

THE ROMANIAN SOCIAL WORKER FACING CHALLENGES AND MEETING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION¹

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This article analyzes to what extent the classical role of the Romanian social worker has been modified in relation to the challenges and also to the opportunities provided by the European Union. As a State Member from 1st of January 2007, Romania has been obliged to authentically reform the old labour environment to a powerful and capable system closer to that in the western countries. An analysis is provided regarding the modification of the therapeutical function in the context in which the social worker has to adopt new strategies towards the traditional Romanian beneficiaries who haven't changed.

***Keywords:** social care assistant, role, social change, European funds, management skills, working strategies, social policies, Public Policies.*

INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER SPECIALIST IN PUBLIC POLICIES

The Romanian Social Services meet nowadays the chance of attracting significant investments, which would facilitate a beneficial development, still having the freedom of their own ideas. The direct involvement of the social worker on strategizing implies adopting managerial skills, which would lead to achieving new objectives. Has the social worker nowadays achieved management and modern entrepreneurship skills? Is his hybrid role able to develop methods and working strategies which could meet new challenges? Observing the recent evolution of this profession during the last years, the hereby article tries to provide answers to all these questions, through capturing both practical and theoretical

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aspects of this profession. Performance and excellence in social welfare activity are gained through continuous symbiosis between the practical and theoretical sphere. If, on the theoretical side, we find the same general principles, in the legal part the law may slightly differ, while field experiences and specializations vary, depending on the social context. However, there are certain freedoms that allow the social worker nowadays to become also a good manager who develops his own social policies, in order to find effective working strategies. Therefore, we are in a transforming state and change of role of the social worker, which was partly already announced through the requested changes by the Community Care Act, 1992. Why were these changes necessary? The main reason came from the need to train and better manage specific stages of a financed project by borrowing a part of their management activity. Even under these circumstances, the classical role of the social worker as a therapist was not deeply affected, as long as the contact with the beneficiary still remains the main activity of any social practitioner.

Romania, member of the European Union starting with 1st of January, 2007, receives the right to draw significant and nonrefundable European funds, in order to develop a part of public and social policies. Nevertheless, this new funding type and the change in working practices brought along some of the social worker's role change whom we now find in a far more advantageous circumstance, such as the investment chapter and attracting EU funds. Social Work in Romania received, nowadays, the chance to develop its own working strategy, without taking into account the annually very low percentage received from the State. This involves the social worker also, through personal participation in attracting grants by filing and winning strategic projects. The adopted managerial side represents an advantage that ensures the success.

THEORETICAL DEBATES AND DELIMITATION OF CONCEPTS

Vulnerable groups and individuals who are victims of social, psychological, economic and cultural causes concern the social work services. They are becoming the main beneficiaries of state and European strategies, in order to improve the quality of life, in the spirit of social justice and equality of chances. *“Therefore, a main role of the social work is to generate specific mechanisms for recovering the self capacity for normal integration into the community, for reducing the social dependency for vulnerable people and vulnerable groups in accordance with the requirement of independent living/ self-sufficiency. The social worker must face these new challenges and assume responsibility of solving complex situations in terms of professional standards”* (Zamfir, 2011: 3). As shown in the definition above, the role of the social worker is to intervene directly and personally on the spot, objective which doesn't differ from field activity required by any project, more since the social worker is sufficiently funded to achieve the settled objectives.

In the post-revolutionary Romania, we encounter a dedicated social worker to his job, but with very poor material resources. As the generic solutions were solved by the lack of money and the medium and long term projects, the problems became recurrent or were simply blocked by absurd bureaucratic obstacles. There are, in this respect, various analysis and research projects of professionals in social work at the Research Institute for Quality of Life, who patiently measured all these steps in the past 25 years. After 2007, the changes proved favorable to the formation of a modern social worker, active and involved in core development projects of areas with increased human vulnerability. As noted by the sociologist Elena Zamfir, accountability and the addressing of complex situations in new circumstances lead to the minimum-required training in the area of project management, with focus here on – not necessarily as a project manager, but as a member that integrates the application of modern teamwork methodologies. Under these new requirements, through this profession, the social worker still is and will remain primarily a practitioner able to seek and evaluate the facing reality.

