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SOI: [1.1/TAS](#) DOI: [10.15863/TAS](#)

### International Scientific Journal Theoretical & Applied Science

p-ISSN: 2308-4944 (print) e-ISSN: 2409-0085 (online)

Year: 2020 Issue: 10 Volume: 90

Published: 21.10.2020 <http://T-Science.org>

QR – Issue



QR – Article



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## CURRENT PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION AND EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

**Abstract:** *The article presents a research on current aspects of social work in Bulgaria in its function of socially significant activity, profession and education. The purpose of the research is to identify the challenges and problems that arise before them and that form conditions for creating an unattractive image of social work and social workers, lowering their public prestige, demotivation for practicing the profession and training in the specialty and limiting professional realization and identification. The results of the analysis of content and empirical data confirm the purpose of the research and reveal that the current situation and the challenges and problems arising in it are caused by: legislation, policies and practices leading to the dominance of neoliberal ideology and market approach in the management and provision of social services; ignoring the necessity to develop and apply regulations and standards in the social work profession and education. This leads to the formation of a negative tendency to blur the boundaries of social work and its gradual deprofessionalization. Key factors for the implementation of reforms are presented, which contribute to the establishment of the statute and development of social work as a profession and education in Bulgaria.*

**Key words:** *neoliberalism and social work, social work profession and education, regulations in social work profession and education, standards in social work profession and education, reforms in social work profession and education*

**Language:** English

**Citation:** Nunev, S. T. (2020). Current problems of the social work profession and education in Bulgaria. *ISJ Theoretical & Applied Science*, 10 (90), 254-260.

**Soi:** <http://s-o-i.org/1.1/TAS-10-90-45> **Doi:**  <https://dx.doi.org/10.15863/TAS.2020.10.90.45>

**Scopus ASCC:** 3312.

### Introduction

In modern conditions, social work is defined as an important factor in achieving social change, development and social justice and the promotion of equality and diversity in Europe and the world. It is upright facing many challenges and difficulties, caused by changing social and economic policies and as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Together with the neoliberal ideology and the market approach in the management and provision of social services, they influence the quality and efficiency of social work and the life and well-being of people. This dynamic context requires from social work a realization including a high level of competence, justification and adequacy of the applied approaches and practices of the needs and problems of vulnerable communities.

In Bulgaria, as a member state of the European Union (EU), after the democratic changes that took place three decades ago, the social work profession and education are still in the process of affirmation. Highlighting them as important for the development and well-being of society requires: increasing their public prestige; achieving accordance of education, competencies, qualifications and social work professions with the EU countries with introduced regulations, standards and experience; quality assurance of the training and professional activity of social workers, mobility in education and the workforce at national and European level.

The presented aspects determine our research interest to analysing the state of social work profession and education in Bulgaria. They are

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characterized by lagging behind neighbouring and other EU countries due to the authorities' neglect of the need for reforms to regulate of statute and prospects for their development.

### European social work aspects

In the Regional Report of International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)-Europe to the General Assembly of IFSW (2020) noted that the implementation of social work in Europe in according with global definition encounters many difficulties. Basically, they are related to: the political, economic and cultural conditions, mainly related to the influence of neoliberalism, managerialism, extreme right-wing movements with authoritarian-nationalist ideology and human rights violations; the challenges to social workers and the social work itself in the new EU member states of Eastern Europe in introducing the neoliberal model and the market-oriented approach to the social sphere in the 90s of the 20th century and early 21st century [20]. The growing application of the principles of neoliberalism and managerialism in the field of social services creates conditions for changes with a negative impact on the social work as a profession and education in terms of upholding one's own principles and values, identity, role and importance in the society at national, European and international level [1; 20]. In the conditions of changes in the state in accordance with the neoliberal ideology and the restrictions on the financing of social services, they lead to: emergence of resistance and strengthening of the positions of the radical social work; vision of a 'crisis of the value' of social work and its bureaucratization; lowering the public prestige and importance of the social work profession; use of a reductionist approach in teaching content on human rights and social justice in the social work education; emerging challenges and difficulties in adapting social workers from Eastern European countries to neoliberal ideologies and realities, making meaningless the role of the social worker as an agent of social change in everyday practice and his limited opportunities to influence policies and negative practices [5; 9; 12; 13; 19].

