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## Social Workers in Wartime Ukraine: Between Systemic Challenges and Wartime Pressures

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### Abstract

The full-scale war in Ukraine has deeply affected the country's provision of social services, intensifying long-standing structural vulnerabilities, damaging infrastructure and increasing the need for support. Drawing on focus group discussions with visiting carers, social work specialists and managers of municipal institutions in rural, semi-urban and urban communities, the analysis presented here reveals the impact of the war on their daily work, particularly staff shortages, administrative burdens, and mobility constraints. These findings provide insight into how the wartime state relies on the invisible resilience of these workers and stress the importance that social work has for broader social policy debates.

### Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine's social infrastructure has been tested as never before. While much attention has been given to the distribution of humanitarian aid by international organisations and NGOs, the provision of social services has remained less visible in discussions of the response to the humanitarian crisis and the multiple vulnerabilities that are caused by the war.

Drawing on qualitative data collected by the end of 2023, this article offers insight into how the working conditions and daily routines of those engaged in public social service provisions in Ukrainian communities have been affected by full-scale war and how long-standing problems that characterised their work before the war evolved since February 2022. It draws primarily on findings from three focus group discussions with visiting carers, social work specialists and managers (24 participants in total)—the three most common positions within social service provision—in municipal institutions (such as territorial centres for social services and social service centres for families, children, and youth) across rural, semi-urban and urban communities in the Dnipropetrovsk, Chernihiv, Chernivtsi, Kharkiv and Kyiv regions. Most of the participants were women, as the sector is among the most feminised in Ukraine. According to the State Statistics Service, as of the end of 2021, women accounted for 89% of workers in non-residential social service provisions.<sup>1</sup> To contextualise the research findings, this article briefly reviews pre-war working conditions in this sector and the key reforms that shaped the current public social services system.

### Social Services in Ukraine at the Intersection of Structural Reforms: Pre-war Context

Social services and social assistance payments are key instruments for use in implementing social policy in Ukraine. Social services include a wide range of support, from care for older adults and persons with disabilities to assistance for families that are affected by alcohol addiction. Over the past decade, Ukraine has undergone overlapping reforms in social protection and governance that have influenced the provision of social services.

In particular, the decentralisation reform launched in 2015 transferred substantial responsibility for providing and financing social services to local authorities.<sup>2</sup> In June 2020, the government issued a decision defining the territories of 1,469 territorial communities or *hromadas*<sup>3</sup> (rural, semi-urban or urban), created through the proclaimed voluntary amalgamation of previously separate territorial units, including villages, towns and cities. This marked the completion of one of the final stages of local self-government reform, which introduced significant changes to fiscal and taxation policies intended to increase local budget revenues and expanding the mandate of local authorities. In parallel, a 2020 reform attempted to restructure the social services sector along market-oriented lines by creating a legislative framework that enabled competition among municipal, private and NGO providers for local and state budget funds.

However, although decentralisation reform was intended to promote local autonomy and improve the quality of public services, it has been widely criticised by representatives of local government—including the

1 Data obtained in response to the author's request.

2 Local authorities are responsible for ensuring the provision of 18 basic social services—such as visiting care for adults, assisted living, sign language interpretation, and social support for families in difficult life circumstances—as defined by Ukrainian law ('On Local Self-Government' and 'On Social Services').

3 *Hromada* (short for 'territorial *hromada*') refers to a self-governed municipality.

Association of Territorial Communities and the Association of Ukrainian Cities—for delays in both local government reform and budget decentralisation. These delays have resulted in responsibilities being transferred to local authorities without a corresponding transfer of financial resources (Association of Ukrainian Cities, 2020a). Notably, this issue continued to be raised even three years later (see, for instance, Drobysh, 2023). In interviews conducted by the author in 2023 with heads of *bromadas* and representatives of local social protection units, persistent problems with the financing of social services from local budgets were often cited (Lomonosova et al., 2024b, p. 46).

