

SOCIAL WORKERS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES AMIDST THE THREATS OF MILITARY CONFLICT

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Abstract

This article examines the perspectives of Latvian rural social workers concerning military threats arising from the ongoing war in Ukraine, within the broader context of public sentiments related to the conflict. The study aims to analyse the challenges faced by rural social workers amid uncertainty and the potential threat of military conflict. It focuses on three principal areas: (1) Macro-level social policy responses to the armed conflict, including challenges in service delivery; (2) The prevailing public opinion in Latvia regarding the war in Ukraine, as perceived by social workers; (3) The perspectives of rural social workers on these developments. The methodology includes desk research, an autoethnographic study, written interviews, and semi-structured interviews with social workers. The key findings highlight the rapid response to the needs of Ukrainian civilians displaced by the conflict. During the initial stages of the conflict, the primary focus was on addressing immediate crises; however, over time, attention shifted towards issues of integration. As the conflict persists, both the public and social workers in Latvia have become increasingly aware of the potential military threats facing the country. The study raises critical questions: How are rural social workers contributing to civil protection efforts? What are their experiences of working in the current conditions? These political and social challenges necessitate innovative approaches to mobilize and strategically utilize the resources and expertise of rural social workers to enhance community resilience. Living in conditions of war threat, it is important for social workers to identify information about all vulnerable groups in the municipality and to cooperate with rescuers and volunteers in providing support, if necessary.

Keywords: rural social workers, military threats, crisis solutions, rural community.

Introduction

The evolving landscape of social work policy in Latvia mirrors the contemporary complexities faced by social work worldwide. Considering the profound impacts of the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the humanitarian crisis stemming from the conflict in war-torn Ukraine, addressing these challenges necessitates a departure from micro-practice toward community-led, harm-reduction, and preventive approaches.

The study aims to analyse the social and professional challenges faced by rural social workers amid uncertainty and the potential threat of military conflict. It focuses on three principal areas: (1) macro-level social policy responses to the armed conflict, including efforts to provide humanitarian assistance while grappling with challenges in service delivery; (2) the prevailing public opinion in Latvia regarding the war in Ukraine, as perceived by social workers; (3) the perspectives of rural social workers on these developments. The study was initialized and finalized during 2024. The fieldwork was carried out in 2024 (May-December). It includes analysis of documents, statistics and data from the fieldwork. Elements of crisis intervention, narrative approaches and emergency social work theories are used as a basis for theoretical analysis. 'Emergencies—ranging from natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes to human-made crises such as terrorist attacks and industrial accidents—pose significant challenges to affected communities. The role of social workers in these scenarios is pivotal yet often underappreciated. These professionals are integral in managing the social and psychological aftermath, providing essential services that extend beyond the immediate crisis response' (Zakour & Harrell, 2003). Today, we also consider the military conflict in Ukraine an

emergency. This war, initiated by an authoritarian regime in Europe, started in 2014 and escalated with Russia's full-scale attack on its neighbouring country in 2022. Social workers usually do emergency social work in special teams, services or other organizational units.

The research questions put forward by our team were: How do social workers perceive the proximity of the threat of war? How might it affect their target groups' security, as well as chosen strategies for work? Objectives to reach the answer to it were set as (1) Substantiate the theoretical background and methodology of the study; (2) Find out what is the opinion of social workers about the threat of war in Latvia. What feelings do the proximity of the threat of war evoke? (3) Find out how the threat of war could affect social security in rural municipalities? (4) Find out social workers' viewpoint on how to ensure social security for the target group they work with on a daily basis under the threat of war.

Socio-economic and political challenges (further 'social challenges') could be defined according to United Nations (UN) as 'issues that transcend national boundaries and cannot be resolved by any one country acting alone'. Social challenges could be understood according to UN initial goals of safeguarding peace, protecting human rights, establishing the framework for international justice and promoting economic and social progress, in the seven decades since its creation the United Nations has added on new challenges, such as AIDS, big data and climate change.

