



A seminar for social work students at the university in Kamianets-Podilskiy continues in the shelters during the rocket alert.

## Building Social Services in a Country at War

Ana Radulescu, Herbert Paulischin

Have you ever wondered what happens when the social support systems that we develop through social work are torn apart?

In moments of crisis, it's often the invisible threads of human connection that carry us forward. In Ukraine, we have learned that social work is not just about frameworks or systems; it's about relationships, about seeing and supporting the people who need us most.

For 30 months, we've walked alongside people whose lives have been shattered. We have witnessed both the fragility and the extraordinary resilience of individuals and communities in crisis. This journey has been one of profound learning—of rediscovering that the true power of social work lies not in the structures we build, but in the humanity we restore, the connections we nurture, and the hope we sustain.

Ukraine has reminded us that no matter how confident we are in our knowledge and tools, when faced with a crisis of such scale, everything must be reimagined. The systems we rely on in more stable times may not be sufficient when lives are broken and futures uncertain. Yet, it is in these moments that social work has the potential to make its most meaningful impact.

### BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY CENTERS

Have you noticed that in many countries, the principles and tools of social work are so seamlessly woven into everyday life that we may not realize their profound impact?

In our own countries, social work is embedded in the systems that protect us, the relationships that support us, and the quiet, almost imperceptible ways in which we care for one another. However, in Ukraine, social work is still finding its place. It is not yet integrated into the fabric of everyday life but resembles a mosaic – shaped by creativity, perseverance and uneven development in both urban and rural areas. In rural Ukraine, this lack of social service support becomes particularly evident. Families often face isolation and a severe lack of essential resources. Social services, along with the principles of social work that allow communities to thrive and develop together, are noticeably absent. This harsh reality highlights the urgent need for innovative solutions to address these challenges.

Responding to this need, a project funded by Eriks Development and IFSW Europe introduced the Community Social Support Center – a specially designed initiative to bring social support closer to those most in need. These

community centers have become a model for social care innovation in Ukraine. They demonstrate how resource sharing – where people exchange knowledge and skills to collectively address challenges – can empower communities. Built on the principles of responsiveness and the belief that everyone has the capacity to contribute, these centers offer a scalable approach to building community resilience where social services and social assistance are completely lacking.

These centers can be lifelines, providing essential information, conducting needs assessments, and offering social counseling. They bridge the gap between families and support systems that were previously too distant or underfunded.

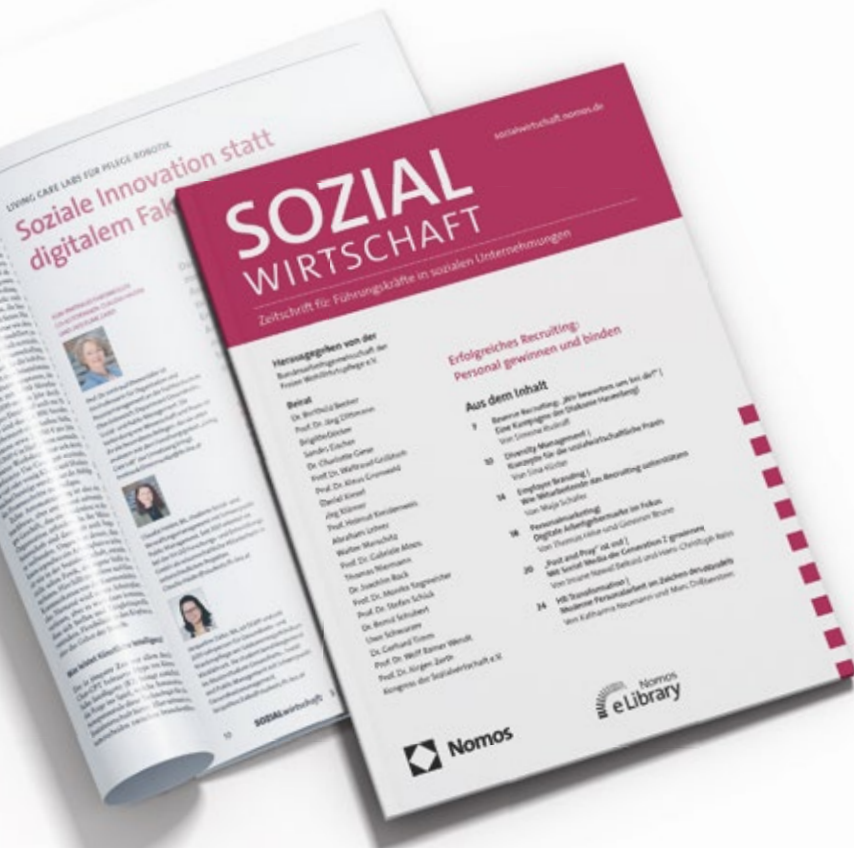
The success of these community centers in rebuilding community strength has made them a model in Ukraine. Witnessing firsthand how the core values of social work—connection, support and empowerment—can transform lives, even in the absence of fully established systems, led the Ministry of Social Policy to launch community resilience centers across the country. While the initiative is still in its early stages and significant training is needed to professionalize support, the foundation for building community support has been laid.

