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The transformation of social work in Ukraine before and during the war

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ABSTRACT: *Background:* This article aims to review the development of the social work profession in Ukraine and to describe the impact of social, economic and political changes on social work practices and education. *Methods:* A comprehensive literature review and participant observation methods informed this study. A case study of a Polish community's response to Ukrainian war refugees illustrates how social workers might capitalize on current social structures to continue strengthening civil society in Ukraine. *Findings and Discussion:* Social Work, focusing on the fit between person and environment, is shaped by knowledge, culture and belief systems. Ukraine's history and transition from communist/centralized thinking to civil society is reflected in the development of social work to date. The impact of Russian invasions has hindered and strengthened how social workers can recognize and respond to needs. Limitations include the time lag between published articles and the rapidly changing situation in Ukraine. *Originality/Value:* Few articles focus on social work development in Ukraine, which adds to this article's originality and relevance.

KEYWORDS: social development, professional education, history of social work, Russian aggression of Ukraine

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORK IN UKRAINE

When Ukraine was a part of the Soviet Union, no specialized social work profession existed. The state provided for the care of vulnerable populations through

a system of financial benefits and services. The state also defined the needs of specific groups of people and determined the public policies to address those needs. There were no nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or organized volunteer agencies that served people in need. The public looked solely to the government to respond to their demands when they were in crisis and to support the structures of society. However, given the never-ending financial concerns of a centrally planned (communist) economy, there were limited resources to respond to people's struggles. The prevailing poverty and powerlessness of significant segments of society and the absence of any other types of organized aid discouraged people from seeking their own solutions to their problems.

An economic crisis accompanied the regaining of independence in Ukraine in 1991, just as occurred in many other post-Soviet countries. Living conditions worsened because the new government could not respond adequately to the unprecedented economic and political situation. Ukraine experienced a systemic transformation from a centrally planned economy to capitalism, a transformation that came with its own structural problems of poverty and social exclusions. However, with capitalism, there was a chance to adapt social policies and interventions established in developed countries. This included creating and developing a non-governmental public sector and applying social work practices to help people in crisis.

The development of social work as a profession (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2009) required changes in public policies and education that began immediately after Ukraine gained independence. With the help of other European and North American nations, new academic social work programs were developed from 1993 to 1995. To create sustained programs based on Ukrainian academic capital, social work training was developed within existing local university departments, with scholars from diverse fields, including law, management, sociology, and psychology. In 2005, social work was already taught in about fifty Ukrainian educational programs (Semigina & Boyko, 2014).

Semigina and Boyko (2014) described several systemic factors that affected the development of the social work profession in the first twenty years of Ukraine's independence. They included the persistence of elitism in political and social life, similar to what was known under the Soviet system. The practice of different rules for rich and poor, the lack of transparency, authoritarian management, and corruption stifled the modernization of the country. Although officially announced by the government, many political decisions were rarely implemented. For example, Ukraine signed international conventions concerning human rights without creating pathways to their implementation. Social workers, like many other government employees, were underpaid and undervalued, and they did not have much, if any, political influence.

Most of the systemic factors Semigina and Boyko described in 2014 are reminiscent of the Soviet reality that was very difficult to overcome. There was a continuous push-pull among the forces of Ukrainian society looking either toward the West for the country's modernization or to the political power corrupted by Russia. For years, government administration and bureaucracy in Ukraine were the main reasons for sluggish policy changes. However, the development of non-governmental organiza-

tions (NGO) and civil society created a political environment to establish the social work profession. In addition, the attention of international academic and civil society institutions significantly affected the situation (Semigina & Boyko, 2014, Hayduk & McKenzie, 2016).

Social work as a recognized vocation in Ukraine was established in 1997, and in 2004, social work was included in the Ukrainian Occupation Classification. However, administrative authorities still only minimally recognized the field and did not attract young people to make career and life commitments. Thirty years later, the standards and values of social work are still poorly identified, and the profession's status is not helped by the fact that people who work in human services without a professional education can identify themselves as social workers. Those who have obtained an education as social workers often find better-paid jobs outside of the profession and are not part of efforts to raise the standards and accomplishments of the profession (Semigina & Boyko, 2014).