The formulation and implementation of social policies in response to military conflicts are geared towards addressing the immediate and long-term needs of affected populations. Research by Gough & Woods (2004) provides a comprehensive analysis of the

various policy measures adopted by governments and international bodies to mitigate the effects of military conflicts. These policies often include emergency relief, rehabilitation programs, and reintegration initiatives for displaced populations and former combatants.

Understanding public opinion and sentiment in relation to military threats is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders involved in conflict resolution and national security. Advances in sentiment analysis and big data analytics have enabled researchers to gauge public mood and opinions effectively. The study by Pang & Lee (2008) provides a foundational understanding of sentiment analysis techniques and their applicability to analyse public opinion on military threats. Furthermore, research by Tsytarau & Palpanas (2012) delves into the methods of aggregating and interpreting large-scale opinion data from social media platforms and news sources. These studies reveal that public opinion is often influenced by media framing, governmental communication strategies, and historical context of the military threat. Governments and law enforcement agencies utilize sentiment analysis to monitor public responses to various events, enhancing national security efforts (Valsts kanceleja, 2025). The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to a significant negative sentiment towards Russia across various countries, with notable differences in sentiment between NATO and non-NATO countries (Pina, 2024). The Russian invasion also influenced public discourse on nuclear energy, with sentiment becoming more negative in response to military threats, despite a lack of polarized public argumentation (Zarrabeitia-Bilbao et al., 2023).

Social work in conflict zones has been extensively studied due to the complex and challenging environment in which social workers operate. The key challenges faced by social workers in conflict zones include 'emotional and professional stress' and 'complex interpersonal dynamics'. These challenges significantly impact both social workers and the communities they serve, necessitating targeted strategies for support and intervention. Social workers experience significant emotional stress and fear due to the violent political conflicts in their regions, which affect their well-being and professional performance. Competing national and religious identities create moral dilemmas for social workers, often testing their loyalty to universal social work values. Resilience is noted among social workers, indicating a capacity to cope despite the challenges posed by the conflict (Ramon et al., 2006). Complex interpersonal dynamics were found while working in such circumstances. Social workers in mixed ethnic communities face challenges in their relationships with colleagues, often leading to silence on political matters to maintain professionalism. The fear of discussing political issues can hinder collaboration and effective service delivery among social workers from different backgrounds. There is a need for social work training that addresses

the impact of political conflict on professional relationships and service provision (Darawshy et al., 2024).

Existing literature highlights the critical role that social workers play in providing humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, and restoring community resilience. It emphasizes the unique skills required to navigate the cultural, political, and security dynamics of conflict settings. Studies by Jones & Truell (2012) underscore the importance of cultural competence and adaptive strategies in delivering effective social work services in such volatile environments, which made true also in Latvia, when in the March of 2022 facing the first flows of Ukrainian civilians, most of them affected by war – related trauma. Additionally, Al-Krenawi (2017) discusses the impact of armed conflict on mental health and the pivotal role social workers play in trauma-informed care. Government structures, such as the Ministry of Welfare, have implemented measures to equip social workers with essential skills. Further details of this approach are provided below.

Rural social work is a specialized field within social work that focuses on the provision and organization of social services in rural areas and towns characterized by low population density and limited access to services. Rural social workers encounter similar social issues as their urban counterparts but operate in environments with weaker service provision. The challenges faced by rural social workers include limited access to services due to geographical distance, accessibility issues, larger territories, and inadequate mobility infrastructure. Social interaction patterns in rural areas differ significantly, with greater emphasis on primary social ties and less opportunity for face-to-face interactions, resulting in a reliance on secondary social ties and increased trust in neighbours and local municipalities (Greenfield & Reyes, 2015; Mair & Thivierge, 2010; OECD, 2024). Rural social work is grounded in general social work practices but adapted to the unique characteristics of rural communities. The availability of professional social workers with specialization in various social groups is often problematic in rural areas (Bela & Rasnaca, 2023). Rural social workers employ appropriate context skills and knowledge to address the needs of rural communities, where social interaction typically involves place-based familiarity, local traditions, and mutual aid. Social work practice in rural areas addresses issues of disadvantage such as remoteness, distance, transport difficulties, limited-service choices, and hidden poverty. Farming, the predominant rural occupation, no longer provides adequate earnings for many rural residents, who often find better employment opportunities in urban areas. Data from the Latvian Central Statistical Bureau indicates a decreasing trend in employment in agriculture, forestry, and fishery, from 7.2% to 6.7% between years 2019 and 2023. Additionally, industrial accidents in agriculture result in more severe injuries and fatalities compared to urban occupations, as evidenced by a survey conducted by Purdue University (Stewart, 2010).

