficulties, displacement, and living with everyday uncertainty⁷, however the people's fears and experiences do not always correspond (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 7-8). The answer of one respondent research exemplifies the magnitude of the effect of violent conflict on the lives of those affected: "You simply reconsider all your values. I realized that everything may lose its meaning in a second. Your life, your property, your career – it all equals zero without peace. (Baia, 37, first responder, Georgia)" (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 65).

One of the economic effects of violent conflict, which represents an important factor of socio-economic uncertainty, is poverty. Civil war is considered to be at the root of the persistence of poverty (Murshed and Collier et al. in Murshed and Tadjoeddin 2007: 2). According to Justino war may directly affect household welfare through economic effects such as the loss or destruction of assets and livelihoods, through its impacts on human capital and through displacement (Justino 2007: 7-15). The impact of war on human capital relates to health, such as deaths, injuries, diseases, disabilities caused by violence; it also relates to education via restricted access to education due to various reasons such as replacing the dead or injured household member in work, or because of becoming fighter (Justino 2007: 10-13, Justino 2011). In respect of the impact of war on health, Bundervoet, Verwimp and Akresh in their analysis of the effect of Burundi's civil war on children's health status have found that exposure to war led to decrease in the children's height for age⁸ (Bundervoet, Verwimp and Akresh 2008: 1). Concerning the impact of war on education, in the case of the Bosnian war Swee has found that a higher level of war intensity diminishes the likelihood of secondary school completion (Swee 2009: 25).

⁶ The proportion of respondents who experienced the followings in the eight countries where the research was carried out: "Forced to leave your home and live elsewhere": 56%; "Lost contact with a close relative": 47%; "Serious damage to your property": 40%; "Been humiliated": 32%; "A member of your immediate family was killed during the armed conflict": 28%; "Somebody you knew well was a victim of sexual violence": 19%; "Wounded by the fighting": 18%; "Tortured": 17%; "Imprisoned": 10%; "Kidnapped or taken as a hostage": 10%; "No or very limited access to basic necessities (water, electricity etc.)": 45%; "Lost my means of income (e.g. job, revenue, farm land, etc.)": 40%; "No or very limited access to health care": 35%; "Had your home looted": 32%; "Lost all my belongings": 27%; "Combatants took food away": 23%; "The area where I lived came under enemy control": 36% (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 40-41).

⁷ Proportions of respondents who indicated as "the two or three greatest fears people are facing in a situation of armed conflict": "Losing a loved one": 38%; "Inability to earn a living/personal-family economic instability": 31%; "Living with uncertainty": 25%; "Losing/destruction of the house/losing of personal belongings": 25%; "Having to leave their home/becoming a displaced refugee": 24% (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 43).

⁸ They have found that "an additional month of war exposure decreases children's height for age z-scores by 0.047 standard deviations compared to non-exposed children." (Bundervoet, Verwimp, Akresh 2008: 1)

Violent conflicts do not only lead to obvious lack of safety, destruction of assets, loss of sources of income and loss of one's job; they also lead to changes in social relations, especially to the deterioration of networks that form for significant resources for each of their individual members (Bott and Granovetter in Barbalet 2009: 377). That loss both increases primary forms of uncertainty and severely limits the possibilities of individuals to cope with their condition, thus generating a downward spiral of instability. Links between the members of a community, and the norms attached to these links, represent a fundamental resource in coping with difficulties caused by a conflict. This is seen when reconstruction of such links is possible. In the post-conflict period, providing support for members of one's community is morally rewarding even when it proves very difficult. That is typically the case with refugees who moved to more prosperous and peaceful countries. For example, Zimmermann and Zetter (2011: 12-13, 16-17, 19, 23, 27-35) have shown how certain refugees from Somalia in the Netherlands make double, contradictory efforts to succeed in their host country and at the same time to provide support for family and friends who remained in their home country or other Somalis in exile. Thus, conflict affects refugees also when they are in their host countries due to their links with their home country and those who remained there. The same research shows that refugees are exposed to stress due to the difficult conditions in their home country and the conflict in their home country is considered to be one of the causes of the social problems of refugees in their host country (Zimmermann and Zetter 2011: 14-19, 12).