The educational system is a separate problem in establishing a specific social work profession. It is still resonant with the hierarchical Soviet system. Specific social work curricula were created as elements of other disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy, and history. Outside the social work profession, scholars from these fields defined these curricula. Often, education in social work was very theoretical and did not include applied knowledge and practical training in community human services (Semigina & Boyko, 2014).

Although the organization of higher education is still the product of the Soviet period, learning opportunities result from the early capitalist system of the 1990s. The reality is that education is not free, and only those who can afford years of studying can achieve the degrees offered (Długosz, 2017). Another problem in education is teaching style. During the Soviet era, teachers shared knowledge, and students listened and accepted information. Today, especially in social work, educational practices involve the collaboration and exchange of experiences between trainer and trainee. This is especially true when a teacher comes from a different country as part of an international program and teaches a person who is an expert in local living conditions (Horwath & Shardlow, 2001; Hayduk & McKenzie, 2016).

The second decade of social work development in Ukraine resulted from systemic changes, namely, the effects of the 2004 Orange Revolution and the Maidan protests in 2013 and 2014. Only through the weakening of Russian influences were any systemic progressive changes possible. There was a period of decentralization reforms and a focus on local communities. Identified community needs were related to poverty, unemployment, ageing, and health issues. These "new" social problems required immediate attention. Due to Russia's invasion of Crimea and East Ukraine in 2014, additional demands for the social work profession became imminent, including the social effects of military conflicts and forced migration. Different demands among various local populations led to the creation of a speciality within the social work profession devoted to working with communities (Slozanska et al., 2019). Popow (2019) presented models of social work practices with local communities based on Polish experiences.

In addition to community-centered social work, another new approach is related to

the family and its significance in social welfare. It is assumed that since the family is a basic resource for children's education and well-being, social workers' main support should be directed to families. This approach applies empowerment as a basic tool in helping families solve their problems. To deal with obstacles, the family needs to be united and supported by distant family, friends, and the local community. Social workers help to recognize the social capital of the family and suggest how to use it in overcoming life's struggles. In this approach, social work intervention is family-driven, and the social worker supports the process. Krasiejko and Bewz (2017) described specific examples of family-oriented social work models in Ukraine and Poland. Some directions of changes in Ukraine to family-oriented services were followed in Poland under the government of PiS, the Law and Justice party (Brenk et al., 2018).

Children who do not have parental care become the responsibility of the state. Due to a continuous lack of resources, the prevalent models of child protection are institutions managed by nonprofessional staff to lower the cost of care. In the Soviet era, raising children in a communal environment was acceptable and convenient, with full control of children's life experiences. With the introduction of an individualistic approach to human services and the professionalization of social workers, the model of orphanages became too outdated. New approaches, such as cottages and family homes, were considered (Lough & Panos, 2003). These new models are both less expensive and more appropriate for child development.

It is also interesting to compare the development of the social work profession in Ukraine with that of its counterpart in Poland. Both countries, though to varying extents, experienced the consequences of a Soviet-type welfare system. The comparison shows how different types of political and economic transformation can affect the long-term process of the professionalization of human services. In Poland, there was a history of social work during the interwar period, when an independent Poland was able to implement policies free of any imperial influence. After 1989, Poland was able to benefit from this history. The "shocking" political transition in Poland in the 1990s nonetheless created a deep economic crisis and forced a systemic change in the social welfare system (Brenk et al., 2018). In Ukraine, slower political changes led to slower changes in social welfare (Semigina & Boyko, 2014).