Materials and Methods

The research design and approach of this study are qualitative. Data collection involved qualitative written interviews. Additionally, desk research and secondary survey data analysis were employed to provide an overview of background information and the exposure of social workers to problems caused by the war in a neighbouring country over the past three years. A phenomenological approach was applied to the analysis of the written interview data. This approach does not require the researcher to adopt a neutral observer position; instead, it involves viewing the situation through the eyes of the interviewees, emphasizing their everyday experiences and feelings as reflected in the quotes (Raza, 2024). Desk research was conducted on the legal provisions for Ukrainian civilians settling in Latvia because of the war in their homeland. Additionally, an autoethnographic perspective was incorporated by one of the authors, who described her position and experience as a policy implementer while working at the Ministry of Welfare and providing professional development activities for practicing social workers in 2022. This subject, which forms an essential part of the author's professional identity, was chronologically revealed to readers within a social context. Autoethnography allows researchers to make sense of their own experiences within the context of their culture and society, sharing their insights with others. It enables researchers to examine how their cultural background and personal experiences influence their understanding of the world and explore the connections between their lives and the larger cultural and social structures in which they are embedded (Chang, 2013). Micro-level semi-structured interviews with social workers were conducted. Data from 35 interviews with social welfare specialists (social workers in social services and NGOs) were analysed during August to December 2024. Criterion sampling (based on professional status) was combined with convenience sampling. All respondents were women, as most social workers in Latvia are women. It took 45 to 90 minutes for respondents to answer the questions in written form. A phenomenological approach was used for the analysis of the written interview texts (Schiek, 2022). The three main stages of analysis were: description and understanding (interpreting what respondents mean by their text), reduction (identifying the main points in their experiences), and clustering of descriptive elements.

Results and Discussion

Macro-level Social Policy Responses

Since March 2022, Latvia has demonstrated a rapid and effective response to the needs of Ukrainian civilians displaced by the conflict. Key achievements include providing accessible housing, social services, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The cornerstone of these efforts is the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians (Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 2022), which is subject to periodic amendments based

on comprehensive needs assessments and service provision monitoring. The most recent amendments were adopted by the Saeima in November 2024. On November 21, 2024, the Saeima approved amendments to the Law on Support for Ukrainian Civilians in its final reading, deciding to extend support measures for Ukrainian civilians for another year. Support for Ukraine remains a priority for Latvia. The country has provided substantial assistance to Ukraine during Russia's armed aggression, offering humanitarian and military aid and actively participating in security and economic initiatives. As before, Ukrainian civilians in Latvia will continue to receive support for housing and food at the current levels. Households hosting Ukrainian civilians will also remain eligible to apply for cost compensation. The 2025 state budget allocates €65 million for supporting Ukrainian civilians. However, even budget-grounded solidarity in service provision for war refugees with trauma is not enough: social workers in rural communities all over Latvia were confronted with common acknowledgement of lacking skills needed for the culturally sensitive and trauma-informed service provision.