### Working Conditions in Social Service Provision Before 2022

While intended to promote local autonomy, decentralisation reforms in Ukraine have deepened territorial inequalities not only in access to social services but also in the working conditions of those who provide them.

The social services reform launched amid the coronavirus pandemic and disrupted by the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 has not yet been fully realised. Although it was intended to increase the presence of non-public providers, the majority of social services in Ukraine continue to be delivered by municipal institutions. Provision by private and NGO actors remains limited and unevenly developed, particularly in rural communities<sup>4</sup> (Lomonosova et al., 2024a). As local authorities typically establish municipal institutions, they are responsible for maintaining their premises, funding staff salaries and covering other operational expenses. Even before the full-scale war, the lack of financial resources in local budgets led to volatility in bonus payments—which are an important component of social workers' remuneration<sup>5</sup>—insufficient work equipment and marked disparities in working conditions between urban and economically disadvantaged rural *bromadas* (Lomonosova and Bobrova, 2020). This was particularly evident in the case of bonus payments for social workers involved in direct contact with beneficiaries and home visits, who faced a greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

This issue is especially pressing, given that over the decades, salaries in the social sector have remained among the lowest within the public sphere. Just before the full-scale invasion, in 2021, the average monthly salary in municipal institutions providing social services was 10,095 UAH (327 EUR) which is 1.7 times lower

than the national average (Main Department of Statistics in Kyiv, 2021).

Low pay is a key reason for labour shortages in the field. For example, at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the Ministry of Social Policy estimated that approximately 8,000 additional social work specialist positions were needed to address its consequences (LB. UA, 2020). However, owing to limited local budgets, municipal institutions were unable to expand their workforce. Moreover, low salaries, difficult working conditions, and significant physical and emotional demands have resulted in an ageing workforce, particularly among visiting carers. Moreover, younger people show little interest in entering the field.

Previous studies have shown that official workload standards are frequently violated in practice and overtime work is widespread among visiting carers (Lomonosova and Filipchuk, 2022). Overworking is primarily the result of insufficient staffing and the inadequacy of existing state-defined standards regarding the number of clients per worker and the time allocated per service. Another contributing factor is the daily need that many social workers face of commuting across the *bromada*. Public transport is infrequent and unreliable in many Ukrainian cities, especially in rural areas. The provision of bicycles or vehicles depends heavily on the availability of local funding and the ability of municipal institutions to attract support from donors or benefactors.

### Wartime Challenges and Increasing Workloads

The war has exacerbated long-standing problems in Ukraine's social sector, including chronic understaffing, bureaucratic overload, and underfunding.

One key impact of the war that social workers have reported is the increase in workload. In many cases, municipalities have been unable to quickly replace workers who have fled to safer regions or abroad. As a result, those who remained had to take on additional clients or work overtime without compensation. This was particularly evident in early 2022 in the case of visiting carers, who provide in-home care to individuals with limited mobility and older adults. The increased demand for visiting care for older adults is a key factor in the increasing workload. With younger relatives and neighbours fleeing hostilities, many older adults were left solely in the care of municipal social workers. Consequently, although state standards prescribe 8–10 clients in urban areas and 6–8 in rural areas, visiting carers in

4 According to the Register of Social Service Providers and Recipients, as of early 2024, private organisations were present in only 12 regions of Ukraine and the city of Kyiv. Most non-governmental and private providers, including those operating as individual entrepreneurs, are concentrated in communities centred around regional capitals. Their distribution across Ukraine's regions remains uneven.

5 Each employee's salary consists of a base wage and additional payments as stipulated by law (e.g. for years of service or other qualification category).

the focus groups reported serving 12–18 individuals in 2023. Even if these older adults were later placed in residential care facilities, visiting carers still had to provide in-home support beforehand. As one focus group participant—a manager of a municipal institution, a territorial centre for social services in a city in the Dnipropetrovsk Region—described their daily work experience in 2022: “We found ourselves in a difficult situation. [...] the workload was very high, up to 20 citizens [per visiting carer], and we had to [manage] within eight hours, but we did not work eight hours; we worked more, and the care had to be provided. [...]”

