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Social work in FSU countries: mapping the progress of 'the professional project'

Социальная работа в странах бывшего СССР: очерчивая прогресс «профессионального проекта»

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ABSTRACT

This article presents material from literature and responses from national experts about social work developments in the 15 Former Soviet Union (FSU) states, since independence in 1991. Taking professionalization as a theoretical framework and considering the role of the state and other actors, the authors use a thematic approach to analyse the factors relevant to the professional project. Throughout the region, the state is identified as still the major actor in driving welfare changes and creating the organizational and legislative bases for the development of social work. A chronology of legislation relevant to the establishment of social work is included which highlights the variations in the pace of developments, as do the establishment of professional education (throughout the region) and professional associations (in most countries). The authors conclude that the professional project faces many challenges across the FSU region and the progress made – or lack of it in some countries – can be related to the politics and economics of particular states. However, the evidence suggests that, less than a quarter of a century after the demise of communism, this project has been initiated in all but one FSU countries and there are indications of positive developments.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье представлены результаты анализа литературы и интервью с национальными экспертами по проблемам развития социальной работы в пятнадцати бывших республиках Советского Союза, начиная с получения ими независимости в 1991. Принимая в качестве теоретической рамки концепцию профессионализации и рассматривая роль государства и других акторов, авторы анализируют факторы, релевантные профессиональному проекту. Повсеместно в регионе государство по-прежнему является главным актором, который проводит изменения в социальной политике и закладывает организационные и правовые основания развития социальной работы. В статье рассматривается сравнительная хронология социального законодательства, создания профессионального образования и профессиональных ассоциаций в странах региона. Авторы приходят к выводу, что реализация профессионального проекта сопряжена с рядом проблем во всех странах бывшего Советского Союза. Достижения и трудности на пути профессионализации могут

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объясняться условиями, свойственными политике и экономике отдельных государств. Проведенный анализ позволяет авторам говорить о том, что спустя лишь четверть века после падения коммунизма профессиональный проект социальной работы стартовал во всех (кроме одной) странах бывшего Советского Союза, и налицо признаки позитивных сдвигов.

Introduction

This paper analyses the 'professionalisation project' as it has been developing in the 15 states of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) (see Table 1), a topic that has been relatively little researched and publicized to an international audience. These states have been going through a period of transition from a centralized command economy to the market, and all are still dealing with socialist legacies to a greater or lesser extent. There are huge variations in terms of land mass and population size (Table 1) between the states, as well each having distinctive historical trajectories and current economic and cultural attributes (The Guardian, 2014). Many so-called 'post-socialist' countries had formerly been part of other imperial entities before coming under the power of Soviet Russia after the Second World War (Waaldijk, 2011). Various forms of social care had been developed under

Table 1. National contexts, legislation, education and associations: a chronology.

Country	UN member	EU member	Population estimate	Legislation (use of term 'social worker')	Education	Associations
Armenia	1992	–	3018k	Social Work Law (2005) (social worker 1996)	1992	2004
Azerbaijan	1992	–	9754k	Social Services Law, 2011 (social worker 2005)	2005	2006
Belarus	1945	–	9496k	Social Services Act 2000 (social worker, 1998)	1998	1996
Estonia	1991	2004	1313k	Social Welfare Act 1995 (social worker, 1991)	1991	2004
Georgia	1992	–	4000k	Legislation, 2005 (social worker 2003)	2004	2004
Kazakhstan	1992	–	17,625k	2005/08 (social worker 1992)	1992	2004
Kyrgyzstan	1992	–	5940k	Social Services Law 2001, Code for Children 2006 (social worker 1994)	1994	1998
Latvia	1991	2004	1971k	Law on Social Assistance 1995/Social services and Social Assistance 2003 (social worker1991)	1991	2006
Lithuania	1991	2004	2878k	Social Services Act 1996/2008 (social worker 1991)	1992	1993
Moldova	1992	–	4069k	Social Assistance Act 2003 Social Services Act 2010 (social worker, 1997)	1997	1998
Russian Fed'n	1945	–	143,457k	Social Services 1995/2014 (social worker 1989, specialist in social work 1991)	1991	1992
Tajikistan	1992	–	8482k	2008 (social worker 2009)	2009	2004
Turkmenistan	1992	–	5374k	Social Code, 2007 (social worker – not yet)	–	–
Ukraine	1945	–	29,893k	Social Work with C and YP 2001 S. Services Act 2003 (social worker 1992)	1991	1992
Uzbekistan	1992	–	29,893k	Social Services Law 2015 (draft) (social worker 1998)	2004	–

Source: UN and EU data (columns 1, 2 and 3) and national experts augmented by cited literature (columns 4, 5 and 6).

previous political regimes and, as elsewhere, the pre-professional history of social work included philanthropic efforts and religious initiatives. Varied arrangements for social care and training for personnel were evident in different times and places, some of which persisted into and beyond the communist period.