One of authors tells her story from 2022. 'Idea to organize online Training for Practitioners in Trauma-Informed Care came from the Centre of Support for Adolescent, where my former student Alexandra Pavlovskaya worked. She was one to introduce Latvia with SFBT (Solution Focused Brief Therapy) in 2017 and now was approached by the global SFBT network offering free of charge online trainings Europe-wide for social workers handling support for Ukrainian civilians fled from war. It was rather easy to convince my ministerial supervisors of the necessity and justification, so the project started smoothly. Recognizing the importance of culturally sensitive care for conflict-affected individuals, a series of online training sessions was organized for clinical practitioners. This initiative, supported by the Ministry of Welfare, included six sessions led by esteemed professionals in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). I was one to coordinate the sessions with trainers and collect feedback from participants. Trainers such as Mark Gardiner, Criss Iveson, Carolyn Emanuel, and Guy Shennan introduced participants to trauma-informed practices for working with Ukrainian refugees. This training equipped social workers with the tools to support individuals experiencing trauma, with implications for preparedness in the event of similar challenges in Latvia. We have trained 131 persons from all over Latvia, and feedback was high in appreciation for a new knowledge and competencies they acquired'.

Public Opinion in Latvia: perceptions of the war in Ukraine

Understanding the general sentiment of the Latvian population is critical for contextualizing social work initiatives. Recent public opinion data from March

2024, compared to surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023, reveal shifting attitudes:

- **Perceived Safety and Threats:** Approximately 34.6% of respondents feel secure due to Latvia's NATO membership, though perceptions of military threat have increased. In spring 2022, 39.2% felt safe from direct military threats; by March 2024, this figure declined to 32.8%.

- **Concerns about War:** While 14.5% believe a Russia-NATO conflict is inevitable in the coming years, 11.5% foresee a Russian attack on a Baltic state.

- **Fear and Anxiety:** Experiences of fear related to nuclear war or invasion have decreased since 2022. In March 2024, 27.3% reported fear of nuclear war, down from 48.1% in 2022, while 21.1% feared foreign troop invasions, down from 46%. However, 20% still experience constant anxiety.

- **Support for Ukraine:** Support for Ukrainian war refugees has grown, with 60.1% of respondents favouring refugee reception, up 8.1 percentage points from 2023. Additionally, 56.3% support Ukraine until it defeats Russia, believing this helps protect the European Union (54.6%) and Latvia (53.6%).

- **War Fatigue:** A significant portion of the population (44.7%) reports fatigue from war-related news, and 43% express a desire to disengage from it (Valsts Kanceleja, 2025).

Since February 24, 2022, Latvia has invested €234 million in assistance to war refugees. Since February 24, 2022, 46,994 people have arrived in Latvia from Ukraine, of whom 32,304 are currently residing in Latvia. At the end of last year, support for Ukraine and belief in its victory increased, according to a public opinion poll commissioned by the State Chancellery. 61.7% of Latvians agree that they will support Ukraine until it wins the war against Russia. This compares with 50.7% in June 2024 and 53.8% in September - an increase of 11% since June (Valsts Kanceleja, 2025). The results show that 64.2% of the Latvian population want Ukraine to win the war against Russia, compared to 59.2% in June 2024 and 60.6% in September. Since June, there has been an increase of almost 5%. The number of people who agree that Ukraine can win the war has also increased. While in June last year 47.7% and in September 48.9% of respondents were convinced of Ukraine's ability to win, at the end of the year 51.5% of respondents were convinced. The share of people who agree that by helping Ukraine we are protecting Latvia from war has also increased significantly. The latest data shows that 64.2% of respondents agree. Last June, 51.7% agreed with this statement, while in September 53.3% agreed. Since June, confidence in the role of assistance to Ukraine in Latvia's security has increased by 12.5% (Valsts Kanceleja, 2025). The survey shows that the proportion of people who are tired of news about Russia's war in Ukraine and do not want to know about it has decreased. In June, 40.9% of the population expressed fatigue, in September 46.9%, and at the end of the year 38%, or almost 9% less. Moreover, when

asked what topics are most interesting to them at the moment, most respondents, 37.9%, said they were interested in the Russian war in Ukraine. The survey was conducted online by Berg Research on behalf of the State Chancellery from 15 October to 24 November 2024 and was attended by 1,009 Latvian citizens aged 18 to 74 (Valsts Kanceleja, 2025).

