

## Dysfunctions and Transformational Processes in Social Systems under Contemporary Global Changes

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### Abstract

The present study examines social systems as complex and dynamic structures that function through the interaction of institutions, social groups, norms, and values. In the context of globalization, technological transformations, and increasing interdependence among societies, social systems are subjected to growing transformational pressure and various forms of dysfunctionality. The article analyzes the main theoretical approaches to the study of social systems, focusing on the concepts of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. Particular attention is given to the mechanisms of systemic stability, adaptation, and integration, as well as to the factors that may lead to disruptions in the functional balance of social structures.

The study identifies the main directions of dysfunctionality in social systems, including accelerated social change, global external shocks, institutional instability, structural rigidity, and technological transformations. Specific manifestations of these processes in Bulgaria and the European Union are also examined, such as social inequality, regional disparities, the crisis of institutional trust, and demographic challenges. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that the resilience of social systems depends on their ability to develop adaptive mechanisms, modernize institutional structures, and maintain a balance between stability and change. Effective management of social risks, the reduction of social inequality, and the strengthening of institutional legitimacy are considered key factors for the sustainable development of contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** social systems, social dysfunctions, institutional stability, social transformation, social inequality

**JEL Codes:** A14, I31, O15

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary world is characterized by a high degree of dynamism, complexity, and interconnectedness of social processes. Under such conditions, crises become an inevitable part of the development of societies. They arise at global, regional, and local levels and affect various spheres of social life - economic, political, social, cultural, and institutional. Some of these crises are resolved relatively quickly through mechanisms of adaptation and transformation of social structures, while others persist over time, generating long-term tensions and imbalances within social systems.

The accumulation of social, economic, and institutional contradictions leads to states of instability that hinder the normal functioning of society and create conditions for structural change. In this context, the study of social systems and the mechanisms through which they respond to crises becomes a key scientific and practical issue. The analysis of these processes requires an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account the complex interaction between economic, political, cultural, and social factors.

In public and academic discourse, there is often a tendency to examine social systems primarily through the prism of economic processes. Undoubtedly, economic relations play a significant role in the structure and functioning of society; however, reducing social reality solely to economic parameters may lead to an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of social processes. Social systems represent multidimensional structures in which economic, political, cultural, and normative elements are interconnected and mutually influential. It is precisely this complexity that creates difficulties in analyzing ongoing processes, characterizing them, and formulating adequate scientific interpretations (Andreeva, 2023; Terziev, 2026).

In general terms, social systems can be understood as complex, dynamic, and structured social formations composed of individuals, social groups, institutions, norms, and values that function in mutual interdependence. Their primary role is to ensure the stability, coordination, and development of society. For this reason, social systems are studied across numerous academic disciplines, including sociology, political science, economics, social philosophy, public administration, and other fields within the social sciences. Each of these disciplines offers different theoretical and methodological perspectives for analyzing social reality.

From the perspective of the systems approach, society can be viewed as a comprehensive and integrated system consisting of multiple interconnected subsystems. Among these, the economic, political, legal, cultural, and social subsystems are most commonly distinguished. Each of them performs specific functions while remaining closely connected with the others and influencing their functioning. This interdependence between subsystems determines both the stability and the vulnerability of social systems in the face of internal and external challenges.

Every social system is characterized by certain structural and functional features that determine the way it operates and develops. These include:

- Structure – a relatively stable pattern of social roles, institutions, and interactions between them;
- Functions – activities and processes aimed at satisfying the fundamental needs of society and its members;
- Normative structure – a system of rules, laws, moral norms, and values that regulate the behavior of individuals and groups;
- Mechanisms of self-regulation – processes of adaptation, regulation, and transformation that enable the system to respond to internal tensions and external influences.