In the post 1945 period, institutional care establishments (mainly for people with disabilities or orphaned children) were re-established or continued to exist under state socialism but on a different ideological basis and, in the community, the 'care-and-control' tasks now often associated with social work were carried out by the state. Official state policy did not recognize the existence of social problems and, if difficulties arose, these were to be dealt with by police, teachers, employers and community networks. Thus the need for social work was not articulated and the academic bases for critical thinking (provided by sociology and psychology) were eliminated from university curricula or only followed the official/communist party line (Guzzetta, 1995, p. 192).

In its 'golden age', the Soviet government had built an advanced system of social welfare with universal services widely available; despite the high degree of cultural diversity in the region, in the late 1950–1960s, the Soviet system served as a model for the majority of states in the socialist bloc (Schilde & Schulte, 2005). However, 'equal welfare' meant in practice a generally low level of service and unfair redistribution of resources to separate elite centres (capital city dwellers and party nomenclature); while some people enjoyed the benefits of socialist welfare, others were excluded.

The centralized and homogenizing influence of the Soviet system was disrupted by the shifts in political power and international relations signified by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and independent states subsequently gained autonomy and economic responsibilities. With the dissolution of the **AQ3** USSR (1991), Russia and its former republics developed market economies during the 1990s. By 2002, the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, had opted for membership of the EU (accepted 2004) bringing different opportunities and influences on the development of welfare services and social work. Throughout the FSU region, new legislation and policies governing social security and social care systems have been devised over the past 25 years and new relationships forged between the state, the free market and civil society (e.g. Borodkina, 2015 in relation to Russia) as well as internationally.

Some of the current particularities regarding social work development are specific to individual countries or observable through a subregion, but the pace of development of welfare systems and establishment of a social work profession has varied across the region as a whole. In this paper, we use the notion of 'the professional project' (Larson, 1977) to identify some of the characteristics and the different rates of professionalization since the early 1990s. The analysis draws on published material and information derived from personal contacts with national experts[1] and is presented thematically and not as a national comparative study. After a brief summary of the theory relating to the professional project, the specific case and context of social work are presented. Thereafter, 'findings' and discussion are related to the legislative basis for social work and the development of social work education and professional associations. Conclusions are drawn about the variations in the establishment and progress of the professional project.

The professional project: theory and literature

AQ4 Larson (1977) described the process of professionalization as a 'project' whereby a distinct occupational group seeks to gain control over a monopoly of competence and credibility with the public and thus to secure an increase in income, power and prestige. This process is accompanied by power struggles for higher status, jurisdictional rights (Abbott, 1988) and professional autonomy (Freidson, 1988) and 'the professional project' is facilitated or deterred by different cultural contexts, including the part played by the state, the stratification order, patriarchy and the role of knowledge as both the outcome of cognition and a metaphor for behaviour (MacDonald, 1995).

Relationships between professionals, the state, the market and civil society, as well as definitions of professionalism, have varied over time and place. Krause suggested that 'there is a continuum of profession-state relations, ranging from the essentially "private" professions with limited state involvement and employment (the American example), to the state-involved professions of Western Europe, to the primarily state-located and state-employed professions of Eastern Europe' (Krause, 1991, p. 4). The state has played a major part in shaping the extent and direction of the professionalization of social work in many FSU states, with implications for the roles and collective identity of this occupational group.

Wilensky (1964) identified stages that an occupation goes through in the process of professionalization as follows: establishment of training schools and professional associations to ensure standards; definition of the core tasks and a code of ethics and legal support to protect and maintain the 'job territory'. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, it has taken many years to develop the features of a social work profession, for instance, in Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2002), and the extent to which social work has progressed along the professionalization path in other FSU countries varies widely. Additionally, while acquiring its status, every profession tries to identify a field of issues where it can claim unique and legally supported spheres of competence (Freidson, 1988). In some FSU countries (e.g. Lithuania and Russia), the identity and 'boundaries' of social work overlap with those of social pedagogy, as in many countries of continental Europe (Lyons & Huegler, 2012).