Perspectives of Rural Social Workers

The analysis of semi-structured interviews reveals the following trends. The questions answered by respondents were divided into three main blocks: (1) What is the opinion of social workers about the threat of war in Latvia? What feelings does the proximity of the threat of war evoke? (2) How could the threat of war affect social security in rural municipalities? (3) What is the viewpoint of social workers on how to ensure social security for the target group they work with daily under the threat of war? The heuristic phenomenological approach to reading and understanding the interview texts allowed the authors to identify the main categories for analysing the experiences of social workers. The categories chosen by the authors (after describing and understanding the text) for linking the personal and professional experiences of social workers amidst the threat of war were empathy, denial, reflection, and action. The introductory part of the interviews includes the previous experiences of social workers working with Ukrainian refugees during the initial stages of the conflict in Ukraine. The first problems faced by social workers in rural areas of Latvia were related to refugees (civilian citizens from Ukraine). Most of the refugees were women, mothers with one or more children. Some of the refugees had dramatic experiences, including abuse and the consequences of trauma. 'Many survivors of abuse who suffer from PTSD have difficulty performing routine daily activities, let alone adapting to new circumstances' (SW, Talsi). Social workers must work with people who suffer from traumatic experiences or abuse. The necessary social work approach in working with refugees from Ukraine was crisis intervention. In the following stages of the work, social inclusion issues came to the fore. 'Not everyone is able to overcome severe losses equally quickly and regain the ability to actively shape their lives. This is especially true for people who have experienced severe injuries or the loss of loved ones because of the war. The traumatic experience of the injured and bereaved is a challenge for social workers who have not dealt with it before. We must live on' (SW, Aluksne). As hostilities in Ukraine continue for the third year, with disturbing news of battles and civilian casualties every day, there is a sense that the war is moving closer to Latvia. This creates anxiety, insecurity, and reflections on the role of social workers. The authors reread the interview texts. During coding, empathy, denial, reflection, and action were identified as the main categories that allowed for combining blocks of text.

Social workers feel *empathy* towards the target group they are involved with in their everyday work. They feel empathy towards family members, children, husbands, parents, and even domestic animals. They are also concerned about the possible general situation and all vulnerable people. 'When thinking about the threat of war, the conversation about safe shelters and how potential people will be provided with necessities in their area is important. What will happen to those residents who cannot cope with such situations on their own – elderly seniors, children in out-of-home care, people with limited mobility, people with mental disorders?' (SW, Cesis). Social workers are concerned if these (vulnerable) groups are precisely identified, and if there is a support plan that considers the needs of these individuals in case of emergency. What will happen to medical appliances and drugs, the availability of financial resources, necessities (food, hygiene products, drinking water, batteries)? Of course, their own family and its safety worries the respondents, especially those who are involved in the national guard and who may have to fulfil their duties at the place of duty while leaving the children in the care of other family members.

Denial? Denial is one of the defence mechanisms that people use in crisis situations. It is often easier not to think about danger, threats, and to cling to easier-to-solve issues and everyday responsibilities. 'Thinking about the threat of war, for me as a mother and a social worker, the first emotional reactions are denial, fear, hope, difficulty accepting the threat, empathy, and compassion for myself, family, society, animals, nature' (SW, Bauska). We could observe that society is somewhat used to the threat of war, but how we will act if it really happens is not thought of. 'Like ostrich politics, I also live in denial for my part, because there is a lot of resistance to developing this thought. To be honest, I don't like to think about this, but you must be ready for everything, but emotionally it's hard' (SW, Jēkabpils).

Reflection? Reflection is a crucial skill in the social work profession, necessary for understanding both short-term and long-term relationships formed with the people they encounter and the situations they deal with. 'The onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022 compelled Latvia to consider the potential threats of war in Latvia and other neighbouring countries of the aggressor more intensively. In my opinion, the war as a possible disaster has been ingrained in the minds of every resident of Latvia for a very long time' (SW Olaine). The availability of information about emergencies, particularly war, and the information necessary for professional duties is a significant concern for social workers. Although it seems impossible to prepare for such events, psychological preparation and information about action plans are extremely necessary. 'War is a tragic event that brings enormous negative changes and destruction, obliterating everything that the country, community, family, and individual have built up to this point. Thanks to social media, we all now see and understand

