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INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL WORK WITH REFUGEES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINE, THE EU AND KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract. Large-scale migration flows caused by the armed conflict in Ukraine have exacerbated the need for systematic social work with refugees. In a crisis, the institutionalization of social services plays an important role in ensuring that refugees have access to social support and are integrated into the host society. In Ukraine and the countries of the European Union (EU), there are organized mechanisms for helping refugees, including state structures, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international humanitarian agencies. These institutions ensure the coordination of social services, the provision of housing, medical and psychological assistance, and promote the social adaptation of refugees. In Kazakhstan, on the contrary, there is no system of social work with refugees, and assistance to Ukrainian migrants was provided mainly by volunteers and NGOs without a clear algorithm of actions. The lack of institutional coordination has led to fragmented social services and uneven distribution of assistance among refugees.

This study is devoted to a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of social work with refugees during the crisis period. The article discusses the legal and organizational aspects of the provision of social services in Ukraine, the EU and Kazakhstan, analyzes the degree of involvement of social workers and NGOs in the process of helping refugees. The study is based on the analysis of legal documents, international refugee support programs and empirical data on the practice of social work in these regions.

The results of the study reveal institutional differences in social work with refugees: in the EU and Ukraine, this activity is part of the system of social services, in which both state and NGOs are actively involved, and in Kazakhstan it is spontaneous. The lack of coordination between government agencies and NGOs, the lack of professional support and reliance on volunteer initiatives create barriers to the social adaptation of refugees.

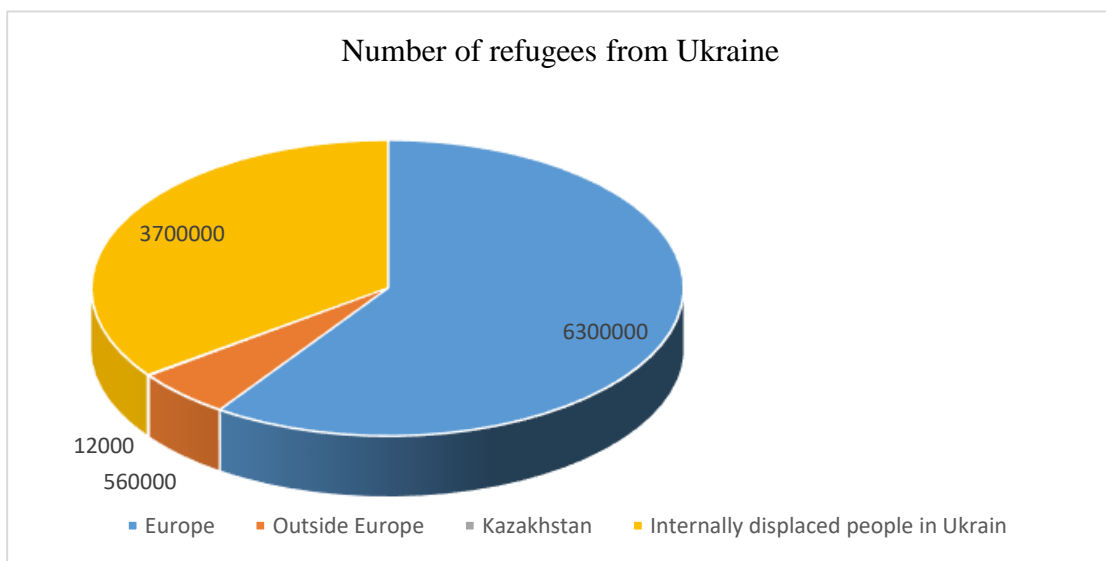
Keywords: migration, social work, NGOs, institutionalization, social services, refugees, integration.

INTRODUCTION

Emergencies and crises occurring in the world have a significant impact on the well-being of society and social stability. Every year, countries face various challenges that require a comprehensive and systematic approach to solving them. Recent global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and related losses, socio-political upheavals such as protests and elections in the United States, the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the migration crisis, the January events in Kazakhstan, as well as Russia's war against Ukraine, have significantly affected social policy and migration processes.

Institutionalizing social work is an important step in responding effectively to these crises. The armed conflict in Ukraine has caused the largest migration crisis in Europe since World War II. According to the UNHCR, by 2025, more than 6.9 million Ukrainians have been forced to leave the country, of which 6.3 million are in Europe, and 3.7 million have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine (UNHCR Central Asia, 2025).

Figure 1. Number of refugees from Ukraine in 2025



Note: Compiled on the basis of UNHCR

EU countries have implemented various measures for the integration of refugees, including temporary protection mechanisms, the provision of social services and the active involvement of social workers in this process. In Ukraine, social work with IDPs remains an important part of state policy, implemented in cooperation with international organizations.