Social work aspires to a self-disciplining form of governance but the question arises whether professionals subordinate their own self-interests to the public interest (Saks, 1995). Reeser and Epstein (1996), for example, warn that greater professionalization can result in decreased activism and increase the gap between practitioners and clients. Efforts to address this tendency are evident in the rise of new professionalism, emphasizing social inclusion, empowerment and critical reflection (e.g. Davies & Leonard, 2004). However, in the twenty-first century, the dominant influence of capitalist values in societies and managerialism in the public sector have raised issues of professional discretion and accountability and altered the roles and functions of many social workers in the West (Evans, 2010). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, in the post-Soviet context, with the professionalization project at an early stage, various definitions and ideologies of welfare policy and social work are contested.

The social work professional project: contexts and actors

Context and the role of the state

History, international influences, economic development and the experience of democracy are the most important factors affecting divergence in the structure of welfare states and the varied paths of social work professionalization (Orenstein, 2008). In the 1990s, in the transition from socialism to market economy and democracy, crucial transformations occurred within FSU states in the role of the state, the ideology of social support and models and instruments of social policy and social services, as well as in the macro context of international relations. Some states already had membership of the United Nations and new states joined (Table 1); many countries signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, became members of the Council of Europe and subscribed to the European Social Charter. National governments became aware of the need to develop social services as part of a modern social welfare system and some of the post-1991 legislation specifically related to the naming and role of social workers in countries where this was established as a new occupation. Over two decades, the legal foundations were laid for the new profession; education for social work was established; and municipalities were charged with providing social services in virtually all the FSU countries.

An immediate effect of the economic and political transitions taking place in the region was an increase in unemployment, poverty and associated social problems for many (Cook, 2007; Standing, 1998). Significant changes took place in the labour market for all occupational groups, including a

rapid marginalization of many professionals, for example, doctors, school teachers and engineers working for the public sector suffered from low salaries and chronic delays in wage payments. These 'new poor' joined the ranks of the unqualified work force and some switched to alternative occupations, including social work.

More recent literature (e.g Borodkina, 2015 in relation to Russia) has suggested an improvement in socio-economic conditions for the majority of populations, as the twenty-first century has progressed, although the gap between the very rich and the rest of the population is considerable. Orenstein (2008) has also suggested that social expenditure throughout the region is relatively high due to historical legacies, but that some countries, despite being rich in natural resources, are less democratic and spend less on social protection. (Georgia and Kazakhstan were cited as examples in 2008). Meanwhile, Orenstein (2008) suggested that the Baltic States had become more democratic and were spending about the same on social welfare as the more generous FSU states.

The most characteristic socialist legacy in the FSU is the persistence of the monopolized position of public services and the limited possibilities for creating a competitive environment (Borodkina, 2015; Romanov, 2008). The top-down approach to solving social problems is still in place, so that the state has the main jurisdiction over the new profession, providing it with financial and symbolic capital, but also influencing the professional project. Additionally, the lack of a popular voice in politics allows some former Soviet states to ignore the plight of the socially weak (Orenstein, 2008) and there is little evidence of structural reorganization of social policy programmes in ways that correspond to public demands and interests (e.g. in Russia, Verbilovich, 2013).

Transnational actors have also had an important influence on the social policy agenda in all post-communist countries from the mid-1990s. Post-socialist welfare states have been inspired by international organizations that have supported a liberal model, for instance in the privatization of the pension systems, reform in health care and many other programmes (Orenstein, 2008), including some that have adopted western methods of social work intervention. But progress towards recognition of social work as a profession by administrative bodies has been slow and, in many countries, an approach that places the emphasis on the provision of social assistance benefits at the expense of professional family support and psychosocial services for clients has persisted (e.g. in Georgia, USAID, 2008) thus slowing, if not blocking the professional project.

Marketization, civil society and international influences

Given the adoption of market economies by FSU states, it can be questioned whether the social work project has been involved in such changes. Early on, Krause (1991) noted a deliberate fostering of the market by the state in Russia and the opportunity for the establishment of a social services market. More recently, there has been reference to 'private programs' in Armenia (USAID, 2008) and, in Kazakhstan, Mukhtarova, Kozhamkulova and Sudakova (Personal Email Communications PCs: 2012) suggested that while most social work is conducted in the public sector, 'private practice' is growing. It is not clear, however, whether 'private' in this context refers to all non-state organizations and activities or whether it specifically relates to 'for profit' enterprises.