International cooperation facilitated many structural changes in post-Soviet countries. Most interactions from abroad were directed to academia or to NGOs with the goal of civil society development. Although well-considered, some changes were met with misunderstanding or opposition from local organizations. One example concerns the feminist movement. While Ukrainian women seek empowerment and agency, they also understand their role in society differently. Women see themselves in the roles of both self-sacrificing mothers and nation-builders. In these roles, they receive social respect and meaning. To recognize the differences between a Westernized model of feminism and the ambitions of local women, a special hybrid model of government-supported NGOs was created. Hrycak (2006) gave specific examples of such hybrid organizations in Ukraine.

Poland and Ukraine benefitted from international social work cooperation; however, in each case, local politics and the cultural traditions of human services had the

most substantial influence. In Poland, there was a centuries-long tradition of the Roman Catholic Church helping women, children, and the poor and homeless (Brenk et al., 2018). Poland also benefitted from its application to the European Union, using the EU social programs in community development. In these conditions, a new civil society was built using old and new social practices, often with some competition between different models like those described earlier by Hrycak (2006).

Social work in Poland is open to international cooperation. Many academic programs collaborate with universities in Western Europe and North America. The authors of this article have collaborated for over ten years in a scientific exchange program between social work departments in Poland, at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (UAM) and at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in the United States (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2018). UAM cooperates with professionals from Ukraine who work in Poland on the Lane Kirkland scholarship. As a result of this cooperation, we were able to participate in the first International Scientific–Practical Conference Innovative Potential of Social Work in the Modern World: At the Intersection of Science and Practice in Chernihiv National University of Technology, in Chernihiv, Ukraine, in May 2021 (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2021a). We dare to say that this conference was transformative in acknowledging the existence of the modern social work profession in Ukraine.

An exchange of knowledge through international cooperation takes many different forms. It can be in the form of mutual visits in each involved country to study new interventions through multicultural lenses. It can be the exchange of knowledge in the application of evidence-based practices across different environments and cultures (Romaniuk & Farkas, 2019). It can be the study of how the process of helping people changes through time. Łojko (2014) described the process of change in the social work profession in Poland after 1989. She said that, initially, social work used the medical model, in which the client is a passive recipient of social services. Today, through the creation of NGOs and a well-developed civil society that employs local community resources, people are empowered to resolve their own problems with the cooperation of social workers.

The conditions for social workers in Ukraine in the first three decades since independence have been challenging. Social workers do not have much systemic support; their work is undervalued and often misunderstood by local administrations. Their efforts in helping those with special needs, such as street children, children with cancer, orphans, children in foster care, people with disabilities, and the homeless, may lead to burnout and dissatisfaction with their work (Karagodina & Baidarova, 2014). Such conditions require the professional support of supervision that would address both the professional and emotional needs of helpers. Karagodina and Baidarova (2014) described the specific needs of social work supervision in Ukraine. The most recent events would require specialized, trauma-oriented social work supervision (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2021b).

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2014 RUSSIAN INVASION

After the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of the Donbas region, the territories occupied by the aggressor are deteriorating (Piechowska, 2020-11-19; Semigina & Gusak, 2015). The networks of cooperation and mutual exchanges among the regions of Ukraine were disrupted or discontinued. There was a mass migration of people from the occupied territories. In August 2015 there were 1.4 million internally displaced people (IDP) in Ukraine (Semigina & Gusak, 2015). People who remained in Crimea and the Donbas region experienced isolation and a lack of fundamental services. People who stayed in the occupied Donbas region were mostly older, which increased the number of people over 60 years of age from 28% to 36% of the local population, compared to 24% in the rest of the country. Since most coal mines and other industries were closed, there was a significant increase in unemployment. The average income of people in the Donbas region was about half of the rest of the country. Infrastructure was destroyed, which created an additional hurdle for living conditions. Many professionals and health providers left the territory. The Ukrainian language lost its status as the national language, and education was carried out using Russian books and resources. All activities of people in relation to religion and freedom of speech became controlled by the occupier, and any signs of Ukrainian culture were eliminated.