The development of the systems approach in the social sciences is closely associated with the theoretical contributions of a number of scholars. A particularly significant contribution in this field is the structural-functional theory of the American sociologist Talcott Parsons. According to his concept, society represents a system of interacting subsystems that must fulfill certain functional requirements in order to ensure the stability and sustainability of the social order. Parsons formulated four fundamental functions that every social system must perform: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (pattern maintenance). This model, known as the AGIL framework, emphasizes the necessity of maintaining functional balance among the different elements of the social system.

Further development of social systems theory can be observed in the works of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who proposed a different interpretation of social reality. According to his theory, society can be understood as a system of communications rather than merely a collection of individuals or institutions. Social systems, according to Luhmann, reproduce themselves through continuous communication processes that create

and maintain the boundary between the system and its environment. This perspective directs attention to the role of information, communication, and interpretation in processes of social interaction.

Despite the differences between various theoretical approaches, most scholars agree that social systems possess a number of common characteristics that define their nature and mode of functioning. Among the most important characteristics are:

- Openness – social systems actively interact with their external environment and exchange resources, information, and energy;
- Hierarchy – the existence of different levels of organization and subordinate subsystems;
- Dynamism – a continuous process of development, change, and adaptation to new social conditions;
- Complexity – the presence of numerous interconnected elements, relationships, and dependencies.

In the context of globalization, technological transformations, and increasing interdependence among societies, social systems are becoming increasingly complex and sensitive to various types of crises and disruptions. This places before the social sciences the task of developing adequate theoretical models and analytical tools that can enable a better understanding of processes of social change, resilience, and adaptation. The study of social systems in the context of contemporary crises, therefore, represents an important prerequisite for the formulation of effective policies and strategies for managing societal development (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Durkheim, 1984; Giddens, 1990; 2009; Habermas, 1975; Luhmann, 1995; Parsons, 1951).

### **2. Literature Review**

The theoretical framework of this study builds upon the evolution of social systems. Classical perspectives from Durkheim (1984) and Parsons (1951) establish the foundations of systemic stability, while Luhmann (1995) introduces the importance of communicative complexity. Modern transformations and the risks of "liquid" social structures are analyzed through the lenses of Giddens (1990), Bauman (2000), and Beck (1992). Contemporary research by Terziev (2025) and Petrova (2025) further explores how institutional inertia and global shocks contribute to modern dysfunctions. Collectively, these scholars highlight the tension between rapid social change and the adaptive capacity of institutions.

### **3. Methodology and Limitations of the Study**

The present study is based on a theoretical and analytical approach to the examination of social systems and their dysfunctions in the context of contemporary social transformations. The methods employed include systems analysis, comparative analysis, and an interdisciplinary approach, which make it possible to examine social processes in their complexity and interdependence. The theoretical framework of the study draws on concepts from sociology and social theory, including the structural-functional approach and social systems theory. The analysis also incorporates empirical data and statistical indicators from international sources, which help illustrate the social processes and trends observed in Bulgaria and the European Union.

Despite the analytical nature of the study, several limitations should be noted. The research relies primarily on theoretical analysis and the use of secondary statistical data, which limits the possibility of an in-depth empirical verification of the examined processes. Moreover, the complexity and dynamic nature of social systems imply the presence of numerous interacting factors that are difficult to comprehensively capture within a single study. For this reason, the presented analysis should be considered as a conceptual framework for understanding the dysfunctions of social systems, which may be further developed through future empirical studies and comparative analyses.

### **4. Dysfunctions of Social Systems**

Social systems are inherently complex and dynamic structures that function through the coordination of numerous interconnected elements - individuals, social groups, institutions, norms, and values. Ideally, these elements interact in a way that ensures stability, social integration, and sustainable development of society. In real social practice, however, such an equilibrium rarely persists over a long period of time. Throughout historical development, social systems inevitably encounter various dysfunctions that disrupt their normal functioning and create tensions among different structural elements.

Dysfunctions in social systems arise when organized forms of social interaction fail to ensure the necessary level of coordination, order, and institutional stability. This leads to weakened regulatory mechanisms, increased social insecurity, and difficulties in adapting to new social, economic, and cultural conditions. In such situations,

individuals and social groups are often forced to respond to rapidly changing environments, which may place them in a state of social uncertainty and disorientation.