In terms of socio-economic uncertainty violent conflicts impact in a very detrimental way on displaced people, refugees, who often face destitution, poverty and social exclusion. Displacement has long-term effects on the displaced people's economic security too. A consequence of forced displacement is structural poverty (Hulme y Shepherd in Ibáñez and Moya 2009: 10). Kondylis has found that in the post-conflict period in Bosnia, the probability to be in work for those who were displaced was lower than for those who stayed (Kondylis 2008: 1). Displacement may negatively affect not only those who are displaced but also other people, for example it may have a negative effect on labour conditions especially for those who are vulnerable in the sites of reception (Calderón and Ibáñez 2009: 3, Calderón, Gáfaró and Ibáñez 2011: 1).

The literature on the impact of war on poverty shows both a direct negative link and an indirect link regarding increased socio-economic uncertainty for those affected⁹. The impact

⁹ This is not to deny that for some people war represents opportunity.

of war on poverty differs depending on specific characteristics of the conflict. Analyzing Burundian panel data Verwimp and Bundervoet have found that the increase in the intensity of war had a significant negative effect on the consumption of households. According to their findings, another differential effect of the war in respect of consumption is that while violence against the household members had a decreasing effect on consumption, membership of a rebel group had an increasing effect on it (Verwimp and Bundervoet 2008: 1). Justino and Verwimp have found in the context of the war from Rwanda that the households' probability to become poor was increased by the destruction of their house or by the fact that they lost land (Justino and Verwimp 2008: 1). Such findings confirm differential effects depending on specific characteristics of the conflict.

Linked to the violent conflict exposure to insecurity, vulnerability might be enhanced for certain groups of people. Displaced people and refugees obviously constitute such a specific group that is highly exposed to socio-economic uncertainty. Women are often specifically targeted by sexual violence as it happened in the Bosnian war (Human Rights Watch in El Jack 2003: 16, Nikolić-Ristanović 2001). In the post-conflict period too, as a result of the impact of the war as well as due to specific socio-cultural reasons women might be highly vulnerable, for example those women in the post-conflict period in Acholi sub-region in Uganda who were prevented from returning to their villages by having no access to their lands (Kindi 2008: 16). Women who became heads of households after losing their spouses in the war might face insecure socio-economic conditions in the post-war period too. Other groups may become particularly vulnerable for political reasons, as it happened with NGO workers in Mogadishu (Lindley 2009: 39).

The reviewed literature on violent conflict shows the presence of various factors that are at the source of socio-economic uncertainty, both immediately and in the long run. It also points to links between exposure to uncertainty and specific characteristics of violent conflicts.

Coping with socio-economic uncertainty: risk taking, trust and availability or lack of resources

Coping with socio-economic uncertainty caused by violent conflict shows specificities linked to the conditions of each conflict. High levels of uncertainty and insecurity drastically reduce the agency of individuals affected by the conflict. The decreased levels of control of individuals over events that might affect them, their limited access to reliable information, the

changing social and institutional context, the lack or limited availability of resources on which one can rely on due to the conflict, the decreased level of calculability, are all factors that render decision-making very difficult. All options one might choose in the context of a violent conflict may imply taking high risks.

We discuss the role played by risk taking, trust and available resources in coping with uncertainty produced by violent conflict. There are differences in the way these notions are conceived. While Luhmann in respect of risk emphasizes the role of decision and in respect of danger considers that a loss that might occur is caused by the environment (Luhmann 1993: 21-22), Giddens considers that: “What risk presumes is precisely danger” (Giddens 1995: 34). According to Luhmann taking decisions always involves risk (Luhmann 1993: 27-28). Risk taking plays an important role in the management of uncertainties, in coping with uncertainty. Risk can be conceived as a factor that reduces uncertainty (Peretti-Watel 2010: 19). In the views of Bonss and of Zinn “risk is seen as one special rational strategy to transform unmanageable contingency into manageable complexity” (Bonss; Zinn in Zinn 2006: 281).