Another argument assumes that, in general, the social problems of a human community do not change easily, but they may improve when the social worker is able to investigate the cause before offering optimal solutions. All the steps required by the practice of this profession involve major personal effort finding the solid theoretical knowledge an imperative in analyzing the causes of social phenomena, like a sociologist. The European social worker plays the role of a true barometer, which indicates the existing weaknesses in a human community. The direct experience and personal observations represents an advantage of the eyewitness who develops the legitimacy to convey the best feedback to the political system. Politics is a subsystem of the global social system that traces the first boundaries of social and Public Policies. Although both systems interfere in the common interest, a separation of the two areas is not necessarily required. State involvement in the vulnerable social environment is a matter of social policy, and the social worker's feedback to the political system is a topic of interest dependent on Public Policies. Therefore, if in the first phase, the social worker as the legitimate representative of the state intervenes to relieve a problem with a high degree of social vulnerability, in the second phase we put to discussion the necessary feedback on the institutional development of intelligent solutions – we already need a specialist in social assistance. Boundaries are almost invisible. So are the social policies, only part of Public Policy, determining a certain ambiguity in the delineation of both terms, which is provided by the convergence of the specialist role and the interests of the State that meet upon a mutual point of interest. Thus I explain the elusive demarcation of social and Public Policies, eliminating the temptation of keeping the same signifier.

In order to simplify the problem of technical terms I will define and analyze the complexity of Public Policy, in order to better understand the closeness between the public and social policies. Public Policies are part of the area of

political science and aim to investigate, apply and develop policies of economic, social and political interest on a local or national level, using the form of complex programs initiated and supported by the Government.

As we can understand through this definition, through Public Policies, the Government achieves two objectives: the first objective, as a democratic actor who intervenes and actively involves in direct solving of economic vulnerabilities exercising the harmonization of acute differences, and the second objective, the same Government being interested in producing measurable results on medium and long term, in order to justify the priority activities of the governors.

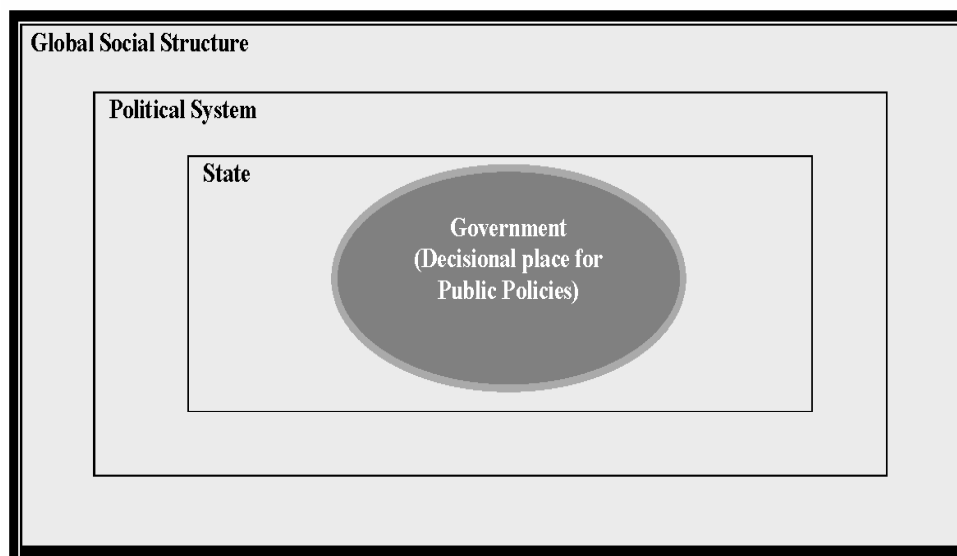
An eloquent example of Public Policy would be the following case: "Government Decision no. 430/2001, Government Strategy for Improving the Roma Condition, has a duration of 10 years, a general plan of action in the medium term of four years, and includes 10 major sector areas. According to the principle of the division of sectorial and decentralized execution, the Government Strategy provides a structure for organizing, coordination and control, and the specific responsibilities of institutions, public authorities and NGOs in implementing the Plan of Measures. The aim of the strategy is to encourage Roma participation in the economic, social, educational, cultural and political society through involvement in health sector and community development" (Ionescu and Cace, 2006: 67). In this case we see how the State is concerned in raising the quality of living for Roma communities by creating smart sectorial activities that stimulate their interest in education, employment and community development. The ultimate goal is to raise the percentage of integration of Roma communities that are disadvantaged in the labor market in Romania, using charges and more efficient tools. The mechanism of these types of Public Policies requires the development of complex programs with clearly defined action plans and draft legislation that are supported by local government. Another prerequisite should be that where the Public Policies shall apply, should be local autonomy that would produce the necessary changes in the structure of public administration.