In contrast, the situation in Kazakhstan is significantly different. There is no institutionalized social work with refugees, and assistance to Ukrainian migrants was provided mainly by volunteers and non-governmental organizations without clear

coordination and a structured algorithm of actions. Social workers were not involved in this process, resulting in an uneven distribution of assistance and limited access to social services for refugees.

The issue of institutionalizing social work with refugees is relevant not only in the context of crisis response, but also in terms of the long-term integration of migrants. This article provides a comparative analysis of approaches to social work with refugees in Ukraine, the EU and Kazakhstan. Institutional mechanisms for the provision of social services, the role of NGOs in supporting refugees and structural barriers to the development of social work with migrants in Kazakhstan are considered.

The study is based on the analysis of legal documents, international refugee assistance programs, as well as social work practices in these regions. The results obtained will allow us to identify possible ways to develop social work with refugees in Kazakhstan, taking into account international experience.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the institutionalization of social work with refugees in Ukraine, the EU and Kazakhstan, to identify differences in approaches, to determine the role of social workers and NGOs, as well as to study the problems arising in the context of the crisis. The study is aimed at identifying gaps in the refugee assistance system in Kazakhstan and developing possible ways to institutionalize it, taking into account international experience.

Tasks:

- explore institutional arrangements for social work with refugees in Ukraine and the EU, including public policies and NGO involvement;
- analyze the situation in Kazakhstan, where assistance to refugees was provided mainly by volunteers and NGOs without a structured system;
- compare the effectiveness of refugee support mechanisms in Ukraine, the EU and Kazakhstan, identifying key differences and challenges;
- assess the role of NGOs in providing assistance to refugees and their interaction with government agencies in different regions;
- to develop recommendations for the institutionalization of social work with refugees in Kazakhstan based on international experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Modern migration processes require an integrated approach to social work with refugees. The institutionalization of social support in different countries demonstrates the variability of approaches: in the EU it is based on developed intersectoral strategies, in Ukraine it mainly remains part of state policy implemented in cooperation with international organizations. In Kazakhstan, the situation is radically different: there is no institutionalized social work with refugees, and assistance to Ukrainian migrants was provided mainly by volunteers and non-governmental organizations without clear coordination and algorithm of actions. Social workers were not involved in this process, which led to an uneven distribution of assistance and limited access to social services for refugees.

The issue of institutionalizing social work with refugees is relevant not only in the context of crisis situations, but also in terms of the long-term integration of migrants. This article provides a comparative analysis of approaches to social work

with refugees in Ukraine, the EU and Kazakhstan. Institutional mechanisms for the provision of social services, the participation of NGOs in supporting refugees and structural barriers to the development of social work with migrants in Kazakhstan are considered.

One of the main factors for the successful adaptation of refugees is access to medical and social services. In the EU, routine vaccination of Ukrainian migrant children demonstrates a systematic approach to integration, ensuring disease prevention and social inclusion (Lewtak et al., 2024). However, the level of health literacy among migrants remains low, which complicates the decision-making process for vaccination and medical care. In addition, the development of predictive models of migration flows plays an important role in the planning of social work. As Mehrab et al. note, understanding the dynamics of forced migration is key to effective policymaking and humanitarian assistance. The introduction of agent-based models makes it possible to predict the needs of refugees and adapt social support measures depending on conflict scenarios (Mehrab et al., 2024).

Non-governmental organizations play an important role in the integration of refugees, especially in countries with limited public resources. In Moldova, they compensate for gaps in public policy by providing assistance to refugees at different levels. József et al. emphasize that despite the active participation of civil society, there is a lack of a comprehensive overview of the NGO ecosystem and their financial sources, which creates a gap in coordination and synergy. This confirms the need to develop clear mechanisms for interaction between the state and civil society in social work with refugees, ensuring the stability of funding and a clear distribution of roles between various structures (József et al., 2025).

The integration of refugees into the labour market remains one of the most difficult tasks, even with legal guarantees. Despite legal rights, two-thirds of Ukrainian migrants in Western Europe remain unemployed (Gorbach et al., 2024). The main reasons for this are the lack of language and soft skills, the lack of social capital, as well as gender factors, such as the high proportion of single mothers among refugees. Krivonos notes that forced displacement is not only a crisis episode, but also a struggle to sustain life, in which migrants are forced to balance employment and caring for families (Krivonos, 2025). Thus, the institutionalization of social work should take into account the support of family structures and the elimination of gender imbalances in migration policy, providing refugees not only with access to the labor market, but also with opportunities for social adaptation.