In general, there is little evidence that the market has yet played a significant role in the development of social work and welfare (Borodkina, 2015). Indeed, in most countries, even in the context of a general market economy, social work continues to be largely an 'organ of the state'. However, throughout the region, the neo-liberal idea of new managerialism is evident in twenty-first century public services with its emphasis on economy and efficiency and this has opened up the possibilities of non-government organizations (NGOs) competing with municipal services for budgets for service provision (Liebert, Condrey, & Goncharov, 2013; Romanov, 2008). This in turn may open up new employment opportunities for social workers.

A shift in favour of giving greater responsibilities and opportunities to the instruments of civil society has been more in evidence in some places. For instance, in parts of Russia, in the face of very limited social service provision, non-governmental services have mobilized the resources of

local communities to help vulnerable groups (Sätre, 2014). In addition, the role of religion in people's lives has taken on significant meaning in many FSU countries, and the Russian Orthodox and Catholic Churches and Islamic institutions have all contributed to a revival of charitable efforts in particular communities (Roga, 2004). The church is visible in social service provision in Armenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova, Kyrgizstan and Russia (PECs) and Islamic community and charity traditions are also evident, for example, in parts of Russia (Round & Kuznetsova, 2014).

Some of the NGOs that have grown out of service users' communities and grass-roots movements have developed a strong emancipatory view in their work, which is also the case with agencies involved in international collaborations (Borodkina, 2015). The role of international agencies in FSU countries has received special attention in the literature about the region (e.g. Borodkina, 2015; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2015; Trygged & Eriksson, 2009) and international collaboration has led to multi-faceted exchanges and influences. Many countries have built strategic international partnerships on all levels of welfare governance and practice, both with western countries and between FSU states themselves (Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2013). The availability of foreign funding primarily encouraged the growth of the NGO sector: international NGOs either 'imported' foreign social workers or employed local social workers, for example, in SOS Children's Villages in Uzbekistan (PEC: Kim & **AQ5** Isayeva, 2012).

NGOs and foreign-funded programmes have been important in capacity building for social work in a range of FSU countries but, as noted by the World Bank (2011) in Armenia, such projects tend to be small scale and limited in their reach; they are usually aimed at protection and support of elders, refugees, children and/or people with disabilities in a particular locality. In addition, they lack financial sustainability, an issue for NGOs in many other countries. In Azerbaijan, foreign funding was important in establishing a small NGO sector (providing the only opportunity for social work activities) but here, as in Russia, government policy has recently turned against such initiatives, with consequent closures, loss of services and unemployment of social workers. The authorities in Russia started allocating annual grants and subsidies to support 'societally oriented' NGOs, which would help to achieve public goals and benefits to address social problems (Javeline & Lindermann-Komarova, 2010).

Earlier this century, there was also some development of the NGO sector in Georgia with the assistance of foreign aid but projects have concentrated on meeting the material needs of urban populations (USAID, 2008). UNDP and UNICEF have funded projects employing social workers in countries such as Turkmenistan (USAID, 2008) where strong traditions of familial care either mask or compensate for lack of funding for social services as well as very limited numbers of professional staff. However, some national experts suggested that there has been a decline in international funding (for whatever reason); and throughout the region the state has maintained a major role in steering or blocking the professional project.

Establishing a legal basis, education and associations for social work in the FSU states

According to the literature, professional education and associations, alongside the recognition and legitimacy granted by a given society, play an important part in progressing the professional project Larson, 1977; Wilensky, 1964). Given the central role of most FSU states in developing welfare and social services, legislation is therefore important in identifying the roles to be undertaken by social workers and perhaps also the educational qualifications that they should hold. The range of dates or periods when these three factors were established can therefore illustrate the variable extent to which the social work professional project is underway in different FSU states (Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, the term 'social worker' came into use in most FSU countries in the 1990s. However, the term has not been uniformly or widely 'defined'; legislation underpinning social services has usually come later and reference to social workers in the legislation has been patchy or non-existent. But national standards for social services, which specify functions and activities of workers, are gradually being adopted in many countries of the region.

With regards to professional education, there were three main periods of establishment and growth.