The version of the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (GSSWET), updated by IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), July 2020, reflects the latest developments in the global social work, the purposes are defined and the areas are considered: school, people, and profession. They are having the responsible task of preparing competent professionals to carry out the mission and apply the values, principles and policies of the profession. Their contribution to the development of the social work education and practice, the affirmation of their role in modern society at national and international level and the improvement of the well-being of people in situations of difficulty are noted [6].

### Methodology

#### *Purpose of the research*

Identifying in the current situation in Bulgaria challenges and problems facing to the social work profession and education, leading to the formation of an unattractive image of the social workers and the social work, lowering their public prestige, demotivating to practice their profession and young people to study and to make sense of their professional realization and identification as social workers.

The research in its empirical part is conducted with 165 participants. They fill in a questionnaire, the answers to which serve to prepare a Memorandum for the development of social work education and profession of the social worker during the conducted in 2018 and 2019 at the University of Ruse 'Angel Kanchev', Bulgaria, Regional Forum with International Participation 'Good educational and professional practices in the field of social activities' [16; 17]. Of these, 95 (57, 58%) are representatives of the University of Ruse, six other universities in the country and the Bulgarian Association of Social Work Education (BASWE) (students in bachelor's and master's programs – 43.03%, doctoral students and professors – 14.55%), and 70 (42.42%) – deputy mayors of municipalities (1.30%), social workers from the Social Assistance Directorates (5.70%), social service providers (15.30%) and social workers from the municipalities of Ruse, Varna, Razgrad, Veliko Tarnovo, Targovishte, the chairman of the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers (BASW) (20.12%).

In the forum participated: the President of the IFSW-Europe Ana Radulescu, Romania; the member of the Executive Committee of the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) and Country Coordinator of Bulgaria Florin Lazar, Romania; Herbert Paulischin, Austrian Association of Social Work, Austria; social work professors from the University of Pitesti, Romania; Nadezhda Leonyuk, Brest State A.S. Pushkin University, Belarus. They complete a separate questionnaire in part of which express their opinion for reforms in the social work profession and education in Bulgaria. Participants from Romania present implemented reforms to introduce regulations and standards in the social work profession and education.

#### *Methods*

To conduct the research and achieve reliability and objectivity, content analysis of important sources of information is used chronologically, meaningfully and in terms of dynamics of changes: laws and ordinances in the field of social assistance and social services in Bulgaria, acts of IFSW and IASSW, media publications on policies and activities of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). Facts and trends are established and the impact of the information on recipients and society in professional, educational and social terms is reflected. In accordance with the

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purpose of the research, the author developed a questionnaire. Data from the answers of the respondents are analysed to establish their opinion and positions on the reforms in important areas for the development of the social work education and practice. Respondents' responses are reported on a five-point Likert scale. The research is conducted with informed consent and is voluntary and anonymous.

### Regulation of the social work profession and education and recognition of the education and qualifications in EU Member States

The social work profession and social work education are regulated in the majority by the EU Member States. According to data by the European Commission in regard to internal market, free movement of professionals and a database on the regulated profession 'social worker' in accordance with Directive 2005/36/EC, out of a total of 27 EU member states, 21 are represented in which the profession has such a status [2]. Bulgaria is one of the countries that is not among them. From the beginning of its membership in the EU in 2007 to 2020, the data on the number of decisions taken for the recognition of professional qualifications of candidates for permanent establishment in the EU Member States reveal that out of a total of 90 decisions taken by the host country, 47 are positive (52.22%) and 43 were neutral and negative (47.78%). The geography of mobility has the highest share of recognition of qualifications in the United Kingdom (80.00%), Italy (7.78%) and Switzerland (5.56%) [3; 4]. For candidates from Romania for the same period out of a total of 4768 decisions taken by the host country, 4512 (94.63%) were positive, 256 (5.37%) were neutral and negative. The geography of mobility has the highest share of qualification recognition in the United Kingdom (95.76%) and Italy (2.31%). Among Greek candidates, out of a total of 196 decisions taken by the host country, 175 (89.29%) are positive, 21 are neutral and negative (10.71%). The geography of mobility has the highest share of qualification recognition in Cyprus (53.06%) and the United Kingdom (43.88%).