However, in a simplified sense, the term "Public Policy" may include projects involving more general aspects and less particular interest, and here we notice the interference and an almost invisible boundary between Public Policies and social policies. At the level of terminology analysis for some authors, through Public Policies is intended the achieving of a certain objective of specific governmental interest (Hecl, 1972: 84). In English, the distinction between *politics* and *policies* is more obvious than in Romanian, as well as between *policy* and *politics*, a dedicated group of categorical modern political science. The words "policy" and "politics" outline the boundary between science of Public Policy and political sciences in policy science and political science. "Policy" is determined by the level of transparency that a government strategy has, in the public space as a "description and explanation of causes from government activities" (Dye, 1995: 2).

SYSTEMIC APPROACHES OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Public Policies are part of the mechanism and functioning of the political system. In systems theory, the self-performance of any democratic regime is realized depending on the accuracy of the received data from the field that must reach the decision area of the Government in the form of inputs². To understand the complexity and the need for Public Policies in the political system I will call the following scheme (Hague *et al.*, 1992: 5), which was adapted by myself.

Figure 1



Using a scale pyramid as the “ruling”, the authors show where the important and prioritized decisions are made in the political system, according to the complexity of emerging requests between society and the state. But decisions cannot be taken arbitrarily, without any initial effective mechanism to define the role and type of given solutions. The government is not just making decisions but involves analysis, classification, research, establishing the necessary resources and building strategies that provide solutions to the tasks expected of the Public Policy.

How does the political system work? Some of the systemic theories were taken from cyber theories that have dedicated comparative methods so useful to these topic studies. In the following scheme, we detail the main features of the political system, as follows (Almond and Powell, 1978: 13–14).

² The English term *Input* (as *intake*) here has the necessity sense, requirements or problems which are to be solved by the governors. This term comes from the systemic theory of David Easton. See David. *System Analysis of Political Life*, New York, Wiley, 1965.

Table 1

Main objective	Function	Results
Function attributes of the political system	Political communication	Information is efficiently and transparently transmitted to all officials.
	Political socialization	Represents the required ensemble of attitudes, behaviors, norms, ideas, trends, political beliefs and symbols which the individual or the group manifest within the political system.
	Political recruitment	The need of the state to recruit individuals for performing functions within the political system.
	Political institutionalization	Reform process and the institutionalization of processes which make the political system.
	Legitimacy of political decisions	Legislative and legal framework that provides authority and legitimize the political decisions.
	Programmatic	The obligation of the government to prevent specific issues of particular circumstances (such as the prevention of risk acts, natural disasters, economic crisis, social unrest, etc.).
Selecting and implementing government decision	Classification and prioritization of government interests	Establishing the agenda of government working in order to create Public Policy strategy, based on budget and their importance.
	Aggregation of interests	Through accomplishing the objectives, Public Policies first aim an aggregation of the general interests and secondly, the particular interests (as shown in an above stated definition) ³ .
	The achievement of Public Policies	Transforming of inputs meaning the requirements in solutions, through outputs.
	Applying of Public Policies	Conducting the strategic stages of the project.

