

## HUMAN RESOURCES IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES – PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN THE BULGARIAN REGIONS

Georgi Nikolov<sup>1</sup>, Veselina Lyubomirova<sup>2</sup>  
*e-mail: gnikolov@unwe.bg, e-mail: veselina@unwe.bg*

### Abstract

*The research reveals current work motivation challenges and employment problems in the social care system in Bulgaria. On that basis, are outlined some challenges for the social care system in the Bulgarian regions. The conclusions are based on the authors' survey data and a content analysis of the social services strategies in 22 Bulgarian NUTS 3 regions (districts). The paper shows which ongoing problems in the sector demotivate the social work specialists due to their own opinions and are not solved as policy and planning in the regional and municipality strategies and government level.*

**Key words:** social workers, Bulgarian regions, human resources, social services

**JEL:** H41

### Introduction

“The key role of the human resources for the social services as an essential part of the social care system is practically missing in the current Bulgarian legislation related to the field” (Министерство на труда и социалната политика, 2018). This conclusion was made in 2018 by the interdepartmental working group, which has developed the new Concept for the Law on Social Services in Bulgaria. According to our fieldwork and sectoral knowledge, this understanding is shared by the whole range of experts and specialists working in the social services system. The human resources in the social services (Генчев, 2017) are low paid from years, without proper motivation system in the workplace, without easy and regular access to professional further education and development, without sufficient support from authorities and specialists, which to help them to reduce stress in their specific and often challenging working environment. These are some of the core problems leading to demotivation of the social workers and were among the main problems for solving the newly adopted legislation in the sector (Закон за социалните услуги, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Assoc. Prof., PhD, Department of Regional Development, University of National and World Economy

<sup>2</sup> Assist. Prof., PhD, Department of Regional Development, University of National and World Economy

At the same time, the society and the local communities have increasing expectations from the social services and specialists, which is understandable considering that the social specialists are the leading force in support services for the most vulnerable part of the community. But despite high expectations from the society to the social work quality, the profession with its difficulties, including the low payment in the sector, rarely finds a place in the public and media agenda in the last decade except for the previous two three years, after several small public protests from social workers for gaining the attention of the national authorities.

As the central part of the country social care system, the social services have their place in all current regional and municipality strategies and plans in Bulgaria, as well as in the methodology (Даскалова, 2020, p. 43; МРРБ, 2020) of the new once for the period 2021 – 2027. Every district has its strategy for the development of social services at least until 2020. Also, all administrative districts and most municipalities have former experience with the same strategies and plans for 2011 – 2015. The new 265 Plans for integrated municipality development are also made for them and in the new Integrated territorial strategies for each from the Bulgarian six NUTS 2 regions.

Different working papers and research, including on EU level, sharing the understanding that the strategies for regional development and the municipality plans are a core element of sustainable and resilient development (European Committee of Regions, 2017; Boshma, 2015; Сечкова и колектив, 2011). The comparison between the NUTS 3 strategies for the development of the social services and the current situation in the social services sector in Bulgaria can help identify ongoing problems and risks in front of the future sectoral strategies and policies.

In the last six years, the human resource in the Bulgarian social services is more often the subject of analysis of the researchers. However, most of the studies mainly focus on social work from the perspective of the needed specialists, their qualities, and students' education and motivation. Also, most of the Bulgarian NGO's studies and reports related to social services address primary other aspects of social work, as some elements of the quality of services and rights of their users. At the same time, during conferences, expert meetings, and coworking with national, regional, and local authorities, the academic and NGO's representatives highlight the growing lack of motivation among the human resources in the social sector.

### **The current situation with the functioning of the social services relevant to the human resources demotivation problems**

Specific attention to the topic is given in an article from 2016 named “About the payment of the professional social workers” (Радев, 2016). The paper focuses on one of the core problems with the payment of social workers – the payment

system in the public sector in Bulgaria. There are main differences between the formation of payment of the public administration of national and local level in the current situation.

The author also argues that the Bulgarian minimum monthly income increase is more a matter of political decision, increasing more subjective and unpredictable.