During violent conflicts involving uncertainty with regard to everyday survival, people are often obliged to take very high risks. As we can see in the answer of a respondent in the ICRC research on the impact of armed conflicts, providing for a basic necessity, food, might entail risking one’s life: “Food was a major concern. Where are we going to get meals for the day? If we go to the mountains to find food, we might be shot at. (Jenefer, 77, internally displaced person, the Philippines)” (Ipsos/ICRC 2009: 67). In the case of migration due to conflict, both migration and remaining in an area affected by a violent conflict might involve taking high risks. There are different reasons for migrating, from being a coping strategy of people who more or less voluntarily choose to move to a safer places in order to survive, to being a result of forced displacement. As Lindley’s (2009) micro level analysis on the process of flight from Mogadishu shows, displacement and migration can be coping strategies in insecure situations caused by violent conflicts. The people who migrated from Mogadishu left behind a place characterized by the presence of “direct and life-threatening violence and more general urban insecurity” (Lindley 2009:23).

The way in which people affected by conflict deal with various kinds of risks might vary. As Jarauta Bernal has found in her research on risk management by West Bank Palestinians in the context of conflict, “risk management responds to household conflict experiences and shocks characteristics” (Jarauta Bernal 2011: 43). It is disputed whether risks are objective or only socially constructed, or subjective. According to Latour and Beck risks incorporate both aspects (Latour and Beck in Zinn 2006: 282). Various factors contribute to

the construction of risks, the mass media being one of the factors that play an important role in the discursive construction of risks (Tulloch in Zinn 2004: 16). In the context of violent conflicts, risk perception possibly plays an important role in strategies people adopt in concrete situations. The effect of various factors on risk perception might be enhanced when risks concern threats to people's lives and subsistence. The media during the conflict cycle, and especially when there are no sufficient alternative sources of information, might significantly affect people's risk perceptions, their sense of uncertainty and insecurity, and through reaching many people, might also impact on the conflict itself; for example, by providing a basis that weakens the trust between social groups and reduces social cohesion, by supporting the ambitions of certain groups that might be harmful for other groups, and so on. According to Oberschall in the case of the wars in the former Yugoslavia the media were one of the means through which fear spread (Oberschall 2000: 990).

Socio-economic uncertainty is produced in a social, economic and political context. Both the generation of socio-economic uncertainty and the strategies followed by people who are in uncertain situations might be related to the nature of social relations, to the level of trust between people both as individuals and as institutional operators, which may often take extreme forms. Expectedly, trust may be very low when violent conflict occurs. In Barbalet's view while formal rationality would not be enough to overcome uncertain situations, trust, due to its emotional basis, has an important role in overcoming uncertainty (Barbalet 2009: 379-380). Trusting attitudes are considered to be relatively stable. According to socio-psychological theories change in trust might occur as the result of repeated or traumatic experience (Newton 2004: 18). Violent conflicts cause many traumatic experiences for many people. The literature identifies familiarity (Luhmann, Simmel in Lewis and Weigert 1985: 970) and similarity ('trust radius' Fukuyama in Bjørnskov 2008:272) as being sources of trust. These affect the strategies of people in uncertain situations caused by violent conflicts. As we can see in the case of Lindley's research on people who left Mogadishu, among other factors, familiarity with places towards which they were fleeing, knowing people in other places, as well as previous experience of mobility influenced them in their flight (Lindley 2009: 44-47). The role of expectations and of the existing information, both important characteristics of the strategy of coping with difficult, uncertain situations, is highlighted: "In some ways the story of route-making is also about information and expectations regarding destinations." (Lindley 2009:49).

Giddens defines trust "as confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity or

love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles (technical knowledge)” (Giddens 1995: 34). There are authors who emphasize the collective character of trust as opposed to the individual one, and consider that trust is a collective property (Bourdieu, Coleman in Newton 2004:21; Lewis and Weigert 1985:968). Trust prevents society from becoming a place of “chaos and paralyzing fear” (Luhmann in Lewis and Weigert 1985:968), what often tends to become reality when violent mass conflicts take place. Violent mass conflicts represent specific situations under which both trust and distrust take extreme forms. For example there is often collapse in social trust and trust in institutions during a violent conflict, but there may also be increased interpersonal trust between certain individuals who can count on each other in the middle of war. General social trust as well as specific interpersonal trust, for example between civilians supporting opposing warring factions in a civil war, might be fundamentally weakened during the entire cycle of a violent conflict.