The early 1990s was a period of rapid spread and growth with further phases in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Social work is now offered in universities at least at undergraduate level in 14 FSU countries and 10 have established masters level qualifying programmes as well, while a few states have also established doctoral degrees either independently or in collaboration with partner institutions within or outside the FSU region. While establishment of professional education usually needed state backing and/or the active encouragement of the higher education sectors, in some countries and institutions, international partnerships also played an important role. Such partnerships brought funding opportunities for local posts and resources (e.g. I/T; textbooks) as well as visiting personnel (usually academics) with 'western models' of social work. Some projects focused on the development of practice placements, recognizing the need for input of resources to agencies as well as higher education. From the start, some countries were better placed than others, in terms of their internal resources and politics, to bid for funding and establish partnerships. Some arrangements also included provision for study visits outside the FSU region or even funding for staff to gain academic/professional qualifications abroad.

Professional associations can play an important role in providing leadership and regulation of the profession in a given country, usually also linking it to the international community of social workers. However, the establishment of professional associations is largely the responsibility of social workers themselves, raising issues of confidence and capacity where there is a lack of clarity about roles and/ or where only a small proportion of the workforce hold professional qualifications. By 2006, the majority of FSU states had established professional associations, usually after the establishment of relevant legislation and education, although the general picture is that these are not yet strong enough to influence practice standards or provide self-regulation, even if theoretically the latter would be possible in a particular country. Some associations contribute to the practitioners' training, promote the positive image of social work and publish magazines, but in many cases, they are 'actually unions with limited capacity to service the members, lobby the government, and educate the public' (USAID, 2008, pp. 35–36).

Some national/subregional examples

The three small Baltic states have diverged somewhat from many other FSU states, perhaps due to their location in Northern Europe and their early decisions to seek entry to the European Union. The effects of European integration for social work professional development are visible in the advanced agenda of public policies focusing on the inclusion of vulnerable social groups and strategies for social cohesion and on professional regulation, registration, education and training, including field practice. University degrees have been influenced by the Bologna process (although countries beyond the EU have also adopted these (Heuneman & Skinner, 2014)) and international partnerships assisted social work and social pedagogy programmes in social work and social pedagogy soon after their introduction in the early 1990s. The profession was recognized relatively early, with municipalities being responsible for social care and social services (PECs).

However, in the early stages, there were insufficient qualified social workers and, *in Lithuania*, the Concept of Social Support (1994) stated that individuals from different professions could perform as social workers. This was assisted by the existence of a tradition of social pedagogy and, for a time, tensions affected the establishment of a national professional association. However, according to the 2008 Social Service Law, social workers in this country should be university graduates who could be employed at different levels, depending on their qualification, although this is no guarantee of 'quality'; 'too many graduates are getting a general level of competence that is not always relevant to the concrete needs of the society and new policies' (PEC: Snieškienė, 2015). Also, as important actors in solving the problems of individual users, social workers in Lithuania are not usually concerned with the social policy level, as is also the case in *Estonia* (Grønningsæter & Kiik, 2012). But

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this is a widespread trend in all countries where social workers undertake a major role in the organization of social life on behalf of the state (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Abramov, 2016, in print).

In Russia, the term 'social worker' was used from the late 1980s to describe employees assisting elders or people with disabilities. A higher status was attributed to the 'specialist in social work' defined in 1991 and both became employees of a wide network of public social services established in the 1990s. However, there is no special legal regulation of professional social work practice in Russia. Instead, in the Laws on Bases of Social Services (1995, 2014), the term 'social service workers' is used. Social work education was established early and has expanded from provision in 4 institutions (1991) to 175 (2011), although extensive provision does not guarantee a good fit between professional education and practice (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Rasell, 2014). There are continuing concerns about the number of people who qualify on social work courses but fail to enter the professional workforce (Penn, 2007), about the experiences of new staff entering hard pressed social service agencies, and about the overall staffing and ethos of these agencies. For example, many 'social workers' find themselves primarily engaged in administering welfare payments and they are themselves a relatively poorly paid and under-acknowledged occupational group. Initially, four different groups of employees made efforts to establish a national association and it was not until 2001 that these came together as the Union of Social Pedagogues and Social Workers. However, a state sponsored process of standardization and certification (commenced in 2015) aims to raise the value of professional education and improve practice (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Rasell, 2014).