He compares the minimum national income with the median monthly income in the country to show the unsystematic factors influencing the decisions of the national authorities on the increase of the payment rates in the public sector (Падев, 2016). But this factor can be used to understand only half of the problems with the payment in the social care system because only the national and regional administration in the system is part of the public administration. There are also very low paid but are not our subject of interest. The human resources in the social services are with even more problems, which is our focus in this paper.

There are only a few empirical researches about the motivation of the human resources in the Bulgarian social services, and they are primarily with respondents from one or two regions. One of the few is from 2010 (Тодорова, 2010) and covers three municipalities in Northeastern region of planning in Bulgaria. The research includes 77 social workers and 26 representatives from the management of the services.

The two articles from 2016 and 2010 outlines almost the same hypothesis and problems. Both authors are finding the sector of social services as a growing one, with an increasing number of employees, but with a low payment, leading to decreasing motivation for work and identification with the services and the profession (Тодорова, 2010, p. 66). They are focusing on the social work specialist from the social services and the idea of this paper.

According to the “analytical framework to identify problem sectors in organizational support for the career development of employees – employee perspective” given by Atanasova (2018, p. 11), two from the three main areas with key importance for the employees’ motivations for work are as follow:

**Table 1:** Some problem sectors in organizational support for the career development

Main areas	Potential problems – the perspective of employees
Training opportunities in the organization /administration	Low level of actual use of training opportunities in the organization
Provided feedback and personal career advice development	Problems/deficits in personal directing and advising the employee for inclusion in training that can be enjoy in the organization

*Source:* based on a more extended version from Atanasova (2018, p. 11).

Some of the results in this paper outline deficits in the relation from table 1 (see figure 7) and the following conclusions. In this regard, Koleva-Stefanova (2019) underlines the importance of the employees' motivation with further training as a fundamental instrument for preserving social capital on the national level. The importance of the quality of education, including the workplace and good work performance and motivation, are among the leading factors for today's and future resilient and quality life for society (Владиминова, 2020; Атанасова, 2019).

In the social care system, this role and responsibility are shared between the municipalities and NGOs from the one side, as social care services providers, and the state from the other side, as a primary funder of the social services, but also because of the national framework in the sector. A place for training and education, combined with supervision, is made in the new legislative framework, but primarily optional as a right to the social workers and an opportunity for their employer, not as an obligation, with specific funding.

The object of this paper is the human resources in the social care sector, but in this case, only social work specialists from the social services, not these from the national and local administration, and not the supportive and non-specialized staff in the services.

The research subject is the demotivation factors for the social work specialists, which will show some results from our earlier empirical survey on the national level with 400 respondents (social work specialists from social services) from all regions and almost all districts of Bulgaria. In the regional strategies for developing social services and the new legislation from July 2020, we will search for factors and conditions for the deepening or solving the demotivation problems for the staff in the sector. For that purpose, unpublished empirical survey results will be used from the summer of 2017 and the last sectoral strategies of the Bulgarian regions from 2016 until 2020.

Our argument for using earlier survey results is as follows:

- The survey was constructed and conducted by one of this paper's authors as an expert engagement for an organization advocating on behalf of social care services in the policy-making process.<sup>3</sup>
- The survey from the summer of the year 2017 was the first one among social workers focused on risks for their work motivation and was made to start the debate about the payment, further education, and the need for new legislation in the sector. At some point, this goal was completed.

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<sup>3</sup> "Human Resources in the Social Services – problems and challenges". National survey among social services for the needs and with the resources of the National Alliance for Social Responsibility (NASO) in Bulgaria [presentation], The results of the survey, conducted by one of the authors of this paper were presented at a special conference for social work specialists, government representatives, NGOs, national and local authorities in the social sector at 8.11.2017, Targoviste, Bulgaria.

- During the long-lasting working process (near two years), the new legislation was adopted and partly functioning from 2020. Partially because specifically, the Act about the payment in the sector, based on the level of the working coalification position, was also adopted in 2020, but it's coming into force from 2022.