In the contemporary globalized environment, these processes are significantly intensified. Social systems are influenced by numerous factors - economic, political, technological, and cultural - that vary in intensity, temporal dynamics, and spatial scope. The interaction of these factors often accelerates social change and generates new forms of instability. It can be assumed that the pace of transformation of social systems increases particularly during periods of rapid change in the social environment, when fluctuations in economic and political processes become highly dynamic.

As a result of these processes, the weaknesses and structural deficiencies of social systems gradually intensify. Over time, they may reach a point where the existing institutional model becomes increasingly incompatible with the new conditions of the social environment. In such situations, the system faces a fundamental dilemma - either to preserve itself through adaptive changes and partial reforms or to undergo deeper structural transformation.

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#### *4.1. Main Directions of Dysfunctionality*

The analysis of social systems makes it possible to identify several main directions in which their dysfunctions manifest themselves.

##### *4.1.1. Accelerated Social Change*

One of the most significant characteristics of contemporary society is the acceleration of social change. Rapid transformations in the economic, technological, and political environment place social systems in a situation of constant adaptation. Globalization, the development of information technologies, international economic interdependence, and the transformation of labor markets create conditions for the continuous restructuring of social structures.

When the pace of these changes exceeds the adaptive capacities of institutions and social structures, systemic imbalance arises. Institutional mechanisms begin to respond more slowly than social reality, resulting in a mismatch between societal needs and the system's capacity to meet them.

##### *4.1.2. Global External Shocks*

Modern social systems are particularly vulnerable to sudden external shocks that can drastically alter the conditions of their functioning. A typical example of such an impact is the COVID-19 pandemic, which became a global "stress test" for the institutional structures of contemporary societies.

The pandemic revealed a number of structural weaknesses in healthcare systems, public administration, and education. In 2020, global GDP declined by approximately – 3.1%, representing the deepest global economic

downturn since the end of World War II. More than 1.6 billion pupils and students in over 190 countries were affected by the closure of schools and universities. In many countries, significant fluctuations in public trust toward state institutions were observed, raising questions about the effectiveness of governance mechanisms in emergency situations.

These developments demonstrated that in conditions of high social dynamics, the rigidity of institutional structures and fragmented coordination among subsystems can significantly intensify systemic dysfunctionality.

### *4.1.3. Disruption of Systemic Stability*

Another important form of dysfunction is the disruption of the stability of social systems. In conditions of dynamic economic and political fluctuations, systems may lose their predictability and institutional stability. This is manifested through frequent political crises, instability of governing structures, weakening of social norms, and declining trust in public institutions.

When social norms and values cease to perform their integrative function, there is a risk of social fragmentation and polarization within society.

### *4.1.4. Crisis of Adaptation*

One of the most significant dysfunctions of social systems is the crisis of adaptation. It occurs when the system fails to synchronize its internal structure with the changing conditions of the social environment. The lack of effective mechanisms of self-regulation and feedback leads to the accumulation of structural contradictions that gradually weaken systemic resilience.

### *4.1.5. Internal Structural Defects*

Under conditions of accelerated social change, the internal structural defects of social systems deepen. Among the most important are:

- Structural rigidity: This refers to the inability of institutional structures to respond flexibly to new social realities. Rigid administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms often hinder the implementation of necessary reforms and slow down modernization processes;
- Functional inefficiency: When one or more subsystems fail to perform their functions effectively - such as the economic, political, or educational system - the overall balance of the social system is disrupted. This leads to a decline in institutional effectiveness and a decrease in public trust;
- Structural-environmental mismatch: During periods of rapid social change, a mismatch often arises between established institutional norms and the actual needs of society. In such cases, the system begins to function with reduced efficiency, creating the need for institutional renewal.