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the empirical data for recognition of professional qualification of social workers applying for recognition in host countries in the EU with regulation of the social work profession and education allows to substantiate the conclusion that in comparison with Bulgaria, where there are no regulations, the share of recognized qualifications is significantly higher for applicants from Romania and Greece, in which regulations have been introduced. This reveals the achieved higher level of compliance of the social work education and qualification in at adopted regulatory mechanisms and standards in these countries.

### The social work profession and education in Bulgaria in the modern conditions

After the democratic changes in Bulgaria in 1998, the Social Assistance Act (SAA) was adopted, which was amended repeatedly until 2019. It defines the social assistance (social benefits and social services) as based on social work. In the additional provisions to the 2002 law, a definition of social work is presented, viewing it as 'a professional activity for improvement the mutual adaptation of assisted persons, families, groups and the environment in which they live. It is a set of supportive activities aimed at achieving a better quality of life, dignity and responsibility in people based on their individual abilities, interpersonal relationships and community resources' [22]. Its analysis reveals that some of the main points of the international definition of social work adopted by IFSW and IASSW in 2000 with the following main accents, have not been met: promotion of social change, empowerment and freedom of the individuals to improve the welfare, the principles of human rights and the social justice [7].

A separate chapter with a short text has been created for the professional status of a social worker in the law. It does not specify requirements for holding the position of the social worker. In the amendments to the SAA in 2002, the text was reduced to a minimum, specifying that the requirements for the professional and personal qualities of social workers in their appointment as such are determined by an ordinance of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. The ordinance was issued in 2012 and refers to the career development of the social workers in the structures of the Social Assistance Agency at the MLSP, who have the status of employees in the state administration [18]. In the announcements of the Agency for competitions for the position of 'social worker' is required secondary education and the positions of 'senior social worker' and 'chief social worker' may be held by a candidates with a bachelor's degree and with a humanitarian specialty. This allows the appointment of candidates without education and qualification in social work and reveals the lack of a unified approach towards the establishment of status to the social work profession and the career development of social workers in general and to social workers outside the state structures – social services, hospitals, prisons, etc. In case of additional amendments in the SAA, the chapter Social Workers has been repealed. Today there is no requirements for social work education and qualification when holding the position of 'social worker' in the structures for social assistance and other areas. This creates conditions for the appointment of candidates without education and qualification in social work and calls into question their professional expertise and the quality of work.

In the Social Services Act (SSA) social services are defined as based on the social work. A definition is presented in which the social work is considered as an 'activity (author's note – it is not specified whether

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it is professional), which is based on the human rights and social justice and is aimed at supporting the individual, family, groups or communities to improve their quality of life by developing skills to use their own capabilities and those of the community in order to meet their needs' [23].

It is not specified whether this activity is professional, which erodes its status. The analysis reveals that to a large extent the definition does not correspond to the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession – 2014 and does not comply with the IFSW recommendations for its adaptation to local conditions [8]. The professional subject carrying out the social work is not clearly defined. In the predominant part of the law the term 'employee' is used instead of 'social worker'. The specialist who realizes social work in other systems – hospitals, nurseries, institutions for preschool and school education, prisons, etc. is represented as an employee, and not as a social worker [24]. The SSA does not include a chapter on Social Workers and requirements for applicants and holders of this position for education and social work professional qualification. The analysis of the main points of the law reveals a number of elements blurring boundaries and meaninglessness of the importance of the social work profession and the social work in the social services, regardless of the formal indication of its basic meaning. For over twenty years, there has been no clear position of the legislator and the MLSP on the fundamental and methodological importance of the social work in the field of social activities and the need to introduce state regulation and standards for the social work profession and education. The presented situation reveals a lack of political will and expertise to carry out reforms and protection of the social work profession and education. A study on the legislative activity of the 44th National Assembly on bills submitted during the eight parliamentary sessions states that 87.90% of them do not refer to research and scientific expertise in their justification [15]. This long-term process takes place in a time when legislation in the vast majority of EU Member States operate mechanisms for the regulation, registration, crediting and licensing of social workers was carried out. Unlike Bulgaria, Romania, following the model of countries with experience and achievements, adopted legislation for state regulation of the profession and education in social work, defining the status of the social worker, a National College of Social Workers was established, and Code of the Practice of Social Workers has been developed [10; 11; 21]. The presented situation in Bulgaria is in the conditions of growing need for social workers and increasing quality of customer service. According to the medium-term forecasts (2024), 91.3 specialists will be needed in the Human Health and Social Work sector [14].