what war truly looks like. The threat of war brings all of this to mind and can affect the course of a person's life' (SW, Bauska district). The feeling of insecurity created by the possible threat of war promotes a reorientation of basic needs and actions that are not clear and predictable. 'This insecurity leads people to avoid taking risks and fulfilling their desires, which worsens their mental health and increases feelings of social insecurity' (SW Limbazi). Negative experiences without intervention tend to lead to other negative experiences, creating chains-of-risk (SW Valka). 'War is a disaster in which crime thrives, including human trafficking. In my opinion, this issue affects not only those already identified as victims of human trafficking but all members of society' (SW, Gulbene). *Action?* Action is an integral part of the social work profession, involving solving complex situations, respecting the values of social work, and supporting people's life prospects. Social workers emphasize their professional needs for emergencies in situations of war. We need 'a crisis management plan that explains the provision of social services in emergency situations and the continuity of basic services, including evacuation scenarios, which must be known to every citizen. During Covid, remote forms of communication were used, raising questions about the availability of the internet and how to address and promote the digitization of social services, as well as concerns about data protection' (SW, Aizkraukle). Greater emphasis should be placed on the decentralization of social services, as centralized systems may be disrupted during wartime. Therefore, more focus should be placed on municipalities and cities.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews reveals several key trends. Social workers express empathy towards the target group they are involved with in their everyday work, including family members, children, husbands, parents, and even domestic animals. They are also concerned about the possible general situation and all vulnerable people. Denial was identified as one of the defence mechanisms that people use in crisis situations, often leading to a reluctance to think about danger and threats. Reflection was highlighted as a crucial skill in the social work profession, necessary for understanding both short-term and long-term relationships formed with the people they encounter and the situations they deal with. Action is an integral part of the social work profession, involving solving complex situations, respecting the values of social work, and supporting people's life prospects.

Social interaction in a professional environment, as well as cooperation with professionals from other sectors, is a prerequisite for successful social work in emergency conditions. Also, during the threat of war. Latvian social work professionals are preparing to carry out social work at both the macro and micro levels. The question of work forms and coverage (how to reach each employee and consider the specifics of each target group) is debatable. The sense of security of social workers is sometimes threatened by previous

experience of informative cooperation and data security solutions. A heuristic approach is the mode of how to simplify social interaction patterns in emergency situations.

Conclusions

1. The Latvian state serves as a model for European nations in providing continuous and stable support for Ukrainian civilians. Additionally, Latvia has promptly implemented training programs of trauma-informed clinical social work for social work practitioners. Public opinion in Latvia remains supportive of the Ukrainian cause, advocating for either victory or sustainable peace.
2. Findings indicate that a more intensive involvement of the state, specifically the Ministry of Welfare, in the development of community social work in rural areas is essential to ensure safer environments for the rural population.
3. Greater emphasis should be placed on the decentralization of social services, as centralized systems may be disrupted during wartime. Therefore, more focus should be placed on municipalities and cities. This includes the implementation of early warning systems and community mobilization in situations of environmental disasters, crises, or military threats.
4. Municipal planners should collaborate closely with social service agencies to address these tasks, as the role of community organizer aligns well with the competencies and skills of community social workers.

Furthermore, advanced training in crisis intervention and trauma handling is necessary for all municipal social workers.

5. The primary challenges encountered by social workers in conflict zones, as previously emphasized by the authors, encompass both 'emotional and professional stress'. Social workers endure significant emotional distress and fear due to the violent political conflicts in their regions. The findings indicate a substantial level of professional stress among the respondents, with anxiety and insecurity being experienced daily. Nevertheless, in terms of building resilience, there is a demonstrated commitment and readiness to support the local population. The authors present evidence-informed hope for the capacity to cope and extend assistance to community members despite the challenges posed by potential or ongoing conflicts.
6. Cooperation between social workers and other state and local government structures in the event of a crisis must be mutual, otherwise vulnerable groups may be left without support.

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