## IMPROVING CARE AND UNDERSTANDING FOR LESS VISIBLE VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

The human cost of the crisis in Ukraine is undeniable. Yet, what struck us most was the courage required to rebuild—not just in terms of physical space and infrastructure, but in terms of trust and relationships.

In 2024, we renovated the Senior Citizens' Center in Svancek, funded by Volkshilfe and implemented by IFSW Europe. This project was not just about improving care models; it was a vital opportunity to redefine how vulnerability is understood. In a country at war, the most visible vulnerabilities are often those directly affected by the defense process. But what about those less visible—such as people with disabilities and the elderly? The Svancek project drew attention to these often overlooked groups, emphasizing that true vulnerability is not just about physical needs, but about being seen, heard, and cared for.

The center not only provided a foundation for investing in a residential social center but also promoted a vision of a society where vulnerability is met with compassion, not neglect. Social work, at its core, is about fostering these social connections.



# Trends und Innovationen in der Sozialwirtschaft

Die Zeitschrift **Sozialwirtschaft** informiert über Trends in der Sozialwirtschaft und beantwortet Fragen der Organisation und Finanzierung sozialer Dienstleistungen.

Das Magazin stellt Persönlichkeiten und Unternehmen der Branche vor und zeigt neue Lösungen für das Führen sozialer Betriebe. Kommentare, Interviews und Glossen bieten pointierte Orientierungspunkte für die Leitungspraxis.

QR-Code scannen und direkt abonnieren!





## **BUILDING DIGNITY THROUGH THE SOCIAL SHOP PROJECT**

In a society where resources are increasingly scarce, the concept of dignity often becomes an unspoken casualty. The social shop project emerged as an innovative response to this challenge, bridging the gap between offering material support and fostering a sense of personal worth. Unlike traditional aid models that often place recipients in passive roles, the social shop empowers individuals by positioning them as active participants in their communities. The "currency" used in this store consists of cash vouchers earned through community engagement.

This initiative allows people facing economic hardships to access essential goods and services at affordable prices or through a barter system that values their contributions—be it skills, time or knowledge. At its core, the social shop is more than a place to meet immediate needs; it's a hub of community investment. By encouraging individuals to engage and contribute, the project creates an ecosystem where mutual support thrives. Those who access its services are not simply "receiving help"; they are recognized as vital contributors to the resilience and growth of their communities. This model demonstrates that dignity and support are not mutually exclusive. When we invest in structures that allow individuals to maintain autonomy and pride, even in the face of adversity, we lay the groundwork for stronger, more cohesive societies. The social shop project proves that even in challenging times, it is possible to nurture both individual resilience and collective solidarity.

## **OPENING SPACES FOR CHANGE DURING THE SEMINARS ON SOCIAL SUPPORT IN UKRAINE**

In the regional seminars we held across Ukraine, we posed a fundamental question: What kind of society do Ukrainians want to build, and what kind of support should the country provide for its most vulnerable people?

At the end of 2024, we organized regional seminars, funded by Eriks Development. These seminars brought together regional administrators and NGO teams to discuss the future of social support. They became platforms for dialogue about the necessary changes Ukraine must make to build a more resilient and compassionate society. It became evident that the country needs more than just infrastructure—it needs the courage and vision to recognize its most vulnerable citizens, identify available resources within communities and the determination to support them. Most importantly, it requires a collective belief that together, they can rebuild something stronger than what was lost.

During the seminars, we explored numerous challenges in developing effective social support systems and the strategies required to address them.

One major challenge was the lack of data collection infrastructure within local administrations. Without accurate



The students and young graduates of the Faculty of Social Work organized a party for the children of the city of Kamianets-Podilskyi on International Children's Day.

data, decision-making becomes difficult, resources are misallocated, and projects may fail to achieve their intended impact. To address this, we conducted needs assessments with children and families before providing support and making recommendations, ensuring that their voices were included in the development process.

Another challenge was the absence of a culture that actively involves those in need in designing social services. Without their input, social services risk failing to meet real needs, resulting in poor engagement and ineffective outcomes. Throughout the seminars, we emphasized the importance of meaningful engagement with people requiring support. Real change does not come from external interventions alone – people change their own lives. Our role is to ensure that support structures empower them to do so effectively.