“Since the year 2000 the public sector in Bulgaria has gone through radical reforms of its regulatory base, forms of ownership, and changes in the models of financing and payment to the providers of healthcare, education, social, administrative and other public services” (Delcheva, Gorchiova, 2015, p. 34). The human resources in the social services are between the national and local levels of administration. Most of them are municipalities employees, as far as the municipalities are the primary provider of social services in Bulgaria (Пенкова, Делчева, Горчилова, Вълков, 2019, p. 51). Some of them are NGO's employees because NGO's also can be a provider of social services. But the social services in Bulgaria are funded by the state through the responsible ministry and agency. In short, every year, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Finance defines the “financial standards”, which means the limit of funding for each type of social service. The budget includes all expenses for the service, including payment for the workforce there. But their salaries' costs are not a separate part of the budget, from the total costs for the functioning of the services, which often excludes the possibility of increasing the employees' payment. The most often increase of the resources for the services per year during the last years is around 10%, which sometimes covers primarily part of the increase of the general expenses for the object's functioning, where the social service is carried out. The professional training for the workforce in social services, the supervision (the primary tool for quality control and stress reduction in the services) are also expenses covered from the general budget of the services, but without obligation to the services provider how much of this budget should go for salaries, training, supervision, bonus payment, after the provider (municipality or NGO) covers first the monthly expenses of the whole functioning of the service. Until 2020 the provider is not obliged by law or by local regulation to spend a concert part of this budget, especially for the workforce, so every increase in the sector from the state in general, and not specific for the specialist in the social services. The practice from the last more than ten years shows that the increase is not every year and always does not cover budget gaps for the service functioning. Usually, it is not enough to provide an increase of supervision and training for the staff. The providers are responsible for the management, motivation, and salaries of the human resources sector, but as the practice shows, mainly with state resources. In this situation, the conclusion from six years ago that “there is a need for some improvements the financing of the social services from the state budget” (Кръстева, 2016, p. 107) remains relevant.

From January 2022, the payment standards must be guaranteed and organized the financing of the social services normative act. But the supervision and further education of the staff is mentioned in the new legislation only as a right of the social workers, not as an obligation, budget support from the government, the municipalities, or the private social services providers.

On this basis, we define the research problem as follow:

First, in the last more than 15 years, there is a growing social services sector in Bulgaria, but without planned and working system for motivation and development of the human resources in the sector, including with constant insufficient payment. The payment and professional development opportunities in other spheres of the public sector, for example, for the teachers in the educational system, have become in the last years one of the political and government priorities, which brings to systematical payment increases and other motivation factors for personal development in the sector. At the same time, society expects quality social services, holds responsible the social workers for the quality of their work. Still, the working conditions they have to handle and their salaries under the national middle levels are not often included in the public agenda and media interest. As a result, social workers are constantly saying that they don't feel their profession is respected and appreciated by society, which increases the demotivation for realization in the field.

Second, the social services are an essential part of the districts and municipalities' strategies and plans for development and social sustainability, as well as the resilience of the regions, as a core element of the social system for people in need, and as supportive service and infrastructure the families. Quality and enough social services with the needed number of good professionals are important for the regional and local authorities to provide social support to the citizens. So, they need enough specialists to hire, and workers motivated to develop the service and themselves as experts.

Third, a popular phrase in the professional community of social workers is that "they are no one's children". Because the whole budget for the social services is from the state, but they are not part of the public administration. The provider of the services (municipality or NGO) is also their employer. Still, he pays them salaries most often with the state budget because most social services rely on state delegated financing. So, the social services providers, mainly the municipalities, declare that they do not have resources for co-financing the services, increasing the social care specialists' payment. The practice until 2020 shows low interest and opportunity from municipalities to finance some of their services with rare exceptions. So, the only hope here is for new trends in the option for co-financed services. Co-financing of social services from the municipalities is not a widespread practice in the Bulgarian regions (Пенкова, Делчева, Горчилова, Вълков, 2019, p. 111), as their plans and strategies are showing, and as is the knowledge of the authors from fieldwork between 2016 and 2020.



## Research problem and tasks

As main problems for the motivation of the social workers can be mentioned three topics (Lyubomirova, 2019):

1. Low work payment, without or with minimum increase through the last ten years and even more, and still expecting an increase, planned for 2022. This situation continues during several increases of the minimum income in Bulgaria, and with several increases of the payments in other public sectors, including the social workers from the local and national administration, which are with the same profession and in the same sphere but as part of the public administration, in some cases, with more opportunities for an increase of the payment, training. And leads to some tensions from the “two sides” of the system.