### *4.1.6. Technological Transformations and New Structural Contradictions*

The contemporary technological revolution and the rapid development of artificial intelligence create new structural challenges for social systems. Automation and the digitalization of production are gradually transforming labor markets and the requirements for human capital.

International studies indicate that within the next decade, between 25% and 30% of existing jobs may be partially automated. At the same time, more than 40% of citizens in the European Union lack sufficient basic digital skills. The share of remote work in the EU more than doubled between 2019 and 2022.

These processes create a significant mismatch between the structure of educational systems and the needs of the emerging digital economy. As a result, transformational pressure on social institutions continues to increase.

## *4.2. Transformational Pressure on the System*

The accumulation of dysfunctions generates strong transformational pressure on social systems. In such situations, systemic defects do not merely weaken efficiency but call into question the very existence of the system.

The system faces three main possible trajectories of development:

- self-preservation through limited reforms;
- deep structural transformation;
- collapse and replacement with a new institutional configuration.

### 4.3. Possible Strategic Solutions

In conditions of accelerated social dynamics, the search for solutions for transforming social systems becomes particularly relevant. These solutions must address both the overcoming of internal dysfunctions and the strengthening of the adaptive capacity of the system.

#### 4.3.1. Enhancing Adaptive Capacity

Social systems must develop mechanisms for more flexible responses to external influences. This includes modernization of institutional structures, reduction of bureaucratic barriers, implementation of innovations, and active use of digital technologies. Such an approach corresponds to the concept of “reflexive modernity” formulated by Anthony Giddens, according to which modern societies continuously reassess and transform their institutional structures.

#### 4.3.2. Institutional Reform and Legitimacy

Many crises of contemporary social systems represent crises of legitimacy and public trust. Therefore, reforms should aim to increase transparency in governance, strengthen institutional accountability, and expand civic participation. Jürgen Habermas emphasizes the importance of the public sphere and communicative action as mechanisms for restoring social legitimacy.

#### 4.3.3. Reducing Social Inequality

Social inequality often becomes an indicator of structural dysfunction, particularly when economic growth does not lead to equitable distribution of resources. In many developed countries, the Gini coefficient ranges between 0.30 and 0.40, indicating significant levels of income inequality. More than 20% of the population of the European Union is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Such tendencies undermine social cohesion and increase transformational pressure on institutional structures.

#### 4.3.4. Balance between Stability and Change

The transformation of social systems should not lead to the destruction of fundamental integrative mechanisms. According to the structural-functional theory of Talcott Parsons, system stability depends on maintaining a functional balance between subsystems. Therefore, reforms should be implemented gradually and strategically while preserving key social functions.

#### 4.3.5. Management of Social Risks

Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and risk. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck describes this situation as a “risk society”, in which institutions must actively manage risks generated by modernity itself. Possible solutions include the development of sustainable development policies, strengthening social protection systems, and investing in education and research.

#### 4.3.6. Communication and Value Integration

The stability of social systems also depends on the existence of a shared value foundation. According to Niklas Luhmann’s theory, social systems function through communication processes that ensure their self-reproduction. Improving communication between institutions and civil society can contribute to strengthening social integration and reducing systemic tensions.

### 4.4. Social Dysfunctions in Bulgaria and the European Union

The analysis of dysfunctions in social systems can be complemented with specific empirical examples from Bulgaria and the European Union that clearly illustrate how structural weaknesses manifest themselves in real socio-economic processes.

#### 4.4.1. Social Inequality and Risk of Poverty

One of the clearest manifestations of systemic dysfunction is the growing social inequality and the high risk of poverty. According to Eurostat data, in 2024, approximately 93.3 million people in the European Union, or 21% of the population, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Differences between EU member states are significant, indicating structural imbalances within their social and economic systems. The highest share of the population at risk of poverty was recorded in Bulgaria—about 30.3% of the population, or approximately 1.95 million people.

By comparison, countries such as Czechia, the Netherlands, and Slovenia show significantly lower levels, between 11% and 16%.