## **THE ROAD TO SOCIAL CHANGE IN A SOCIETY STRUGGLING WITH CORRUPTION**

Ukraine envisions a society where social work drives meaningful change, but the road ahead is long and filled with obstacles. The country faces not only the aftermath of war but also systemic corruption that affects various levels of society. Despite these challenges, social work holds immense potential—not just in rebuilding infrastructure but in restoring trust, transparency and community engagement through responsiveness.

Building a strong society is about fostering relationships. It is rarely highlighted in the news and is never easy. However, in quiet moments—the exchange of ideas, the motivation to create sustainable solutions and the small acts of kindness—we find the strength to begin again. Social work is not a quick fix; it is a long-term commitment to those who need it most, grounded in the belief that change, though difficult, is possible.

## **THE ROLE OF IFSW EUROPE IN SHAPING SOCIAL WORK IN CRISIS AND WAR CONTEXTS**

During my presidency of IFSW Europe, we have witnessed firsthand how crucial the role of the organization in res-

ponding to crisis and war contexts. IFSW Europe has made a significant shift from professional representation to direct involvement on the ground, strengthening social work practices in these settings.

Initially, IFSW Europe focused on advocating for social justice and representing the social work profession. However, it soon took concrete steps to equip social workers with the necessary tools to address the complex needs arising from war and crisis situations. Ukraine, in particular, highlighted the limitations of existing structures and emphasized the necessity for social work to actively engage in and respond to conflict-related demands. This was IFSW Europe's first significant direct involvement in addressing such challenges in practice, setting a strong precedent for future actions.

Through the collective expertise and commitment of its members, IFSW Europe has demonstrated the ability to apply the principles of social work in real-world settings, embodying its core values in practice. This first direct intervention was not only a response to the immediate needs caused by the crisis in Ukraine but also a step toward reimagining how social work can function during times of war and upheaval. These efforts have contributed to the emergence of a more flexible and responsive model of social work—one that prioritizes resilience, community cohesion and long-term recovery.

### **TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS AND APPROACHES TO VULNERABILITY**

The projects launched by IFSW Europe were not merely about providing temporary solutions; they aimed to establish a more robust and inclusive social support system. In the context of war, vulnerability is often narrowly defined, focusing primarily on those directly affected by conflict.

One notable project was the renovation of the Senior Citizens' Center in Svancek, which played a crucial role in enhancing care for vulnerable populations in Ukraine. This initiative emphasized the need to look beyond the visible wounds of war and address the needs of marginalized groups, including people with disabilities and the elderly. This project broadened the perspective on vulnerability, advocating for a more inclusive approach that recognizes individuals at risk, even if they are not always visible or heard.

A key factor in the project's sustainable success is its systemic approach as a foundation for action. We viewed our target groups as part of a larger system, acknowledging both available resources and potential resistance within it. Our activities generate benefits not only for the direct beneficiaries but also for the communities in which they live. As a result, the Senior Citizens' Center in Svancek evolved into a hub offering support to the local population and fostering social inclusion.

The efforts of IFSW Europe in Ukraine mark a critical first step in transforming social work practices during crisis. These initiatives have laid the groundwork for future actions, demonstrating that social work's true power lies not only in established frameworks but also in direct, hands-on community engagement. The success of these projects has shown that rebuilding and healing is a long journey, but it begins with the courage to act and the belief that, together, we can overcome even the most profound challenges.

Social work is a transformative tool, and IFSW Europe's direct intervention in Ukraine has proven that even in the face of crisis, relationships, resilience and collective solidarity can make all the difference. This moment has set the stage for a new era in social work, where the organization's ability to respond to the needs of vulnerable populations becomes a model for others and a guideline for decision-makers in politics and public administration.

### **LESSONS LEARNED:**

- In times of crisis, it is the unseen threads of human connection that guide us through the storm.
- Social work transcends frameworks and structures; it is about building relationships, recognizing needs and providing support where it is most needed. Its true strength lies in the humanity it restores and the hope it inspires. With this approach, social work creates sustainable change.
- Social work is not a quick fix; it's a lifelong commitment to those in need, grounded in the belief that change is possible, no matter how long the journey.
- The road to rebuilding and healing may be long, but it begins with the courage to act and the conviction that, together, we can overcome the deepest challenges.

We are delighted to have been invited to write this article for SIO, the Austrian magazine for social work. Austrian support was crucial to this project. The collaboration with Volkshilfe, the financial support from "Nachbar in Not" and the personal commitment of Enric Torras (OBDS) were invaluable in making this initiative a success.

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### **Ana Radulescu and Herbert Paulischin**

Ana Radulescu and Herbert Paulischin are leading the Center for Training and Assessment in Social Work in Romania (CFCECAS), and together they are involved in a number of international projects, including the development of social services in Ukraine