From this scheme results the importance and the role of the government in accepting or rejecting certain Public Policies, based on criteria and the will of those responsible for making decisions. According to David Easton, theoretician of the political system, Public Policies can be seen as an authoritative allocation of necessary values in the society (Easton, 1965: 3). By assigning values we not only refer to money, food or material benefits, but also to symbolic, cultural or spiritual resources, which the humanity appreciates and evaluates as well.

The main area of Public Policy action is the public sector that we can define as a set of organizations and institutions, such as: Prefecture, City Hall, School, Orphanage, Hospital, Local County Councils, and other social structures which gain funding from the state budget.

The cooperation between the government and the public institutions is essential in the regional development and communitarian participation of less developed areas,

³ The principle comes from the Hegelian philosophical approach of the State. For Hegel, the state is a set of general interests built from the essence of all particular interests of each citizen. The head of state cannot remain in the hands of people with selfish interests, as long as they are obliged to think and act only for the welfare of all citizens.

as seen in most of the Romanian rural environment. Ownership is thus the boundary between public and private sectors, excepting private institutions which are state financed, as the case of private clinics, private schools, etc. In this respect, a simplified distinction should be made between public institutions or organizations, which are prone to Externs with their purpose to produce changes in the social environment, and private institutions that have personal goals, performing activities in order to only get profits. Even these differences can become relative when concerns and interests may interfere in both cases, therefore, the most simple and secure boundary remains funding origin, which is or is not made from the state budget. Usually, in modern democratic regimes, the interference of both public and private funding has become a habit, being generated by mutual and effective agreements between the public and private sectors.

Through the systemic approach, the role of social projects is to focus particularly on the practical side of life, using a broad methodology of the social sciences and politics. The Public Policy Research is justified by the very interests of the political system in finding viable solutions the government is interested to produce in the transformation of inputs into outputs, which involves the strongest relationships and interference between politics and science. The social worker is, therefore, the perfect hybrid of the two major concerns: once by his scientific side to know the truth from the essence of things on the field, and on the other hand, is a politician who is always looking for smart strategies that provide the necessary balance in any democratic regime.

Another scientific aspect of the Public Policy should be to continuously discover new variables to modify or correct at times the puerile intentions of the government to provide unsustainable solutions. Therefore, government collaboration with specialists is a key criterion for achieving good governance only if they apply the principle of institutional transparency that prevent misplaced politicization or unfortunate intervention of other interests. Not coincidentally do I mention specific vulnerable aspects of the Romanian political system. One solution would be a good knowledge of European legislation on financing projects that nowadays Romania badly needs, in an effort to create transparency and accountability of the involved partners. Another interesting phenomenon is the fact that most of the ideas in the world of Public Policies do not appear as directives from the government or the European Union as major funders. Any Public Policy is an original work and cannot be easily copied or adapted to another context. Therefore, we need a social worker to explicitly know every detail, avoiding to providing similar solutions applied in other areas. The comparison of Public Policies is good to the extent of efficiency, but not to copying strategies. Here's the merit and place of the social worker in the Public Policy.

The political system must take into account the predictions calling the programmatic function, when creating outputs. In the quality of a solution, we often find the objectivity of the taken decisions after prior consultation of specialists dealing with *policy research* and *policy analysis*.

The distinction between the two terms is very small, in *policy research*, the act of research involves an exploratory academic activity, while the *policy analysis*

follows as part of the applied methodology is already established in the first stage and is oriented towards the customer. Another distinction is that the research is defined as a science of Public Policy, while the analysis is described as a science for Public Policy, meaning for the practical side of the field. Finally, the terminology of the English language should, as constructive criticism, not to excessively separate terms by clarifying the distinction, since there is a continuous and essential cooperation between the two terms that can be easily included in the same family of study and work.