These differences demonstrate that social systems within the European Union operate with varying degrees of effectiveness in terms of social protection, income distribution, and economic integration of the population.

In Bulgaria, the problem of social inequality is particularly pronounced. Significant disparities exist between incomes across different economic sectors and regions. For example, sectors such as finance and energy generate substantially higher incomes compared to agriculture and services, contributing to the deepening of social inequalities.

#### *4.4.2. Regional Disparities*

Another important form of social dysfunction is regional economic inequality. Within the EU, significant differences exist between regions in terms of economic development, employment, and social conditions.

Eurostat reports that in 2024, there were 25 European regions where more than 33% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, some of which are located in Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, regional disparities are particularly evident between the capital region and peripheral areas of the country. Sofia concentrates a significant share of investments, high-paid jobs, and innovation potential, while the northwestern and some rural regions are characterized by higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, and more limited access to education and healthcare services.

Such regional imbalances create structural tensions within the social system and may lead to demographic challenges, migration toward more developed regions, and deepening social inequality.

#### *4.4.3. Crisis of Institutional Trust*

Another important form of social dysfunction is the decline of trust in public institutions. In many European countries, citizens tend to show lower trust in national governments compared to other levels of governance. Studies by the European Commission indicate that in many EU regions, citizens demonstrate greater trust in European institutions or local authorities than in national governments.

In Bulgaria, this problem is particularly pronounced. In recent years, the country has experienced prolonged political instability characterized by frequent parliamentary elections and periods of caretaker governments. Political crises, allegations of corruption, and weaknesses in the judicial system often lead to public distrust and social tensions.

Low institutional trust makes the implementation of reforms more difficult and weakens the system's ability to respond effectively to social and economic crises.

#### *4.4.4. Demographic and Labor Imbalances*

Social systems in Bulgaria and several other European countries face serious demographic challenges. Population decline, aging societies, and the migration of young people toward more developed EU economies exert significant pressure on pension systems, labor markets, and social protection systems.

In Bulgaria, these processes are combined with regional economic inequalities and shortages of qualified labor, which complicate long-term economic development.

#### *4.4.5. Technological Transformations and Educational Mismatches*

Digitalization and technological innovation create new forms of structural tension between educational systems and the requirements of the contemporary economy. In the European Union, a significant proportion of the population still lacks sufficient digital skills, limiting participation in emerging economic processes.

This problem is particularly pronounced in less developed regions of the EU, where educational institutions often lag behind the rapid development of technology and labor markets. As a result, a mismatch emerges between available qualifications and the needs of the economy, increasing the risk of unemployment and social exclusion (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Durkheim, 1984; Giddens, 1990; 2009; Habermas, 1975; Luhmann, 1995; Parsons, 1951).

### **5. Systemic Conclusions from the Analysis of Social Dysfunctions**

The analysis of social systems in the context of contemporary global transformations shows that their functioning is highly dependent on the balance between institutional stability and the capacity to adapt to a changing social environment. Social systems represent complex structures in which economic, political, cultural, and institutional factors interact in ways that determine both the resilience and the vulnerability of society.

The study of dysfunctions in social systems demonstrates that they most often manifest themselves under conditions of accelerated social change, when the pace of transformation of economic and technological

processes exceeds the adaptive capacities of institutional structures. In such situations, structural contradictions accumulate, weakening the effectiveness of social institutions and leading to a decline in public trust.

External factors, such as global economic crises, technological transformations, and demographic changes, play a particularly significant role in processes of social dysfunctionality. These developments create additional transformational pressure on social systems and require the development of more flexible institutional mechanisms for governance and adaptation.

The empirical analysis of processes in Bulgaria and the European Union shows that social inequality, regional economic disparities, the crisis of institutional trust, and demographic challenges represent some of the most significant manifestations of systemic dysfunctionality. These factors have a direct impact on the resilience of social systems and on their capacity to respond effectively to social and economic challenges.