The economic migration of Ukrainians to other countries is noteworthy (Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Uehling, 2017). Dates of significant events in Ukraine, such as the Maidan Revolution and the invasion of the Donbas region, coincide with measurable waves of migration, especially to neighboring territories, in search of safety and improvement of living conditions. For example, the number of residence permits for Ukrainians in Poland quadrupled from 2013 to 2015 (from 9,595 to 37,833). Most immigrants in Poland were employed or studied at university. Education in Poland often opens the door to employment there. The significant number of migrants with specific needs and skills led to the creation of civic society organizations focused on the integration of the national minority into the Polish nation. Thanks to their work, Poles' positive attitude toward Ukrainians increased from 15% in the 1990s to 36% in 2015 (Fomina, 2017). The network of Polish-Ukrainian organizations has already proven to be especially significant in the 2022 Russian war against Ukraine. These collaborative experiences between Polish-Ukrainian organizations, in addition to their impact on current needs, can provide examples for the continued development of social work in Ukraine and ways in which to maximize the continued growth of the non-governmental sector

There are different dimensions in which we can discuss the consequences of war, such as the time when a response is needed and the methods of the response. Concerning the time of response, we can discuss the short-term (initial) effects of war and the long-term (protracted) effects of displacements. As far as methods, we can discuss different approaches to a social work response and the consequences of war on the individual, community, and societal levels (Semigina & Gusak, 2015; Semigina, 2019).

Semigina and Gusak (2015) described two paradigms of social work during times of human-made disasters: therapeutic and empowering. The therapeutic paradigm concerns well-known interventions that can be applied during a crisis that affects a

person and their environment. Some approaches to the therapeutic paradigm include research concerning vulnerability to stress (Fel et al., 2022), evidence-based practices developed to help people dealing with trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), and organizing the entire community to care for those who suffer. The paradigm of empowerment addresses inclusion and social justice at a time when the opposite is happening as a result of war. In this approach, a social worker advocates for the displaced and for those who have lost a sense of safety.

In the initial stages of the war, the needs assessment of IDP showed that the most important basic needs were finances, food, clothing, housing, and medical care. People often leave their homes without a steady income or seasonal clothing and with food only for the next few days. Many people who needed medication for their health conditions like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and drug use (harm reduction approaches) were left without medical care. Although less important needs could become primary in the long-term, they were related to social, legal, and psychological conditions. Cultural and political needs were associated with the character of war and required a separate explanation.

Russian propaganda for years tried to divide the Ukrainian nation into those who speak Russian and so, presumably, would not object if Ukraine became a part of Russia and nationalist Ukrainians who were described in derogatory, negative terms. During the 2014 Donbas war, many IDP people were affected by this propaganda and struggled to receive help from the Ukrainian government and people who evidently fought against the Russian invasion. People who offered them help had to be mindful of those cultural differences. This is why an inclusion and social justice approach is not simply based on an empty phrase (Semigina & Gusak, 2015; Semigina, 2019).

The institutional help offered by IDP has many forms. The governmental help was bureaucratic and insensitive to people's life circumstances. The new civil society institutions were not well integrated with the community at large, and as a result, people did not know who could help them or how they could be helped. Slowly, each region of the country developed its own system of policies and network of institutions that could offer help to IDP (Semigina & Gusak, 2015).

In the protracted aftermath stage of the war, the government developed policies providing income for IDP through employment and free vocational training. However, financial support was limited because the country's economy was in crisis due to the war. As in many other post-Soviet countries, in crisis situations, Ukraine met with the help and support of the international community (Trubavina et al., 2019). For example, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 57,000 children from the Donbas region obtained help and support from SOS Children's Villages organization (Ukraine, n.d). In the long-term stage of displacement, also the psychological needs of people affected by war were addressed by offering therapy for PTSD with the cooperation of the international community (Semigina & Gusak, 2015).

The goal of many IDPs is to return home and not necessarily to integrate into the hosting community. Some tensions related to the cultural and political background of IDP could additionally stifle efforts to integrate. In addition, people from the hosting community can be resentful that IDP was offered benefits that other people cannot

receive. Such situations were considered as forms of “positive discrimination” and weakened the spontaneous empathetic response toward IDP. These are the reasons why a social work approach advocating for the empowerment of IDP and the development of sustained autonomy within a local community is so imperative (Semigina & Gusak, 2015).