PUBLIC POLICY AND SOCIAL SERVICES IN ROMANIA. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Public Policy is, nowadays, an object of research appeared in the area of more specific disciplines of political and social science. Its unit of knowledge, principles and theories is formed as a result of long inherited experience from the practice of Western countries. The accumulation of these experiences was required to address the risks and challenges that may arise along the way. Any implementation of a Public Policy requires taking the following steps previously established by the feasibility study: preservation objectives to their activities, the time schedule of work, managerial accountability for the division of tasks, financial liability, expenses and salaries responsibility, and measuring or quantifying the expected results. To these core activities it is added another set of observations, needs and changes that may occur, depending on the specific pursued objective and on the field of context under which the entire project unfolds. One certainty is that every Public Policy, especially those that become social policies is determined by a project designed by someone who has established a certain strategy. This leads to both the programmatic and the prescriptive function which results in a true rigidity when the activities, or worse, the working methods need to be relocated. For these reasons, the experience, choosing the best specialists and the degree of flexibility may become fundamental factors in successfully achieving the objectives. Through the required experience and initiation in this type of activities and through accumulation of practice and theory, the election of members or employees is a decision that belongs solely to the project manager, thus, the degree of flexibility is good to be specified in the contract from the beginning. In most cases, a contract that was signed without preventing the freedom to rethink certain working strategies may later involve certain risks. Therefore, this responsibility also belongs to the project manager.

If we look carefully at the history of a Public Policy from a to z, we cannot ignore the number of those who are usually involved, from those that make up the project team, to government people (in the case of a Public Policy of social nature, the legislation and government play a very important role), the evaluation and expertise committee, specialists, experts and researchers from different fields (such as the legal adviser, the social worker, the accountant, the counselor, etc.), the

partners and collaborators. All the ones listed above participate in achieving the objectives, and this means accomplishing all the necessary requirements, in order to produce the desired effects through their quality of work.

Let us consider as case study the following: the project financed with European funds through PHARE program, which ran from November 2004 to October 2005, considered being a successful social Public Policy: “The organization responsible for Project implementation was Alba Iulia council in partnership with the Agency for Employment of the Alba County. In terms of novelty and scope of implementation, the project aims to provide long-term social and professional mediation, facilitating direct contact at meetings between beneficiaries and companies as potential employers. The following benefits have been achieved through the implementation of the project: a close collaboration between local authorities and the Roma community, which created the prerequisites for the development of other joint activities. Within the social and professional activities, the project team had direct access to the real problems of the Roma community in qualified hiring and on the viability, all profit from projects was transferred to the Roma organization *Pakiv Romania* founded as a result of the project. It has assumed responsibility for continuing activities” (Success Stories – Partnerships for chance equality projects financed by European funds for social inclusion: 40)⁴. The main actors who performed the basic activities of this project were the social workers that took part in implementing the strategy and planning of the work, at a time when Romania wasn’t a member of the European Union, yet. I mention this because, at the time, the social workers weren’t benefiting of the training meant to initiate them in the working style of a project. The achieved objectives and results were considered successful, even under these circumstances. In October 2005, 45 Roma people were employed, being qualified through this project, which included education and a number of degrees according to the number of those who have successfully completed their studies. Signing a new contract of employment other 22 people were employed, and about 310 people benefited from some social and professional services as required. Hiring on the labor market has led to the development of employment field, important results that took out the above stated Roma community from isolation.