In the SSA formally and to some extent limited is the possibility of the previous law, through which many municipalities in the late 90s of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century chose to transfer their responsibility to one of the important areas of welfare of the people to private entities, entrusting the management and provision of a large part or all of the social services to private providers (NGOs), which do not always have the necessary capacity and resources. Given the poor state of the financial and human resources of the municipalities in the field of social activities and the difficulties of the state to ensure the financial functioning of the social services, it is possible they are outsourced and provided by private suppliers. Some of them have become a kind of monopolists in municipalities and regions, taking advantage of the shortcomings of the previous law. This suggests that overcoming the neoliberal ideology and market approach in the provision of social services will require a long time to change policies and practices, use a balanced approach to public-private partnership and optimal use of the resources of municipalities and private providers for provision of quality and effective social services. It should not be overlooked the fact that some municipalities do not have the resources to provide social services of a specialized nature compared to private providers.

The trend over the years of ignoring and marginalizing the BASW (IFSW member) at the expense of the monopoly of branch syndicates and non-governmental organizations without the necessary expertise in resolving professional issues can also be interpreted as neglecting the importance of social work and of the social work profession.

University social work education in Bulgaria for twenty-eight years of its existence faces a number of challenges. It is in line with the Bologna process and the MES is committed to provide quality and dealing with the difficulties in recognizing qualifications and periods of training. Unfortunately, there are still problems in achieving an appropriate level of compliance of education and qualifications in social work with the majority of EU and EEA countries. This is a result of: the absence of state regulation and standards for social work education and profession; non-compliance with the general trend in Europe for regulation, registration, crediting and licensing, contributing to the maintenance of high quality of professional resources. The implementation of reforms in order to be achieved compliance of the social work education and qualification acquired in Bulgaria with the European level will contribute to: increasing the compliance with European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations – ESCO classification and mobility; elimination of the shortage and mismatch of skills and competencies on the labour market; improving the quality of the social work education and activity of social workers through

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the introduction of regulations and standards. In the context of the recommendations of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), national authorities need to analyse and identify gaps in skills, competences and qualifications in social work and take measures to compensate for deficits and recognize them in different countries and systems. No information established that such actions have been implemented in terms of education and training in social work in Bulgaria.

The current situation is associated with a serious reduction in the number of candidates and students to study in bachelor's and master's programs. The author's view is that this is due to legislative decisions and policies of the authorities, inconsistent with the realities in the EU countries with traditions and experience in the social work education and in validating, protecting and developing the social work profession. This leads to the meaninglessness of social work in Bulgaria and a reduction in the public prestige of the profession and education. The MLSP and the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) have refused to comply with the demands of the academic and professional community to grant status as a priority to the professional field Social Work and for reforms by adopting regulations and standards for social work education. The refusal is despite the medium and long-term forecasts for a growing need for highly qualified social workers, the strategic planning for development of the social services and the negative trends in demography and the labour market in the field of social work. This problem stands out with its relevance and severity in the context of the adopted GSSWET. The reviewed processes have a demotivating effect on young people to study in social work bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs, to accomplish themselves as social workers or to continue their careers as researchers and academic workers. Ignoring the need for regulations and standards, of the GSSWET, of the experience of European countries, and the data on the insufficient compliance of education and qualifications acquired in Bulgaria in the given field distances the social work education and profession from the ESCO classification, which is part of the Europe 2020 strategy.

### Identification of opinions and positions for reforms in the field of social work as a profession and education in Bulgaria

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirical data from the questionnaire reveals the categorical opinions and positions of the respondents for the implementation of reforms in the aspects:

A. Adoption of legislation regulating the social work profession and education. Supported by 95.80% of the participants, 3.60% express a neutral opinion, no negative positions.