In this context, strengthening the adaptive potential of social systems, modernizing institutional structures, and developing policies aimed at reducing social inequalities emerge as key prerequisites for the sustainable development of contemporary societies.

**Table 1. Model of the Adaptability of Social Systems**

| Structure                               | Indicators / Criteria                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Environment                      | Social environment, Economic changes, Technological innovations, Demographic processes, Political transformations |
| External impacts on the system          | Crises, Global shocks, Social conflicts                                                                           |
| Adaptive potential of the social system | Institutional flexibility, Effective management, Social capital and trust, Educational and innovative capacity    |
| Systemic response                       | Institutional reforms, Policy modernization, Social integration                                                   |
| Outcome                                 | System stabilization, Deepening of dysfunctions                                                                   |

**Source: Own elaboration**

The model presents the mechanism through which social systems respond to external influences and transformations of the social environment (Table 1). The adaptive potential of the system is determined by the degree of institutional flexibility, the effectiveness of governance mechanisms, and the presence of social capital and public trust. Depending on these factors, the social system may achieve stabilization through reforms and institutional renewal or may fall into a state of deepening dysfunctionality.

**Table 2. Cycle of Social Dysfunction**

| Structure                                                  | Indicators/Criteria                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accumulation of structural contradictions                  | Economic inequality, Institutional weaknesses, Social tensions                 |
| Emergence of social dysfunction                            | Reduced institutional effectiveness, Crisis of trust, Social instability       |
| Social crisis                                              | Political instability, Economic downturn, Social conflicts                     |
| Transformational pressure on the system: Possible outcomes | Institutional reforms, Structural transformation, Reproduction of dysfunctions |

**Source: Own elaboration**

The proposed model illustrates the cyclical nature of the processes of social dysfunctionality (Table 2). The accumulation of structural contradictions within the social system leads to a weakening of institutional effectiveness and a decline in public trust. These processes may escalate into a social crisis, which intensifies the transformational pressure on the institutional structure of society. Depending on the system's capacity to implement reforms and adapt its institutional mechanisms, the crisis may lead to stabilization, to deep structural transformation, or to the reproduction of dysfunctions within a new cycle of development (Terziev, 2026).

### 5. Conclusion

The analysis of social systems in the context of contemporary global transformations demonstrates that their functioning is the result of the complex interaction between economic, political, institutional, and cultural factors. Social systems are not static structures but dynamic formations that continuously adapt to a changing social environment. It is precisely this dynamism that determines both the resilience and the vulnerability of societies in conditions of crises and accelerated social change.

The study of dysfunctions in social systems shows that they arise primarily in situations where the pace of social and technological transformation exceeds the adaptive capacities of institutional structures. Under such conditions, a mismatch emerges between societal needs and the ability of social institutions to provide adequate mechanisms for regulating and managing social processes. This leads to the accumulation of structural tensions that gradually weaken the resilience of the social system.

External shocks and global crises play a particularly significant role as catalysts of already existing structural problems. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic fluctuations, technological transformations, and demographic changes clearly demonstrate that contemporary societies operate in an environment characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and interdependence. In such a context, the resilience of social systems depends less on institutional rigidity and more on their capacity for adaptation, flexibility, and institutional renewal.

The empirical analysis of developments in Bulgaria and the European Union shows that several social dysfunctions are particularly evident in areas such as social inequality, regional economic disparities, the crisis of institutional trust, and demographic imbalances. These processes create additional transformational pressure on social systems and raise the need for long-term strategic reforms.

From this perspective, the development of resilient social systems requires a comprehensive approach that combines institutional modernization, effective management of social risks, and the strengthening of social cohesion. Investments in education, the development of human capital, the promotion of innovation, and the creation of more flexible mechanisms of public governance play a particularly important role.

In conclusion, the future development of social systems will depend on their ability to achieve a sustainable balance between stability and change. Systems that manage to combine institutional stability with a high degree of adaptability have greater potential to overcome social crises and ensure long-term societal development (Terziev et al., 2025; Petrova et al., 2025).

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