Another eloquent example would be the project called “Temporary protection center for young deinstitutionalized from Romania, Ialomița County, Fierbinți village”. The project took place between December 2003 and November 2005. The responsible organizations for the implementation of the project were: the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection – Ialomița County, Ialomița County Council, *Ialomița Foundation 2000*, County Agency for Employment in Ialomița and Information Center and Resources for Social Professions in Bucharest (success stories – Partnerships for chance equality, projects financed by the European Fund

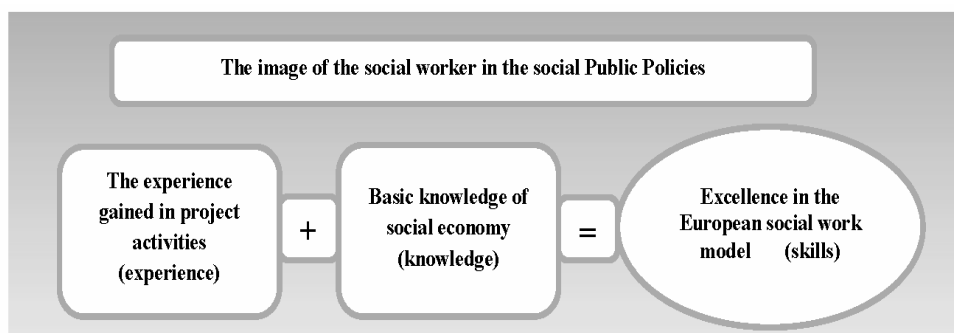
⁴ This project can be consulted at: http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/posdru/images/downdocs/povesti_de_succes.pdf.

for Social Inclusion: 44). Overall, this project has served a very necessary thing in Romania, namely, the decrease in young recipients of welfare dependency and institutional care. General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Ialomița was established with the idea to support the young people deprived of the opportunity and ability to support them, and to form a professional trade.

There never missed difficulties on attitudes, behaviors, and even escapades in which some of the children have run away from foster care and had to be recovered. The results of this project were as it follows: “20 young deinstitutionalized people were accommodated in a transit home for a period of not more than three years, and were assisted throughout the accommodation, in order to find a job and permanent housing; 20 other young people leaving care institutions were provided with working places for a period of 12 months from the beginning of project implementation; after the first month of coming into Center, 20 young people have acquired independent living skills, managing to self-household during accomodation, developed social relationships and have been integrated in the local community; The temporary Protection Center has been integrated into the local social assistance” (Success Stories – Partnerships for chance equality, financed projects by the European Fund for Social Inclusion: 45).

Both social projects have led to the inclusion of disadvantaged people on labor market, thus fulfilling one of the European directives contained in the social economy principles laid down in the Treaty of Lisbon on 1st of December 2009. The relationship between the social worker and the young people, the experience gained from project activities and minimal knowledge of the principles of social economy guarantees the quality of excellence in every socio-economic program of the European type. Putting these elements in a very simple scheme, we could get the following picture of the social worker involved in the new philosophy of Public Policy of the European model:

Figure 2



By this figure I would like to show the direction and type of mutation that occur on the social worker’s role, in the context of Europeanization. The classic

role that we already know, doesn't change at all, still, it enriches with new challenges. It is not about an irreversible trend, as some of the authors evoke, accusing that the interference of management would produce a change beyond recognition. As shown in the two examples above, the role of the social worker is exactly the same. Close contact and the dedicated work with beneficiaries, where specific social worker's sacrifices are the same, does not change the problem. The addition that appears in this context is the necessary experience to carry out governmental or European projects. The new way of working has proven to be easily controlled by achieving the objectives, efficient and productive, in comparison to what previously happened. According to the theoretical aspect, a minimal need for training in the social economy would be necessary, by deepening the welfare state philosophy (welfare state). Achieving both objectives ensures, in my opinion, the way to excellence in quality evaluation of social worker's work.

The model above shouldn't be regarded as a personal proposal, instead, as a result noticed that we extracted from the specific comparative analysis of two contexts: European and non-European.