2. The problems with the payments and the professional development are deteriorating the system and decreasing the interest from a young specialist with a high education degree in the field. Also, specialists with years of experience changing this field of work, most often with positions in the school education system, where the conditions for work (income, social benefits, etc. are far better). Partly, many regions have a deficit of workforce or at least encounter problems to find proper educated and motivated candidates for work in the social services, which is concluded in most of the situation analysis, part of most of the district strategies for the sector.

3. The public opinion of the profession and the perception for this work as not very prestigious (at least with lower prestige than this of the teachers and the health workers like nurses), but still with high expectations for their dedication and quality of performance, open the question among the social workers’ community – “*Is this professional realization worthed the efforts*”, and the phrase that “*the forgotten ones are working and taking care for other forgotten ones*”.

All 28 districts in Bulgaria have their strategies for the sector of social services, which they have implemented in municipalities strategies in the sector, which every city is obligate to have. As the regional planning part, every strategy for the development of social services includes sectoral situation analysis of the sector in the region, as well as goals and measures for the future of the human resources in the sector (Василева, 2018). The article aims to examine how critical the current situation is with the problems outlined above and what risks bring it for the social support in the regions. The article has to show, using empirical data, how the motivation problems of the human resources in the social services look like directly from the perspective of the people in the system, because this was the first empirical survey on a national level in this topic and is still in 2021 the only one. The results are compared with the 22 NUT3 regional strategies for developing the social services until 2020.

The main thesis is that the regional strategies for social services development contain not good working solutions to the problems with the motivation of the social work specialists, which will increase the risks for ensuring the quality of many services and will deepen the problems with the development of sustainable social service system throughout the Bulgarian regions. This will negatively affect regions' ability to provide an adequate supportive environment and social protection for their citizens. The made normative changes on a national level are long expected from the sector and are a good new direction but still slowly affecting the social services workforce in a sustainable direction.

The paper can be helpful to national and regional level experts working on the policies related to the social services, academic researchers, and NGOs.

### **Methodology**

The survey was conducted between 20 and 30 June 2017, with 400 social work specialists from all regions from NUTS 3 in Bulgaria. It is based on a semi-standardized questionnaire. The survey is not representative because of the four missing districts. Other reasons are that there are no official and complete statistics about the number of social work specialists employed in the sector. But as far as the survey is made for the needs of the largest umbrella NGO in the social services system in Bulgaria, with more than 1500 members (providers, social services) should be considered some specifics, which define the data from the research as representative. The questionnaire is made from NGO experts with 20 and more years in social services and academics. The unofficial number of employed specialists in social services is near 30 000. In this case, 400 answered people from different social services and 22 districts from all regions is the largest survey in the field made until now in Bulgaria. The respondents include both groups – employees from social services, provided from municipalities, and services provided from NGOs. There also included all social services (community-based services with or without 24 hours care and a small percent of specialized institutions). Some of the results were about the manager in the sector and are presented in other papers (Lyubomirova, 2019). Another result was given back in 2018 to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy for the work on the new law in the sector. These results are not fully included here. This is the reason for the selective use of figures and data from the survey result. The other approach is relevant to today's issues in the sector of answer from several years ago.

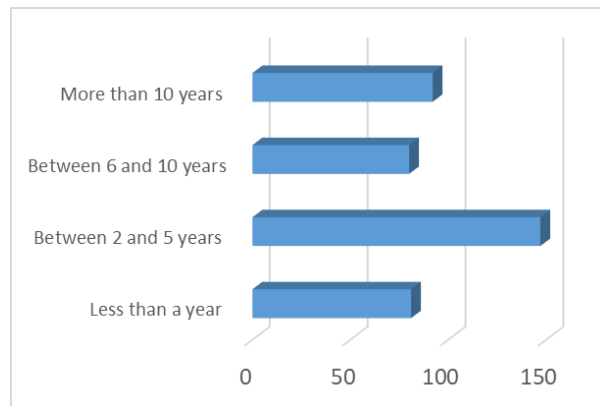
To be analyzed the regional policy in the sector, we are using 22 district strategies for the development of the social services from 2016 – 2020. Three parts of them are important to this research – the analysis for the situation with the human resources in the region, working in the social care system and services; the goals



and measures for improving their career opportunities; and the finances planned for the development of the workforce in the sector.