Semigina and Gusak (2015) and Semigina (2019) reviewed military conflicts in recent years in other countries. Their work aimed to present what social workers learned from the Donbas and other wars. We have to recognize that both authors are professional social workers and exemplary researchers and educators according to recent trends in their field (Labonté-Roset, 2005). It should be acknowledged that after three decades of the development of the social work vocation in Ukraine, their studies are an example of a fully professional description of a social work response to the 2014 war in the Donbas region.

2022 WAR AND THE SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE TO HUMAN CRISIS IN POLAND

In May 2022, 3.3 million people left Ukraine for Poland (*How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?*, 2022). Since the beginning of the war, thousands of people have come daily in search of safety. People in Poland immediately offered help with basic needs, but the number of migrants was unprecedented. The first response was offered by individual volunteers and non-governmental organizations. People acknowledged that the most helpful information was spontaneously offered on social media (Byrska, 2023). It became clear that the initial empathic response had to be followed by the systematic response of the entire country (Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022).

It was the government’s responsibility to create a strategy of open borders for refugees from Ukraine, transportation across the country, and a system of care to meet the basic needs of immigrants. Hundreds of thousands of people needed financial resources, food, clothes, housing, and medical care (Grossi & Vaculenko, 2022). It was quickly recognized that organizations and social associations that already worked with Ukraine were first with organized help, especially those civil society organizations that were created by Ukrainian immigrants after the Maidan and Donbas war (Fomina, 2017). They had contacts, resources, and a flow of information they could trust. The new migrants were an unusually vulnerable population exposed to new challenges in a different culture where trust was a luxury. Some minority groups could find themselves in a hostile environment, and the help offered to them is specifically important (Frydman, 2022).

Immediately, people created posters and flyers with information in Polish and Ukrainian on receiving survival essentials and staying safe. People from Ukraine were offered pathways to employment and/or to receive financial benefits. Children, the elderly, and people with special needs were offered specific resources necessary for their requirements. In many cases, entire institutions that housed the elderly were transferred to Poland. At the beginning of the war, 100,000 children in Ukraine were in orphanages and 64,000 in foster homes. They needed organized transportation to

safety (*Guidance for protecting displaced and refugee children in and outside of Ukraine*, 2022). The government needed new resources to be able to respond quickly to the state's transformation into a country on the border of war.

The Polish employment market needed quick reforms to offer jobs to new employees. The education system had to provide schools for children and language courses for anybody who needed them (Głąbicka, 2014). Besides learning Polish, immigrants want to learn other EU languages, especially English, which would allow them to achieve a better position in the international job market (Kasztalska, 2014). Teaching Polish and English can be offered by the international Ukrainian diaspora using the model of the Teaching English program offered by leaders in the Polish diaspora (Romaniuk et al., 2020). Mental health services, public and private, had to open their rooms for people who survived the horrors of war. The health system, slowly recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, had to respond to the needs of a new population with many health problems (Długosz, 2023).

All of these processes had to maintain people's safety and dignity. The needs of refugee and displaced populations are known to social workers (Boccagni & Righard, 2020). They could respond to the two paradigms mentioned earlier: therapeutic and empowerment (Semigina & Gusak, 2015). Therapeutic work with refugees, families, and children has its own literature (Lanza et al., 2018; Bürgin, 2022). There is already research data from Ukraine and Poland showing that in the time of war when mental health services are especially needed (Karatzias et al., 2023; Długosz, 2023), their availability is minimal (Goto et al., 2023). There is also a call for the development of specialized social and health care for military service people created with input from veterans who know their needs best (Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2023). Therefore, international help for Ukraine must address both problems in countries that welcome refugees and local efforts to help people affected by the war in Ukraine. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) offered its professional resources to help the people of Ukraine in the asylum countries as well as in Ukraine (Truell, 2022).