Ukraine similarly demonstrated an early start on the professionalization project. Social work with children, youth and families has been practised in Centres for Social Services since 1992, although 'social work' was not defined until the beginning of this century in the laws on social protection. Both the Law on Social Work with Children and Youth (2001) and the Social Services Act (2003) refer to social workers as professionals who provide a range of social services specific to the needs of their clients, aimed at improving the quality of life and protecting the rights of persons in vulnerable situations (USAID, 2008, p. 27). The establishment of social work education from 1991 was supported by the state and had expanded from a few programmes to 50 by 2011; the establishment of a National Association of Social Workers was also an early initiative. More recently, the training of social workers has received some funding from the United Nations Development Programme (since 2011) as part of its wider support for implementation of welfare policy reforms (UNDP, 2014).

Social work was named as an occupation by State Committees in *Belarus* in 1991 but was not defined in law until the Social Service Act (2000): 'specialist with relevant qualification which fits the requirements and nature of work as well as (being) committed to provide social services by personal qualities'. The term 'social worker' first appeared in *Moldova* in 1997 and was then listed among a range of titles and roles in the Social Assistance Act (2003) and in the 2010 Social Services Act. Both countries were also later establishing social work education and the smaller country, Moldova, has yet to establish a professional association.

The introduction and recognition of social work in the *Central Asian* states generally came later than those described above, although in the most economically developed and politically stable country, *Kazakhstan*, the terms 'social worker', 'specialist in social work' and 'social pedagogue' have been included in the national register of occupational qualifications since 1992. An early start was made on social work education and this was available in 22 universities by 2011. Its National Association has been active in providing post-qualifying training and continuing professional development, in collaboration with national and international foundations (Thorning, Shibusawa, Lukens, & Fang, 2013; USAID, 2008).

The term 'social worker' has been used in *Kyrgyzstan* since 1994 although it was not officially registered until 1998 on the initiative of the government and the Association of Social Workers. The role was boosted by a World Bank Project on Social Protection in 1998 and, although the title is not specified, the functions of social work are described in the Social Services Law (2001) and the Code for Children (2006) (PEC; Grebneva, 2006). Apart from the establishment of professional education in the late 1990s, the National Association here has also been active in providing post-qualifying

training (with support from external funding) and has drafted an ethical code. However, as the country expert notes, ethical codes usually have no legal status and their use is not obligatory; use of the one in Kyrgyzstan is not widespread (PEC: Orozova, 2014).

In *Tajikistan* (following only a relatively recent start in the field of professional education), the national government, in collaboration with UNICEF and EU, was apparently establishing a national resource centre on social work aimed at modelling social work practice in the area of child welfare (Worrall, 2011). Social work education and a distinct identity for social work are similarly only recently beginning to emerge in *Turkmenistan* where the Social Code of 2007 was primarily concerned with home care services, day centres and residential care, although a USAID report (2008) identified the beginnings of social work in projects under the auspices of international foundations. Similarly in *Uzbekistan*, where the state has a dominant role in family support and child protection services, the profession is not included in the job positions of many social service agencies (PEC: Ganieva & Kim, 2011; Kim & Isayeva, 2012).

In the *Caucuses region*, social work is mainly a development of the twenty-first century although social assistance measures usually predate professional developments. For example, the term 'social worker' has been used in *Armenia* since the early 1990s when social work education was also established (Khachatryan, 2011). The term described the roles of staff in 56 regional centres (established in 1993) who, in the face of extreme poverty, were primarily concerned with material aid. However, since 2005, the social protection legislation has included a Social Work Law, which specifies requirements for qualified 'social work specialists' in public and private programmes concerned with child protection (USAID, 2008), although the local expert notes that social workers still lack a clear mandate from government (PEC: Petrosyan, 2014).

Rajabov (2011) has suggested that the state programme on De-Institutionalization and Alternative Care of Children (2006–2015) has contributed to official recognition of the role of social workers in *Azerbaijan*. The programme has included legislation (2011) to establish social services, which should employ 'professional social workers' (p. 21), and both social work education and a professional association have existed since the early 2000s/2006. *Georgia* similarly has legislation dating from 2006 and 2007, concerning the roles of social workers in specialized areas such as child welfare and social assistance. Responsibilities for social welfare services are fragmented between different Ministries, with an emphasis on material needs at the expense of psychosocial ones (USAID, 2008). However, there was some training of social work practitioners by UNICEF in the 1990s and a TEMPUS EU supported university programme since 2004 (Wallimann, 2006, p. 20). Apart from establishing its own professional education, Georgia has been one of the countries to take advantage of provision for students from FSU states to study full time and gain their qualifications in the west (in the US with support from OSI). Apparently, it was returning social workers who were active in establishing the National Association of Social Workers (USAID, 2008).