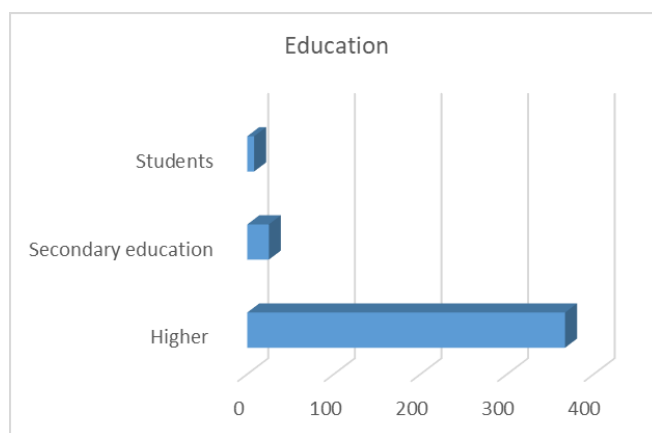
### Results and discussion

More than 90% of social workers in the survey are with higher education degrees. 73% of them are with 6 to 10 or more years of work experience in the system.



Source: Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

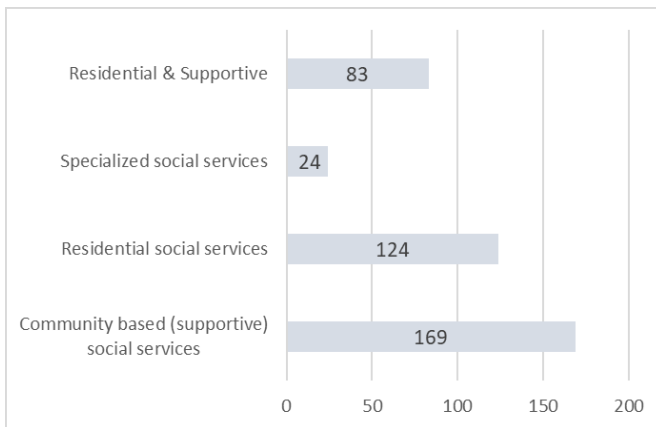
**Figure 1:** Work experience of the respondents



Source: Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

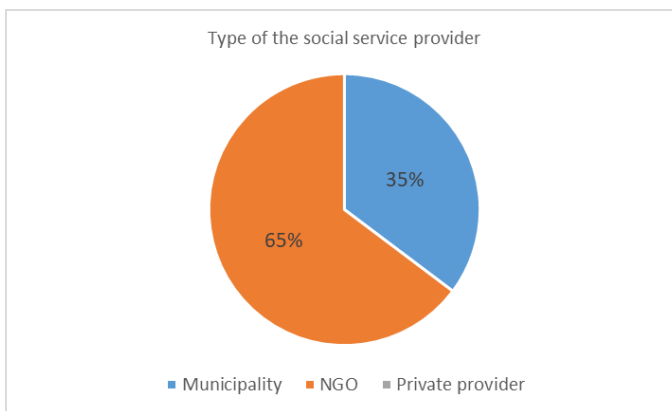
**Figure 2:** Study degree of the responded specialist

Figures 3 and 4 are showing the work profile of the responded social workers. The respondents are from all 28 districts of Bulgaria – mainly from municipality-provided social services (65%). The other part of the participants is from social services provided by NGOs. From figure 1 is made clear that all types of the available in Bulgaria social services are included with their specialists – residential, specialized, combined (residential and supportive complexes), as well as community-based services. The number of participants from each type of the services corresponds to their division and the proportion of the engaged human resources.



Source: Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

**Figure 3:** Profile of the respondents by social service



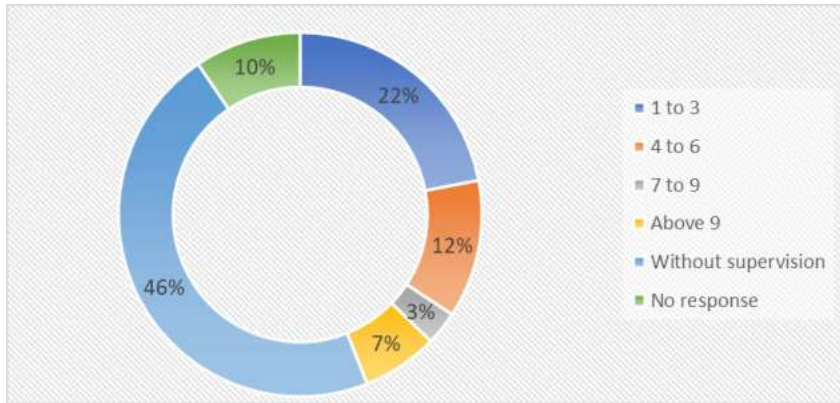
Source: Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