Of special interest is the preparation of military chaplains to build empathy among people from different social groups, build solidarity between soldiers and civilians on the national level, and empower people to defend their homeland (Wanner & Pavlenko, 2023). One of the authors of this article (JRR) took part in the program developed by American Peace Corps Response to teach stress management, empathy, and resilience to Ukrainian university students virtually. The lesson learned was that students who, in the beginning, were grieving the loss of a time of peace felt empowered since their study prepared them to work for a homeland free from Russia for the first time in its history.

A majority of refugees and their families do not resemble those with problems that social workers usually confront. These are people without any dysfunction; the only problems they have experienced are related to their being displaced from their home and country. The empowerment is built on integrating refugees within the host society. An example of this paradigm is through the study of how refugees are accepted and integrated into the lives of local communities (Bąbska et al., 2014). One of the most important issues is the participation of Ukrainians in the local labor market (Duszczuk

et al., 2023). An example of local response to the war in Ukraine is presented below. By learning how communities empathize with refugees and use their strengths and resources to help them, we can develop models of community response to migration crises.

THE EXAMPLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE REFUGEE INFLUX

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war had a significant social impact on Polish citizens. The collective response, in the form of spontaneous grassroots goodwill gestures, was apparent from the first day of the conflict. These undertakings were deprived of a systemic dimension and should instead be characterized as individual ventures of Polish citizens. This impromptu reaction from the Polish people should not surprise anyone, given the peculiar eagerness to participate in such activities deeply rooted in the Polish psyche. This spontaneity is in some way rebellious in nature (Hofstede, 2003). The specific contradiction forming the essence of the Polish character—that it is strongly individualistic yet craving hierarchy—is backed up by research showing the prevalence of keeping distance to administrative power (an acceptance of natural social hierarchies) and individualism, and it results in the Poles being more inclined to engage in activities considered to be aimed at the oppressor. It may be partly due to the way Polish history unfolded over the years—123 years spent under three different imperial regimes and two World Wars followed by decades of oppressive rule under the influence of the Soviet Union. These historic tribulations forced Poles to develop a sort of resentment toward the state, resistance against the system, and creativity in getting around rules and regulations. Therefore, the situation in Ukraine can be viewed as a metaphor for Poland's and the Poles' own (mis)fortune. Another presumed motive of the robust spontaneous support for Ukraine could lie in the sense of brotherhood with the Ukrainian nation, strengthened by solidarity against a common enemy: the Russian Federation. Even satirical images depict the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an assault of a clumsy, brutal brown bear on a seemingly small and weak animal. Thus, their common Slavic roots could be the unifying factor in Polish-Ukrainian relations. Solidarity was weakened, however, by the historic animosities between the two nations (promptly brought up in public discourse by the adversaries of support towards the people of Ukraine). The society's deep antipathy toward Russia and an even deeper one toward its brutal authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin, can indeed be listed as one of the reasons for the powerful response of the Polish citizens to the crisis.

The response of local communities to the danger caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be aptly shown by the example of the village of Nekielka located in Nekla county, Września district, Greater Poland voivodeship. The village's population of approximately 350 has historically been a culturally diverse one and has developed a collective acceptance of that state of affairs. German settlers, voluntarily resettled to these territories by the power of the so-called "Olęder laws", founded the village in the eighteenth century. They were given land to cultivate and assigned to introduce a land improvement system facilitating land drainage. As such, the Mennonites de facto founded Nekielka, and their mentality and attitude toward others defined the village's

character.

The relief effort was initiated right after the war in Ukraine broke out on February 24th, 2022. The community-level collection of necessary food and sanitary items was announced and spread via social media, which facilitated greater participation. One of the residents volunteered to transport the collected goods to the Polish-Ukrainian border. The donated items were initially to be directed to relief centers. A committee was formed composed of those actively coordinating the aid efforts. This enabled delivering the load directly to the border and bringing back to Nekielka the first refugee family that was accommodated in a county youth hostel with the approval of the mayor on February 27th, 2022. The village experienced a gradual influx of those fleeing the war (mothers with children, their sisters as well as two entire families). By July, around 40 Ukrainian refugees had passed through Nekielka, 22 of whom had been accommodated in the county youth hostel. The rest had been welcomed into private homes. Residents of Nekielka who own houses and apartments in other locations (e.g. Poznań) would make those available to the immigrants as well.

