HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL WORK IN ROMANIA: ROOTS AND PERSPECTIVES

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This study offers a brief yet in-depth historical overview of the development of the social work profession in Romania, from its beginnings to the present day. It affirms that rudimentary forms of social work have existed throughout history, and that with the emergence of specialized education in the field, the profession has evolved progressively in line with international trends. Currently, all institutional mechanisms (complete educational programs, institutions, services, legislation, and standards) are in place so that the profession can develop in a mature and standardized manner.

Keywords: *Romania; social work; education; profession; history.*

INTRODUCTION

Social work, as an activity aimed at helping others, has been a part of human history from its very beginnings to the present day; but we speak of the professionalization of the field with the emergence of education and professional standards in the field. In 2026 we mark the 130th anniversary of the founding of the world's first School of Social Work in New York, USA, in 1896 (Chaiklin 2013).

Subsequently, social work schools appeared in Europe, in Amsterdam (1899), London (1903), Berlin (1908), and Paris (1913). Around the same time, social work schools emerged in Japan (Tokyo, 1910), China (Shanghai, 1910), Australia (Sydney, 1914), Canada (Toronto, 1914), India (Bombay, 1920), South Africa (1924), and Latin America (Chile, 1925). And around the same time, the first schools of social work also appeared in our region, in Bucharest, Warsaw, Budapest, and Sofia. Today, there are over 50,000 social work schools worldwide (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, Kim 2013). In Romania, there are some universities that train social workers through bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in social work (ARACIS 2024).

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ROOTS

The evolution of social work systems was strongly influenced by a series of historical, administrative, legislative, political, and economic factors. As Buzducea (2021) points out, the national history records a systematic interest in supporting the most vulnerable people facing social exclusion since ancient times.

In most countries that were once under Byzantine influence, incipient forms of social work developed around religious institutions, with monasteries as primary providers of protection for the poor and the disabled.

In almost every historic period, the Romanian provinces had fairly well-organized emerging forms of what we later called social work systems. Thus, a historic document from the Middle Age (1365) attests to the creation by Voivode Radu Negru of a special village housing people with disabilities. Similar mentions of this village are found in a document from 1639, under the ruler Matei Basarab, which exempts this particular village from their obligations towards the lordship.

The 17th-century practice of giving the poor a penny a day from the Treasury's budget can essentially be assimilated to the minimum guaranteed income currently provided in most European countries. In the 18th century, ruler Constantin Mavrocordat (1741) issued a royal decree that excluded vulnerable people, who were unable to provide for their basic needs, from taxes and duties.

At the end of feudalism in Europe, there was a need to create an organized system to support the poor. Therefore, the European states engaged in social protection activities by developing social programs and building institutions to protect the vulnerable. These can be considered the first public social assistance institutions, as they were built and technically and financially supported by the authorities.

A child protection law was adopted in Romania in 1775. The Department of Public Episcopacy established that same year was in charge with the protection of the poor and orphans among other responsibilities.

It must be noted that rulers who developed and financially supported such social policies aimed to discourage social dependency, and countless urban legends depict the punishment of not only those who undeservedly benefited from such privileges, but also of those who had become accustomed to living in what Oscar Lewis later called the culture of poverty (Small, Harding, Lamont 2010).

In the first half of the 19th century, a period of modernization of the Romanian provinces followed. While they were being administratively reorganized, new institutions with clear social assistance duties were created, social services started to be financed by fees and taxes, and a new legislative framework was being developed. The construction of an organized social work system began in the context created by compounding adverse factors that besieged the Romanian society at the time: natural cataclysms, bad harvests, food shortages, epidemics, famines, locust invasions, and military operations in Romanian provinces. In this

context of major social tribulations affecting the Romanian provinces, crime, robbery and delinquency proliferate, yielding to fear and social insecurity.

Several princely legislative acts and decisions created a preliminary phase to the emergence of a national social work system organized and supported by the state: the prohibition of begging and vagrancy, the obligation of work for those able to work for themselves or for the community, free instruction for poor children as a means of combating poverty, granting of social aid to truly needy people on the basis of means testing, granting and ranking of aid according to the applicant's social status.