Welfare policy in the region: contexts for the development of social work profession

The development of social services and professional activities in FSU countries have primarily been in relation to the population groups that have traditionally been the subject of social work attention elsewhere. Throughout the FSU countries, significant problems of poverty, unemployment and poor housing are compounded for some by disability or chronic ill-health and dependency associated with age. Long established social problems, such as alcoholism, have been joined by others (e.g. drugs and HIV/AIDS) and changes in public attitudes have brought 'new' problems, such as child abuse, onto the social work agenda. In addition, there have been periodic outbreaks of cross-border and internal conflict, adding displaced people and refugees to those already needing social services and professional responses.

A recurring theme in the literature and from respondents is the lack of knowledge on the part of politicians and employers as well as among academics and the public at large about the purpose and

roles of social work. On the one hand, the politicians and public officials underestimate the role of education in social work and the value of such a qualification and 'new knowledge' in the workplace. On the other, the status of national social policy institutions is quite high; welfare reforms receive a lot of public attention in the mass media, and 'social issues' often occupy a central position in the public agenda of politicians (related to the importance of these issues in the promotion of the public image of the government and political parties, see Iarskaia-Smirnova, Prisyazhnyuk, & Kononenko, 2016).

Notwithstanding the patchy growth of a small voluntary sector, social (work) services continue to be provided primarily by the state sector and levels of financial investment in the resources (including personnel) of this sector, as well as welfare funding generally, are variable but not high across the region. Countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan enjoyed booming resource revenues early in the twenty-first century but have failed 'to fully convert impressive economic growth into sustainable socio-economic development' (Joyce, 2008). The key impediments to effective public spending in these countries are the lack of transparency and accountability, weak oversight capacities, government corruption and the general weakness of democratic institutions. The greater transparency and accountability required to secure efficiency of spending and the importance of civil society involvement have been stressed as key factors in developing welfare services (Joyce, 2008).

McCullaugh (2013) suggests different factors explaining the variations in expenditure between mineral-rich and politically hybrid regimes. For instance, in Azerbaijan, there is little evidence of desire on the part of the government to engage in redistribution. By contrast, welfare expenditure in Russia under Vladimir Putin has risen since the early 2000s, driven by new social policy initiatives aimed at increasing pensions, improving salaries for health and education workers and expanding categories for direct cash transfers and benefits to citizens. The post-socialist Kazakhstan occupies a middle position between these two extremes in welfare spending, variations explained by McCullaugh (2013) by differences in elite cohesion. These variations in welfare expenditure are also reflected in the official support given to the social work professional project.

Concluding discussion: differential rates of professionalization and common concerns

Social work is presented throughout the region as an important occupation. Nevertheless, its prestige and autonomy are not high. In Russia, such professional initiatives as the Social Worker Day and The Best Social Worker competition were encouraged by the government to increase professional prestige but the profession (comprised mainly of women) is still characterized by low social status and level of remuneration. Social workers are strictly controlled by the state, inducing a sense of both political and professional powerlessness.

The concern with the quality of service provision is expressed in many countries of the region (USAID, 2008). Occupational standards for social work have been elaborated by the experts and accepted by the government in several FSU countries, for example, Estonia in 2001 (Kiik & Sirotkina, 2005) and Russia in 2013. However, in a situation where professional associations are still weak, it is difficult to formulate occupational standards from below. The first versions of these standards in Russia were elaborated with major participation of the representatives of higher education, including academics from social work. The creation of an expert community from above tends to increase the control over the profession by 'the authorities'. European institutions have framed the processes of professionalization of social work in the Baltic states (especially since the mid-2000s) but elsewhere the state strives to monopolize influence in this field. While pursuing microeconomic efficiency and decentralization of welfare systems, the state is still the main source of status and identity for many professional groups, including social work. At the same time, in all FSU countries, the slow rise of cross-sector collaboration creates conditions for new models of professionalization. New examples of professionalization have already been initiated in different subfields of social work both from below, through the activity of professional communities, and from above, through a series of government regulations (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Abramov, 2016).

Involvement in assessment for material aid continues to be a common element of social services work across the region and social work initiatives to support the deinstitutionalization of children as well as people with disabilities are also widespread (e.g. in Ukraine, Azerbaijhan and Kyrgyzstan). In Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic states, gender violence is now viewed as a societal problem rather than being simply a 'family matter' since the mid-1990s (e.g. Hawkins & Knox, 2014); and in Kazakhstan, new services have been developed for the survivors of domestic violence as well as ex-prisoners, children and adolescents in trouble. In many places, there is a beginning acknowledgment of the need for inclusive policies in services (Antonova, 2014) and the notion of 'empowerment' is entering professional practice, sometimes influenced by international partners, for example, in Russia (Borodkina, 2015).