Polish citizens and non-governmental organizations provided spontaneous assistance from the very beginning, but with the growing number of refugees, there was a need for a systematic national approach. The Polish government provided transportation, housing, and social services, and civil society played a key role in organizing support. In the village of Nekelka, the local community organized fundraising, provided housing and facilitated the employment of refugees. However, long-term challenges such as volunteer burnout and lack of funding underscore the need for sustainable government solutions (Romaniuk et al., 2024).

Kazakhstan, as one of the host countries in Central Asia, faces complex challenges in the field of migration. According to the Ministry of Labor, as of September 1, 2024, there were 368 asylum seekers and 310 officially recognized

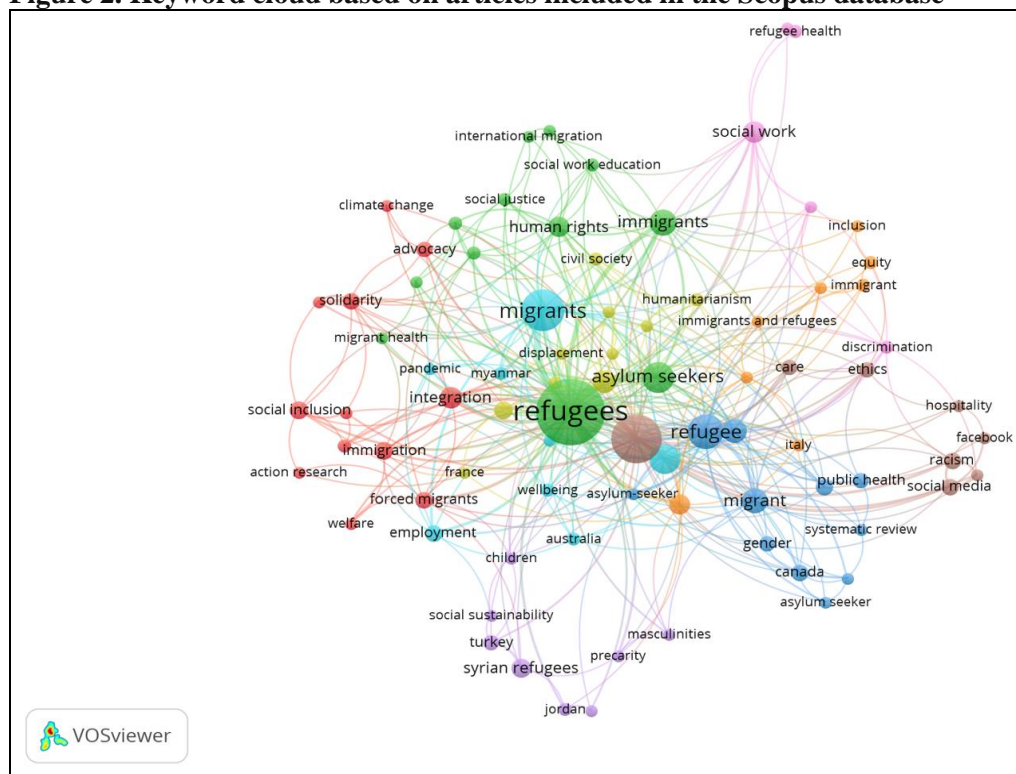
refugees in the country. Most of them live in Almaty, which requires additional measures for their social adaptation. In recent years, Kazakhstan has taken steps to ensure the rights of refugees on an equal basis with citizens of the country. In 2023, the Ministry of Labour and the UN Refugee Agency signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at improving migrants' access to healthcare, education and social assistance. This inclusive approach can serve as an example for other countries in the region seeking to effectively integrate refugees into society (UNHCR Central Asia, 2023).

The analysis shows that the institutionalization of social work with refugees requires an integrated approach. First, there is a need to expand access to health and social services, which includes improving health literacy among migrants and removing language barriers. Secondly, strengthening the interaction between the state and civil society will create clear mechanisms for financing and coordinating NGOs. Third, the development of labour integration programmes should include the introduction of language courses, vocational training and support for family structures. Finally, international cooperation, adaptation of the best practices of the EU and the UN will help to form sustainable mechanisms for the social protection of refugees, contributing to their successful integration into the host society.

The analysis of keywords based on articles published in the Scopus database made it possible to identify several dominant areas in the study of social work with migrants and refugees. Considerable attention is paid to issues of social inclusion, including access to education, health care and employment, as well as the impact of crisis situations (COVID-19 pandemic, wars, economic instability) on the situation of migrants. Human rights, social protection and social justice are also important aspects, which points to the need to develop and implement more effective social work policies at the national and international levels. Separately, it is worth noting the importance of research related to the mental health and well-being of migrants, as well as the study of the gender aspects of migration, including the problems of violence and discrimination.