All voivodeship programs and contributions for the improvement of Romanian society are precursors of modern social work. "Alongside the guilds of chalices and the monasteries-hospitals for the poor sick and the foreigners, other initiatives include the Box of Mercy, the Orphanage, the Epitropia of the Poor Evgheniți. The functioning of the latter will be recognized and regulated by the Organic Regulations, so it does not seem out of place to consider them the embryo of modern Romanian social work" (Livadă-Cadeschi 2001, 236–237).

We can only talk about a structured, legislated and institutionalized social work system after the onset of the Organic Regulations (1831–1832) as it included explicit references to the organization and operation of the national social work system. After the Union of the Romanian Principalities (1859), a legislative framework was created to set concrete attributions for social work services at the level of counties and communes.

In 1881, a social work service was created within the Bucharest City Hall, and in 1894, the Urban Communes Reorganization Law placed the responsibility of protecting the abandoned children to the counties and communes, along with the obligation to set night shelters and communal kitchens for the unemployed.

The Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Protection created in 1920 was charged with the coordination of social work activity through the Assistance Directorate. At the same time the County Committees received the responsibility to create county and communal offices in charge with the coordination of local social work activity.

"Principesa Ileana" Higher Social Work School founded in Bucharest in 1929 was training university-level social workers. An exceptional contribution to the social work development was provided by the Sociology School of Bucharest, coordinated by professor Dimitrie Gusti who shaped and offered ongoing support to the social work at the time. Other personalities, such as Henri Stahl, Veturia Manuilă, Xenia Costa-Foru, Iuliu Moldovan also provided valuable contributions that supported the development of a social work system adapted to the very concrete needs of the Romanian society at the time. The Health and Social Protection law of 1930 created specialized offices at the county and rural level, thus developing the first community social work network.

Between 1929-1936 a Social Work newsletter was printed by "Principesa Ileana" Higher Social Work School – a tradition that restarted in 2002 by the Social Work Department at the University of Bucharest, who printed in partnership with Polirom Publishing House the Social Work Review, currently included in many international databases.

In 1936, Dimitrie Gusti coordinated the creation of the Association for Social Work Progress, a tradition resumed in 1992 by professor Elena Zamfir alongside alumni of the latest post-war social work program (Rodica Ghețău, Iolanda Moroșanu, Adriana Median) which established the Romanian Association for the Promotion of Social Work (ARPAS).

The communist period was disastrous for the Romanian social work system, which was practically abolished. In 1952, this university degree education was reduced to post-secondary level, and later, in 1969 it was definitively abolished by the communist regime whose ideology deemed social work training unnecessary.

Immediately after the Revolution in December 1989, international media extensively reported about "Ceaușescu's orphans" and the image of abandoned children who survived in inhumane conditions in orphanages, news which horrified the world. The new democratically elected government, through Cătălin Zamfir, Labour Minister at the time, laid the foundations for a new architecture of the social work system, irreversibly triggering the administrative mechanisms for change. Social Work Faculties were established in the largest university centers to train specialists, a new legislative framework had gradually emerged underpinning the social work system, and the institutional social work network was gradually re-established. Local authorities started to initiate and develop social services, a new framework for social benefits was created for the different categories of socially disadvantaged groups, and new collaborations with international institutions and development agencies (UNICEF, UNDP, World Bank, USAID) contributed to the development of social programs and social work research.

PERSPECTIVES

The Romanian National College of Social Workers (CNASR) was established in 2005 as the professional regulatory body, granting the right to practice only to those who obtain a social work bachelor's degree. The Romanian Association of Social Work Schools was set up in 2010. Both organizations are affiliated with specialized international bodies (IFSW and IASSW). Together these organizations advocate for the status of the social worker profession, educational programs aligned with the international context. They also support the improvement of social services by strengthening and professionalizing the workforce in the field.