Another argument that supports this model would be that of 2010, when in Romania it was first created the national program of master of advanced studies in social economy, primarily addressed to social workers from Romania. "Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University Bucharest, in partnership with Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, West University of Timisoara, Oradea State University, hold this master's program in social economy. (...) Master students will be selected from among university graduates who wish to specialize in social economy or intend to develop associations, institutions, foundations and social economy profile activities, in order to create jobs for groups which risk exclusion on the labor market. (...) The objective of the master's program is to train qualified specialists in creating new jobs, particularly for the economically and socially marginalized individuals, or to encourage graduates' initiatives regarding the emergence of new forms of social economy enterprise as solutions for integration to the labor market of vulnerable people" (the text is taken from the presentation of the Master of Social Economy on the official website of the Faculty of Political Science, Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University⁵). Besides the noble ambitions of these prestigious universities, the entire program is also funded by the Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection AM POS DRU (which again shows the government's interest in these areas) and the European Social Fund (ESF officially representing the interest of the European Union). Also the formulation of objectives for this master seems to be similar to the above presented model of objectives, thus bringing another argument confirming the closeness between the governmental and European interest on this topic.

⁵ This project can be consulted at the follow address: <http://masterate.ucdc.ro/masterat-in-economie-sociala.pdf>.

CONCLUSIONS

Self-regulation of the political system is, therefore, the key element necessary to a performing democratic regime by taking advantage of the indispensable presence of the social work specialist. Looking to the Nordic countries, we cannot forget that social assistance in these areas became a true philosophy of life. The case of Sweden is the most obvious in this case. The activity sheet of the Swedish social worker indicates there is the explicit responsibility of proposing and initiating Public Policy strategies of social interest. Here, in Romania, only the type of collaboration *libero arbitrio* is popular, which concentrates on the attitude of mere sympathy or antipathy for the ones involved. Any social work project is considered to be, here, only a governmental policy. Wrong! Even if the financial support belongs to the government, in the Swedish example that applies today across Europe, the social worker is the first and most important character indicating the direction of investments, analyzing and providing working strategies, which are proven to be the most effective projects and, at the same time, away from the danger of being politicized. Guaranteeing these rights in the philosophy of social welfare state, Sweden has achieved, in the last three decades, the highest score for quality of life, which places the country on one of the top three in Europe (Noll, 2004: 28). The line analysis of this study dedicated to Public Policy in the context of Europeanization shows, once again, the importance of a new formula of orientation and professional training of the social worker today. The new role hasn't supported a shift from the classical vision, as shown, but has substantially enriched with other adjacent fields, guaranteeing the quality of excellence of a noble and notorious profession in most developed countries. Romania also needs such specialists to reform the social and political environment, transforming it in an efficient and transparent system.

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13. *** <http://masterate.ucdc.ro/masterat-in-economie-sociala.pdf>, accessed on 14th July, 2014.

***I**n acest articol este analizată măsura în care s-a modificat rolul clasic de asistent social din România în raport cu provocările și oportunitățile economice aduse de Uniunea Europeană. Ca țară membră de la 1 ianuarie 2007, România a fost obligată să reformeze vechea structură de lucru spre un sistem performant și capabil care să-l apropie de celelalte sisteme din vest. Asistența socială românească are astăzi șansa de a atrage investiții importante, care îi vor permite o dezvoltare benefică, având libertatea de a-și alege propriile idei. Implicarea directă a asistentului social în crearea de strategii îl obligă pe acesta să își asume o latură managerială care să-l ajute să-și atingă noile task-uri. Unele din aceste schimbări de rol au fost prevăzute de Community Care Act încă din 1992. A preluat asistentul social de astăzi o parte din funcția managementului și a antreprenoriatului modern? Este rolul său hibrid capabil de a dezvolta metode și strategii de lucru care să facă față noilor provocări? Observând evoluția recentă a acestei profesii din ultimii ani, articolul de față încearcă să răspundă la toate aceste întrebări prin surprinderea unor aspecte legate de profesia practică și teoretică. Este analizată de asemenea în ce măsură s-a modificat funcția de terapeut social în condițiile în care asistentul social este nevoit să adopte o altfel de poziție față de beneficiarii tradiționali care, în România, nu s-au schimbat.*

Cuvinte-cheie: asistent social, rol, schimbare socială, fonduri europene, funcția de management, strategii de lucru, politici sociale, politici publice.

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