The above factors have had significant bearing on the rate of professionalization and the shape that the professional project is taking. But problems with the project are also related to the workforce itself, including new graduates. Some students prefer to use the degree to gain entry to a masters degree in higher status subjects (e.g. sociology or psychology), while others take up posts in social work agencies but are easily deterred by low pay, poor working conditions, lack of prospects and workplace cultures where modern social work practices (including empowerment and anti-oppressive approaches) are not in evidence. The majority of social workers (or specialists in social work) in FSU countries have still not received formal education or professional training and lack the qualifications to supervise students on placement or effectively manage newly qualified social workers (see e.g. Selwyn, 2011; Zavirsek, 2014).

At the same time, not all training courses necessarily pay attention to anti-discriminatory social work principles, while where codes of ethics exist these have not yet been internalized by most agencies or individual workers. Some social work textbooks still lack critical appraisal of social problems and new social workers generally feel ill prepared for the realities they face (see, e.g. Iarskaia-Smirnova & Rasell, 2014). The literature in the students' and practitioners' first language, reflective of the local reality, is still limited especially in countries with shorter social work histories (USAID, 2008). Social work as home assistance for elderly people is still typical in public understanding of the profession and, in spite of the greater emphasis in education and legislation on non-monetary social work services, another perception of social workers – as benefits officers – persists. These perceptions and limited public expenditure underlie the low wages paid to social workers in both public and voluntary sectors and low expectations regarding their education and capabilities, discouraging newly qualified social workers from seeking employment in state social services, in countries as diverse as Russia and Azerbaijan.

In some countries, the professional project is being driven by more established national associations (e.g. Georgia) and educational programmes (e.g. Baltic countries, Russia) but for at least one respondent the future of social work is bleak: 'while the government (of Azerbaijan) is emphasizing that they need social workers … there is not yet a fertile environment for social work to grow as a profession'. Elsewhere, another respondent suggested that the status of the profession is gradually increasing and new services have been established in some places on the initiative of professional social workers working hard to promote positive changes (PEC: Snieškienė, 2015).

Finally, there is the issue of transferability of knowledge and how far international understandings of social work are compatible with the cultures, needs and resources of the region. Modern academic and practice models of social work and social policy need to be recontextualized in local conditions (PEC: Ganieva & Kim, 2011; Rajabov, 2011, p. 22f; PEC: Orozova, 2014). There are very different cultural traditions across the region as a whole (sometimes related to religious and ethnic differences) and indications of different geo-political positions, the latter most clearly evident in attitudes to foreign aid and the importation of different models of social work.

Since 1991, FSU countries have been challenged to devise new ways of delivering social welfare, giving rise to opportunities for the establishment of social work as a new profession. Notwithstanding many barriers to progress, new professional ideologies are being formed in the process of social work indigenisation (e.g. Romanov & Kononenko, 2014) and national efforts to build new welfare systems

have been supported by national and international foundations, public discussion on matters of social inequality, social exclusion and social problems, and through education, research and training activities. In many countries, important steps have been taken in implementing legislation, developing social work education and initiating professional associations indicating that, despite variable dates of establishment and rates of progress, the professional project is underway across the FSU.

Note

1. The first author sent letters by e-mail (in 2012 and 2014) to a range of national experts informing them of the wish to publish material about the development of social work in the FSU countries and asking them if they would be willing to contribute to this exercise. If agreed the experts were sent a list of 12 questions aimed at eliciting both factual and qualitative data. Many thanks are due to the following respondents who agreed to be named: Manane Petrosyan (Armenia), Dalija Snieškienė (Lithuania), Valentina Abergan (Belarus), Tamerlan Rajabov (Azerbaijan), Rahat Orozova (Kyrgyz Republic), Irina Evdokimova & Elena Plakhova (Ukraine), Zarina Kurbanbekova (Tajikistan), Zita Batori-Tartsi (Ukraine), Shakira Mukhtarova, Lyasat Kozhamkulova & Galina Sudakova (Kazakhstan) and Lyudmila Kim & Dina Isaeva (Uzbekistan). Specific contributions are cited as PECs.

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