Currently, the national social work system is administratively organized on two levels: one at the central level, and the other at the county and local level. The

role of the central level is rather to coordinate, elaborate the legislative framework, including policies and standards, monitoring and social inspection, and financing through national interest programs. The county and local level, through the county and local public administration structures, are responsible for the creation and proper functioning of the social work system: the institutional network, specialized services and benefits, hiring specialists, supporting beneficiaries, monitoring risk situations.

Currently, a new legislative package was adopted for the modernization of the national social work system, several thousand specialists with a university social work degree are employed, and the administrative decentralization reform of the system has been launched. And while there is a wide range of social benefits, we are still lacking adequate community social services.

However, while Europe has seen a vast movement to reform and decentralize the social services in the 70s and 80s of the last century, Romania's socialist-communist government almost completely abolished the national social work system (Buzducea 2022).

Regarding the educational system, according to the records of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), at the national level there are 21 universities and 38 social work bachelor degree programs, 33 master programs and 4 universities for doctoral programs in social work. The tuition capacity, which also includes the theology-social work programs, is approximately 3,000 places annually at the undergraduate level.

According to the research carried out by the National College of Social Workers (CNASR) on the social work graduates working in the field, approximately 88% of them are females, the average age is 40 and over 60% are already specialists or principals. About 80% of the social workers are employed in the public system, while 20% work in non-governmental organizations. The vast majority of the social workers (70%) are employed in urban areas and 30% in rural areas. The above data was confirmed by the labour force census in social services in Romania (Lazăr *et al.* 2023).

Therefore, while important progress has been made both in social work education and in the evolution of the social work system, there is still a lot of work to be done toward the professionalization and strengthening the social work workforce (Lazăr, Degy, Iovu 2016; Lazăr 2020). In the future, social prevention and support services should be developed at the community level, as close as possible to the needs of beneficiaries, while the inflows of social workers in the system should be consistent.

At present, the field of social work is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the complex needs and developments of society, technological advances, and a shift towards practice based on scientific evidence and cultural competence. Social work continues to face new challenges with the introduction of modern technologies and new applications in the field; yet, beyond the frameworks of

science, professional skills and competencies, social work can also be viewed as a space of culture and spirituality (Crisp 2016), and scholars now acknowledge that the late modernity we are experiencing represents not only a turning point for humanity but also a period conducive to a new renaissance in the sense of rediscovering our roots and the meaning of our existence (Hodge, Akbaș, 2026; Toledo, 2026). As this field embraces new technologies, it must also reaffirm the ethical foundations that guide our practical interventions: social justice, the dignity and uniqueness of the human being, and the development of local communities whilst respecting cultural diversity.

On the other hand, humanity is in a period of transition due to changes affecting ecosystems, such as climate change and biodiversity loss. One of the challenges lies in steering this transition towards a more sustainable future, both locally and globally.

At the same time, we can observe other major trends shaping the future of social work practice and training, including economic globalisation, the ever-changing political climate, the increasing use of technology, demographic changes and their impact on cities, as well as transformations within the academic environment.

The current international context calls for a rethinking of all social interventions in line with the times we live in (Lorenz 2026), and social work develops programs to reduce vulnerabilities, alleviate mental and emotional suffering, strengthen empathy and social solidarity, shape social protection system to people's needs, and strengthen the person, family, and community (IFSW 2022).

AI USE STATEMENT

The author confirms that no Artificial Intelligence tools were used at any stage or in any form during the preparation of this manuscript.

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Studiul de față oferă o prezentare istorică succintă, dar aprofundată, a evoluției profesiei de asistent social în România, de la începuturi și până în prezent. Subliniem faptul că au existat forme primare de asistență socială de-a lungul timpului și că, odată cu apariția învățământului specializat în acest domeniu, profesia a evoluat în concordanță cu tendințele internaționale în domeniu. În prezent, sunt funcționale toate mecanismele instituționale (programe educaționale complete, instituții, servicii, legislație și standarde) astfel încât profesia să se poată dezvolta într-un mod matur și standardizat.

***Cuvinte-cheie**: România; asistență socială; educație; profesie; istorie.*

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