As part of the study, an analysis of scientific publications presented in the Scopus database over the past 5 years was carried out. Particular attention was paid to articles related to social work with migrants and refugees, as well as studies related to Ukraine, Kazakhstan and the European Union. Based on the results of the analysis, 357 scientific works were identified, which consider various aspects of social work with migrants and refugees.

Figure 2. Keyword cloud based on articles included in the Scopus database



Note: compiled by the authors on the basis of articles published in the Scopus database

An analysis of social work with migrants and refugees in Kazakhstan, Ukraine and the EU countries revealed significant differences in institutional approaches, legal regulation and implementation of social support. Since Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the European Union has shown a swift response and solidarity by providing multi-layered support to refugees. For the first time in its history, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive, which allowed member states to establish common legal rules to regulate the mass arrival of people.

As part of this policy, the European Commission coordinated the interaction between EU states, monitoring the situation on the ground and preventing threats such as trafficking in human beings. The Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), which oversees the Solidarity Platform, has played an important role. This mechanism brings together EU Member States, international partners and EU institutions to implement the Directive and share data.

In addition, the EU Migration Crisis Preparedness and Response Plan allows for the analysis of refugee flows and the development of effective responses. Together, these instruments provide Institutional support and adaptation to internally displaced persons in the EU countries.

Against the backdrop of the EU model of refugee support, it is pertinent to examine the institutional mechanisms of social work with forced migrants in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Unlike the EU, which operates within a well-defined regulatory framework, Ukraine has faced the challenge of adapting its legislation and infrastructure to accommodate the internal displacement of millions of citizens. Kazakhstan, in turn, is developing its own system of social support while taking into account distinct geopolitical and legal contexts.

In Ukraine, the policy of social support for refugees is regulated by a number of legislative acts, including the Law «On refugees and persons in need of additional or temporary protection». In 2024, Ukraine's social security legislation codified key principles for supporting internally displaced persons, emphasizing social integration, access to education, medical and legal services. Despite the significant number of internally displaced persons, the social assistance system faces challenges such as insufficient funding, overburdened social services, and a lack of specialized integration programs. At the same time, Ukrainian authorities actively cooperate with international organizations such as the UN, UNHCR, and UNICEF, facilitating the development of targeted support programs.

Kazakhstan ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol in 1999, marking a significant step in the development of a national framework for refugee regulation. In December 2009, Kazakhstan adopted the Law «On Refugees», which came into force in January 2010. Along with the Law «On the legal status of foreigners», it serves as the primary regulatory act defining the legal status of refugees in the country.

Kazakhstan's legislation guarantees refugees a range of rights, including access to healthcare, judicial protection, and the freedom to work and engage in entrepreneurial activities. Asylum seekers are also entitled to free translation services, information on the status determination procedure, the right to appeal government decisions, and protection from deportation while their application is under review. However, certain gaps remain that require improvement. For instance, the legislation does not fully address cases in which a child born in Kazakhstan to foreign citizens fails to acquire citizenship from either parent, potentially leading to statelessness.

A distinctive feature of the Kazakh model is the strong role of non-governmental organizations, which actively cooperate with the state to provide assistance to refugees. Unlike the EU, Kazakhstan has yet to develop a comprehensive system of social inclusion for this population group, highlighting the need for further reforms.

In 2024, the introduction of Kazakhstan's Social Code enhanced mechanisms for supporting refugees, including access to medical care, education, and temporary employment. The Social Code contains a dedicated chapter on social workers. However, it is noteworthy that other legislative acts concerning migrants and refugees do not explicitly mention social work. Despite the presence of a legal framework regulating refugee status in Kazakhstan, the primary provision of assistance to internally displaced persons is currently undertaken by volunteer initiatives and NGOs. Amid the escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has served as both a transit country for many Ukrainian refugees and a temporary refuge for certain population groups in urgent need of assistance.

Volunteers and non-governmental organizations have played a key role in providing social support, including organizing humanitarian aid, facilitating the temporary resettlement of refugees, offering medical assistance – including support for HIV-positive individuals – providing legal aid for legalization and document acquisition, as well as translating materials and offering informational support.

Real examples of volunteer work include resettling families, assisting children affected by war, organizing fairs to support refugees, securing housing for families with disabled members, and facilitating employment opportunities. Humanitarian aid was also provided to the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and women with children.