The level of trust might influence the decisions made and the responses to uncertain situations. It might be related also to the potentiality of conflict eruption and to the way conflict unfolds. Because many violent conflicts involve conflicting ethnic groups, the level of social trust in relation to the extent of ethnic diversity might be indicative of conflict potentiality. There are different research findings on this relation. In a cross-country analysis¹⁰, Newton has found higher levels of social trust in countries where the level of ethnic homogeneity is higher and high levels of trust where there are no religious and economic cleavages (Newton 2004: 29-30). In another cross-country analysis¹², Bjørnskov has found that there is no significant relation between ethnic diversity and social trust (Bjørnskov 2008: 279). Newton has also found that civil war¹⁴ has an indirect lowering effect on trust, and that “modernization, ethnic homogeneity, and wealth are rarely associated with civil wars” (Newton 2004: 29-31).

In respect of coping with situations of uncertainty in conditions of violent mass conflict we might suppose that when a specific cleavage has an important role in conflict eruption or continuation, the possibly very low level of trust or the distrust associated with that cleavage might make certain responses to situations of uncertainty impossible, for example in the case of fighting ethnic groups. When the violent conflict is not fought along that specific line of fractionalization, for example when the conflict is not ethnic but a violent revolution against the state, the level of trust linked to such a division line might be higher. It

¹⁰ A cross-country analysis of data on 60 countries from the third wave of the World Values Study (Newton 2004: 15)

¹² On the basis of data from 100 countries. (Bjørnskov 2008: 278)

¹⁴ Wars since 1945 (Newton 2004: 29)

can even make possible cooperation between people from different sides along that division line in responses to uncertain situations.

Inasmuch as ethnic divisions are concerned, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol have found that ethnic polarization is indicative of conflict risk (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol in Stewart 2009:27). The risk that a civil war breaks out is higher when there are higher horizontal inequalities between groups (Stewart 2011: 14). In Bosnia ethnic polarization became more accentuated after the war broke out (Kalyvas and Sambanis 2005:214-17). Sekulić, Massey and Hodson in their analysis on changes in ethnic intolerance in Croatia have found that before the war, in the period between 1985 and 1989, there was a slight decrease in ethnic intolerance in general. However, when ethnic intolerance was measured with a statement on trust between nations¹⁵ an increase was observed (Sekulić, Massey and Hodson 2006: 809-810). Between 1989 and 1996, a period that includes the years of the war, both measurements of ethnic intolerance showed an increase (ibid.: 810).

In the post-conflict period trust has an important role in reconciliation. Building trust among the parties of the conflict and among citizens and establishing trust in public institutions is crucial for the success of the peace process and for preventing a new outbreak of violent conflict. According to Tam et al. (2008: 311), trust is a “prosocial facilitator when conflict exists between groups”.

The availability of resources is another factor that plays an important role in the strategies of coping with situations of socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity generated by violent conflicts. The destruction or loss of resources, economic and otherwise, such as social network resources involving communities, families, institutions and human capital, may limit or completely prevent coping with socio-economic uncertainty. However, depending on the concrete circumstances, the availability of such resources combined with personal strength, support from non-governmental, humanitarian organizations and from other actors, are among the factors that help people affected by conflicts both in daily survival and in coping with socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity.

In the case of displaced people, the existence or lack of resources might influence who leaves, where and how one leaves, and how one copes with difficulties in one’s destination. According to Ibañez and Moya, among the displaced people in Colombia, the households who succeeded in recovering assets possessed more than one of three types of resources, i.e. educational, financial or of the social network type (Ibañez and Moya 2009: 23). In his

¹⁵ “Among nations it is possible to create cooperation, but not full trust” (Sekulić, Massey and Hodson 2006: 809)

analysis of displacement in the context of the Bosnian war Kondylis has found that the probability for displacement was higher for those who were “more "able" ... in terms of labor market performance” (Kondylis 2008: 25).

Conclusion

Violent mass conflicts cause lack of safety, socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity in various ways. Threats to people’s lives, destruction of their economic and social capital, poverty, disintegration of families and communities, increased exposure to threats to life and to health contribute to increased levels of insecurity and uncertainty. Certain groups are exposed to specifically high levels of uncertainty, including both lack of safety and socio-economic insecurity. Socio-economic uncertainty as well as such aspects of coping with it as risk taking, trust and the availability or lack of resources are greatly influenced by the factors of conflicts themselves, including changes regarding social cohesion. In conditions of violent conflict coping with situations of socio-economic uncertainty often means or goes hand in hand with a struggle for subsistence, trying to avoid threats to one’s life and taking high risks.

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