A. Introduction of standards for social work education based on a competence approach. Defined as necessary by 97.60% of the respondents, 2.40% state a neutral position, negative opinions are absent.

B. Adoption of legislation for the establishment of a system for: registration of those who have acquired the social work educational qualification degrees 'bachelor' and 'master'; career development through the accumulation of credits; licensing to practice the social work profession. Defined as important by 94.50% of the participants. The share of those who expressed a neutral opinion (4.30%) and those who did not support such measures (1.20%) is insignificant.

C. Introduction of changes in the financing of social work education on the basis of quality measures and its determination as a priority on the basis of the current situation of deprofessionalization and the need for social workers. Supported by 94.50% of respondents, 5.50% have a neutral opinion, no negative positions.

D. Improving the financing of social services in order to increase the quality of service and decent pay for the social workers. Defined as necessary by 98.80% of the participants and the share of those who did not express an opinion is insignificant (1.20%).

E. Establishment of a Social Work Council as a non-governmental, nationally representative organization of the academic and professional community of social workers with legal status. It is assessed as an important by 94.50% of the respondents. The share of those who expressed a neutral (4.90%) and a negative opinion with hesitation (0.60%) is insignificant. The Council is expected to perform following functions: development of measures to improve the quality of social work education and practice, based on an analysis of the current situation and development prospects; implementation of advocacy campaigns for implementation of national and European legislation in support of the social work and for affirmation of the high public reputation and social responsibility of the social work profession; development of strategies for the progress of the social work education and profession; inclusion in the development of drafts of normative acts and standards for social work education and practice; organizing and implementing continuing education of social workers; development of a new code of ethics for social workers in Bulgaria and introduction of procedures for compliance with the ethical principles; establishment of a structure in the Council for assessment and certification of the competencies in social work in accordance with international and European classifiers and standards. The foreign participants from Romania and Austria support the presented opinions and positions of their colleagues from Bulgaria.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from the questionnaire reveals a steady positive trend

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in the opinions and positions expressed by the respondents for reforms in the social work education and practice and validation of the status of the social work profession with a focus on adequate response to important current, medium and long term professional and social needs.

### Discussion

The summarized conclusions from the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the content in the field of social assistance and data from the research allow identifying the key factors with contribution to implement reforms, increase the public prestige of the social work profession and education, overcoming of the negative tendency to blur the boundaries of social work and its gradual deprofessionalization:

A. Adoption of legislation on the status of social work and social workers, defining their activity and professional positioning in certain work fields.

B. Introduction of regulations and standards in the social work education and profession, implementation of mechanisms for registration, crediting, licensing and career development of social workers. This will ensure acquisition of competencies and qualifications in accordance with the ESCO classification, improving the quality of the social work education and training at national level, achieving content and technological compliance and mobility in the education and the labour market in EU.

C. Analysing the current situation and taking effective measures to overcome the negative trends in the management and provision of social services, caused by the application of the neoliberal model and market approach and leading to: demotivation of

candidates with education and qualification in social work to realize as social workers; shortage of social work competent staff and reluctance to build on education in master's and doctoral programs.

D. Optimizing the model of the public-private partnership in the management and provision of social services with a focus on the improving the quality and efficiency of professional activity, promoting the identification and development of the social workers; increasing the public prestige of the social work profession and education.

E. Development by the MLSP and MES in partnership with municipalities, social service providers, BASW, accredited to implement social work training in higher education institutions and BASWE of a effective strategy for validation the status of the social work, the social work profession and education, overcoming tendency of significant decrease of their public prestige and increase of quality the professional and academic resources.

### Conclusion

The presented results of the research reveal the realization of the accepted purpose. The challenges and problems for social work as a profession and education in Bulgaria, argued in the analysis and conclusions, are defined primarily as a result of insufficient activity and neglect by the authorities of the need for reforms to validation the status and development of the social work, the social work education and profession. Implementing reforms in compliance with the presented key factors is an essential important for social work as a factor with an active role in dealing with the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.

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