A fundraiser was organized in the village, with the proceeds forming a deposit in the only grocery shop in Nekielka to fund the Ukrainian guests' expenses. The proceeds came from not only the residents of Nekielka but also from their acquaintances (also from abroad). The use of online messaging groups facilitated smooth communication within the relief committee, while the local community could be kept up to date with the committee's activities through the Facebook fanpage of the Ecological Association Clean Nekla. Several families went on to leave Nekielka and head to other locations in Poland. Two families left the country (one for Germany and one for the United Kingdom). The coordination of relief efforts in Nekielka fell largely on the shoulders of one of the residents with substantial experience in management. Thanks to his active engagement, all temporary residents of the county youth hostel managed to secure the formalities of their stay in Poland: they obtained their PESEL numbers (an equivalent of the US Social Security number), set up bank accounts, enrolled in Polish language courses, and got access to necessary help, including medical. The refugees were granted permission to take up part-time jobs, which allowed them to gain a symbolic sense of financial independence. Of great help was the regular financial aid from one of the district council members. Guests from Ukraine were provided with healthcare, Polish language lessons, and casual work opportunities; the children were given a choice between attending a Polish school and continuing education in the Ukrainian system online. The biggest challenge to date remains transport, given that no public transport is operating in Nekielka. The relief efforts were met with a positive response from the mayor of Nekla County, who decided to contribute on behalf of the county by covering the costs of running the youth hostel and the utilities. Apart from that, all the help given to the Ukrainian refugees in Nekielka was funded by private citizens via grassroots fundraisers and collections. As expected, the propensity to provide (primarily financial) help declined over time. In June, the residents had to end their payments to the deposit in the local grocery. Luckily, this coincided with a period of intensified gardening and other part-time work undertaken by the refugees (who were, at the time, solely women).

The war refugee influx into Nekielka was not met with positive reactions from all residents. It caused concerns about job vacancies (especially cleaning and gardening jobs) and loudly voiced discontent with the funding for grocery shopping by the people of the village. There were comments from Polish women fearing that single Ukrainian women would enter into intimate relationships with Polish men. There was also talk of the historically complicated relations between Poles and Ukrainians and the murderous activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. This dark side of relief efforts was noticeable not only on the local level but also in the comments published on social media and shared in private conversations; it does, however, remain far from the mainstream opinion on the current Ukrainian immigrant presence in Poland. (Komunikat CBOS, 2022; Staniszewski 2022). Perversely, the Russian invasion of Ukraine managed to set in motion the mostly very positive, integrative forces inside the local community while also positively impacting interpersonal relations, enabling the establishment of new contacts, and rewriting the mutual relations with the county council. However, when it comes to assessing the role of the Polish state in supporting community-level relief efforts, one cannot help but notice the overall ineptitude of the state, only feigning support and failing to ensure that it reaches those in need and the volunteers sacrificing their own time and emotional and material resources. It is worth emphasizing that the situation described is only one of countless such examples of grassroots relief efforts aimed at helping Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war. The lack of efficient and operational solutions is the subject of many media and scientific reports (Długosz, Kryvachuk, & Izdebska-Długosz, 2022a). The psychological and emotional state of the Ukrainian war refugees in Poland, mostly mothers and children, proves to be extremely difficult. As research shows, the refugees are predominantly people with university degrees coming from urban areas who held a positive view of their financial situation before the outbreak of the war. “Most of them would like to work and learn Polish. Three-quarters have active mental health issues, while about half of them suffer from high levels of distress. Half of the refugees plan to return to their Ukrainian homes as soon as the war ends” (Długosz, Kryvachuk, & Izdebska-Długosz 2022b, p.1).