In particular, volunteers in Kazakhstan assisted refugees arriving from Ukraine by helping them with the legalization process. For instance, Kazakh citizens who had lived in Ukraine for an extended period and returned to Kazakhstan due to the military conflict faced challenges in obtaining documentary confirmation of their non-possession of Ukrainian citizenship. Volunteers and NGOs supported them by submitting requests to Ukrainian government agencies, liaising with embassies, and providing legal consultations.

Thus, social work with refugees in Kazakhstan largely relies on civil society initiatives, which, at critical moments, assume the role of supporting and integrating forced migrants. However, this situation underscores the need to strengthen the state assistance system for refugees and expand cooperation with international organizations to enhance the effectiveness of social adaptation mechanisms.

Despite active support efforts, EU countries face several challenges, including language barriers, limited employment opportunities, and increasing social tensions. In some countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, external funding for refugee assistance is gradually declining, complicating the implementation of long-term social integration programs.

The European Union is implementing comprehensive measures to integrate refugees through the Common Temporary Protection Mechanism introduced in 2022. While EU countries adopt diverse approaches to institutionalizing social work with refugees, key areas of focus include access to housing, healthcare, employment, and educational programs. The Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia host significant numbers of refugees from Ukraine, providing support through national and pan-European initiatives. As of 2024, the Czech Republic has registered 390,000 Ukrainian refugees, implementing programs for social inclusion, medical support, and rights protection. Additionally, the «PORT» center for survivors of violence has been established, and national referral pathways have been developed to enhance support for victims. Poland, which has accommodated approximately 998,000 Ukrainian refugees, is actively implementing social adaptation mechanisms, including mandatory schooling for refugee children and financial assistance for vulnerable groups.

Analyzing the systems of social work with refugees in Ukraine, the EU, and Kazakhstan, several key trends can be identified. European countries have more developed mechanisms for institutionalizing social assistance, enabling them to respond effectively to migration crises. Ukraine is actively working to improve its refugee protection system but faces resource constraints. Kazakhstan, in turn, is in the

early stages of developing an effective model of social work with refugees but is making significant strides in this direction.

The development prospects of this field require a comprehensive approach, including the strengthening of interstate cooperation, increased funding for social work, and the active participation of non-governmental organizations. A key area of focus is the digitalization of social services, which would facilitate access to assistance and enhance its effectiveness. Additionally, the implementation of social adaptation programs, language courses, educational initiatives, and psychological support for refugees would be a crucial step in reinforcing the social protection of this population group.

Thus, the institutionalization of social work with refugees remains a pressing challenge for states. However, successful examples from the EU can serve as a foundation for developing national programs in Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

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ІНСТИТУАЛІЗАЦІЯ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ РОБОТИ З БІЖЕНЦЯМИ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ДОСВІДУ УКРАЇНИ, ЄС ТА КАЗАХСТАНУ

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Анотація. Масштабні міграційні потоки, спричинені війною в Україні, загострили потребу в системній соціальній роботі з біженцями. Під час кризи інституціоналізація соціальних послуг відіграє важливу роль у забезпеченні доступу біженців до соціальної підтримки та інтеграції в суспільство задля їх підтримки. В Україні та країнах Європейського Союзу (ЄС) організовані механізми допомоги біженцям, зокрема працюють державні структури, неурядові організації (НУО) та міжнародні гуманітарні агентства. Ці установи забезпечують координацію соціальних послуг, надання житла, медичної та психологічної допомоги, сприяють соціальній адаптації біженців. У Казахстані, навпаки, відсутня система соціальної роботи з біженцями, а допомогу українським мігрантам надавали переважно волонтери та громадські організації без чіткого алгоритму дій. Відсутність інституційної координації призвела до фрагментації соціальних послуг і нерівномірного розподілу допомоги серед біженців. Дане дослідження присвячено порівняльному аналізу механізмів соціальної роботи з біженцями в кризовий період. У статті розглядаються правові та організаційні аспекти надання соціальних послуг в Україні, ЄС та Казахстані, аналізується ступінь залучення соціальних працівників та громадських організацій до процесу допомоги біженцям. Дослідження ґрунтується на аналізі правових документів, міжнародних програм підтримки біженців та емпіричних даних практики соціальної роботи в цих регіонах. Результати дослідження виявляють інституційні відмінності соціальної роботи з біженцями: в ЄС та Україні ця діяльність є частиною системи соціальних послуг, до якої активно залучаються як держава, так і громадські організації, а в Казахстані вона має стихійний характер. Відсутність координації між державними органами та громадськими організаціями, відсутність професійної підтримки та опори на волонтерські ініціативи створюють перешкоди для соціальної адаптації біженців.

Ключові слова: міграція, соціальна робота, НГО, інституціоналізація, соціальні послуги, біженці, інтеграція.

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