Social work specialists, who typically work with vulnerable families, face an increasing workload due to their involvement in receiving newly arriving internally displaced persons (IDPs)<sup>6</sup> at temporary accommodation sites (some of which are organised on the premises of municipal social service providers). They assisted with daily living arrangements, replacing lost documents and accessing necessary services. This eventually involved considerable administrative work, or ‘paperwork’. Focus group participants shared that, during the first months after the Russian invasion—and in some *hromadas* even longer—social workers and municipal institution managers undertook night shifts to ensure the uninterrupted reception and accommodation of IDPs arriving in large numbers. One participant, a social work specialist at a day-care centre in a city in the Dnipropetrovsk Region, described how her institution prepared to receive IDPs: “Part of our building was not heated, and some of the living conditions were not suitable. We were there both days and nights, doing everything we could in order to be able to accommodate displaced persons. [...] So already, by March 3 [2022], we had a large number of displaced persons in our facility. [...] up to 15,000 IDPs have passed through our institution [by the end of 2023].”

In addition to their active involvement in supporting IDPs, municipal social workers also reported participating in the organisation, receipt, distribution and delivery of humanitarian aid. This significantly increased their daily workload, as they were often required to take shifts at aid distribution points, warehouses and similar locations, leaving their regular tasks pending, creating a heavy burden for the following working day. A visiting carer from a city in the Chernihiv Region described the situation as follows: “Some worked during the day and others at night. [...] The next day, you are running to those [clients] you couldn’t visit the day before. Well, you cannot abandon them. [...] Well, we managed this, we helped. What else could we do? There is no other option.” The distribution of humanitarian

aid also required meticulous documentation for donors, which was often completed at home after working hours.

### Mobility and Safety Concerns

Mobility and safety concerns further constrain service provision. Disrupted public transport, damaged infrastructure and air raid alarms have created unpredictable conditions for social workers’ daily work, which usually involves considerable movement around their *hromada*.

Under conditions of martial law, public transport in many Ukrainian cities stops during air raids, disrupting visiting carers’ already demanding schedules. Workers faced even more significant challenges in communities that were temporarily occupied in 2022. Often, roads were damaged and public transport fleets were destroyed or looted by the Russian army. For this reason, public transportation networks required time to recover in the first months following occupation. During this period, social workers, like other residents, could only move around using their own vehicles (if they had them). Some visiting carers reported having to walk long distances in rural areas to reach their clients.

During air raid alerts, the focus group participants mentioned that they generally try to go to a shelter or, if this is unavailable, seek refuge in relatively safe places. It is worth underlining how this time is spent. On the basis of the evidence collected, regardless of location, social workers attempt to use their time productively, adjusting their schedules to ensure that tasks do not remain undone. “If there’s, well, a serious threat, [...] then we go down [to the shelter]. With clients. Because, for example, right now, we are writing many needs assessments [of the people who may need social services], and people are scheduled; the queue is long and even booked two or three months in advance. We can’t shift it, [...] we never just go down to the shelter to wait it out. We always keep working [...]”—this is how a social work specialist at a social service centre in a city in the Chernihiv Region described social workers’ working routine during an air raid.

### Conclusion

The full-scale war in Ukraine has intensified long-standing structural problems in the provision of social services and led to increased workloads. Despite chronic underfunding—though the increase of the minimum wage to 8,000 UAH (184 EUR) last year slightly improved the situation for visiting carers—and numerous safety risks, municipal social workers have continued to provide care and support for growing numbers of vulnerable people. Their experiences during the war reveal

6 As of the end of 2024, approximately 3.7 million people remained internally displaced due to the war in Ukraine (UNHCR, 2025). By the end of 2022, the figure was even higher, with an estimated 5.9 million internally displaced persons.

a form of resilience that remains largely invisible and undervalued in public discourse. As Ukraine plans its post-war recovery, a focus on the role and needs of social

workers in future social policy frameworks will be crucial to building a more just and sustainable welfare system in Ukrainian *hromadas*.

#### *About the Author*

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