ONGOING CHALLENGES

On the local level: Providing support to war refugees is an arduous task. Especially when the emotional state of the (primarily female) immigrants requires professional care. Small local communities, however affluent regarding their social capital, require state backing to continue providing the much-needed help. In social policy, including social welfare regulations, special attention should be paid to the efficiency and reasonableness of the undertaken actions as well as the skillful management of the available resources. The stark contrast between the shortage of funds and the ever-growing needs requires putting into practice management theory solutions (Głąbicka, 2014). Relief efforts organized spontaneously are naturally short-lived, and the need for clearly thought-through, well-coordinated actions quickly becomes apparent—not only on a mass scale. Everyone involved in the practice of providing help to war refugees knows

that meeting their basic needs is only the beginning of this help. The right way of doing this task is to create and implement individual integrative programs. Such tailor-made programs are designed to meet individual needs and are very hard to execute at the grassroots level. These individual integrative programs require specialized actions with the simultaneous reclaiming of agency by the immigrants who broaden the scope of their autonomous activity and become independent from relief institutions and individual helpers (Głąbicka, 2014). Volunteers involved in bringing aid to others, including war refugees, are prone to so-called burnout, especially when the need for aid is prolonged, the needs get more complex, and the resources are scarce. This is a particularly plausible scenario in the case of small local communities; meeting the needs of the immigrants extends beyond their structural and organizational capabilities (their representatives are not entitled to alter regulations at the state level and are subject to statutes and orders which may not adequately address the dynamically changing situation nationwide). The need for systemic support manifests itself quite clearly in such circumstances.

On the national level: According to data provided by the European Parliament (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2023), one and a half million refugees from Ukraine have obtained temporary permits to reside in Poland since the beginning of the 2022 war. Over 900,000 found employment. Two hundred thousand children attend Polish schools. It is important to note that many children want to attend classes online offered by Ukraine. This information is especially interesting, considering that 80% of refugees declare they eventually want to return to Ukraine. Therefore, it is equally essential to plan the rebuilding of Ukraine now as an investment for the country's future.

Social workers in Ukraine, with the help of international community groups like the IFSW and BASW (*War in Ukraine*, n.d.; Ioakimidis & Maglajlić, 2022), are working on developing their professional responses to the challenges produced by war. One of the approaches is empowering the communities to be self-sufficient and sustainable by recognizing their strengths and knowledge. There is an appreciation for the fact that material support from abroad is helpful. Still, there is also a realization that only by developing people's own resources in response to their needs will they be able to rebuild their country (Truell, 2022). In December 2022, Ukrainian social workers established a National Association of Social Workers organization (NASWU) that was registered by the government. NASWU also developed cooperation with community social services organizations and universities (*Social work in Ukraine*, n.d.).

The recent experiences of both Ukraine and Poland have exposed the strengths and weaknesses of the social work profession during times of crisis, but they also show what can be accomplished. Research concerning society's adaptation to the present conditions generated by war is ongoing and necessary for us to understand what has been done well and what must be improved. A new generation of Ukrainians growing up in the midst of war will experience a very different geo-political reality than their parents and grandparents, and they must quickly understand it. Responses to this geo-political reality will drive systemic changes in Ukraine. While decentralization has been described as the major achievement of Ukraine after independence (1991), there remain many challenges for the Ukrainian nation as it prepares for its contin-

ued future as a sovereign country. For example, both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion have affected how Ukrainians view public education, one of the most important tasks of any nation. Given the uncertainty of daily life, the model of online teaching is increasingly seen as the most appropriate (Sikra, 2023). In addition, academics warn that during the war, Ukrainian elites may marginalize vulnerable groups (Dolan-Evans, 2023), a consequence of incomplete structural and political post-Soviet system change. Since the war continues, the adjustment to a new reality needs to happen quickly. For the first time in Ukrainian history, the end of Ukrainian dependence on the Russian system will allow Ukrainians to rebuild their country according to their aspirations and traditions.

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