**Figure 4:** Status of the included social services

During 2014 – 2017, 20% of all 400 specialists from the survey are staying without increasing the monthly salaries. 79% of all respondents are with only one increase of the monthly income in the same period. During the same period, the minimum monthly income has been increased five times with different percent. In this situation, 39% of the respondents are highly disappointed with the payment for their work and in the sector in general. Only 6% of the respondents say that the payment for the specialists in the system is acceptable.

The respondents are with higher education, even with master's degree for a speech therapist, psychologist, rehabilitator, a special pedagogue, early intervention specialist, etc. With at least six years in the sector (figure 2), their monthly income stays sustainably below the median income for the country. This finding confirms the sector experts' alarm that most young specialists, coming from the universities in the sector, begin their work in social services with or near the minimum income wages. As a result, the experienced specialist with master's degrees and years of field practice is often searching for a change in the work sector. Mostly they are finding better opportunities in the school education system. As this survey shows, many of them have university specialty "social or special pedagogy" (39% of the respondents in the survey). The situation with the payment and motivation for the teachers is not an object of this paper, but this is a sector with several increases of the payments, including bonuses and social benefits, decreasing workload of the workplace, etc. – benefits even now, four years after the survey results, not included in the management and regulation of the social work profession of national level. The young specialist's first payment in the sector was from 2014 – 2017, almost near the minimum wage for the country. The alert from the sector is that this situation puts some of the specialists in a position to become equally payment with the unspecialized workers and the staff without a higher education degree. The result is that for the providers of the services (municipalities, NGOs) is going more challenging to find specialists for the sector on a local level, which brings a huge problem to the provision of quality social services.

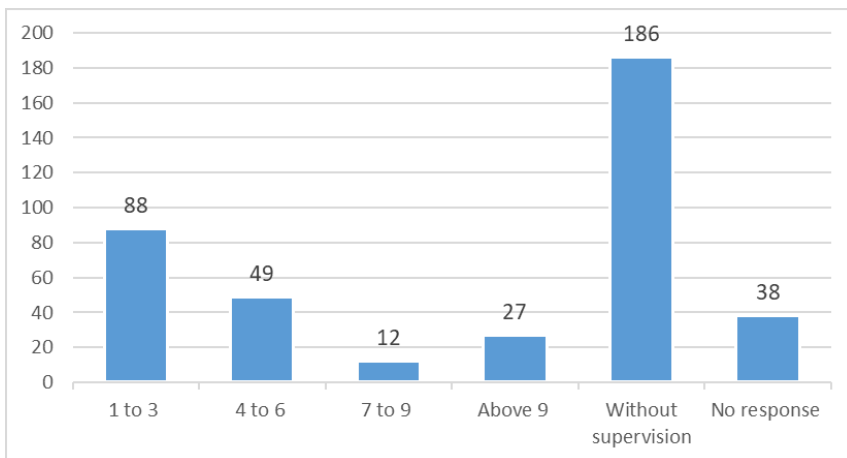
With the new legislation from 2020 – the payment regulation is better organized, fixed by low minimum standards for each qualification level, and considering the social service where the social work specialist is employed because of the different expertise needed for each group of social services. But how this system will function is a future question. For now, this normative act is still not entered into force, and this situation will continue until 2022.



Source: Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

**Figure 5:** Participation in supervisions as stress reduction instrument, kind of support from the external experts for the social workers

84% of the respondents have not participated in training and qualification courses between 2014 and 2017. The question presumed mainly training arranged and paid from the service providers. The other demotivation factor is that 46% of the respondents are without the popular sector “supervision” (for stress reduction and quality of the work with services users) during the same period. And 22% of all respondents have participated only in 1 to 3 supervisions for the whole period, approximately a maximum of one supervision for the last three years (figure 6).



Source: Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

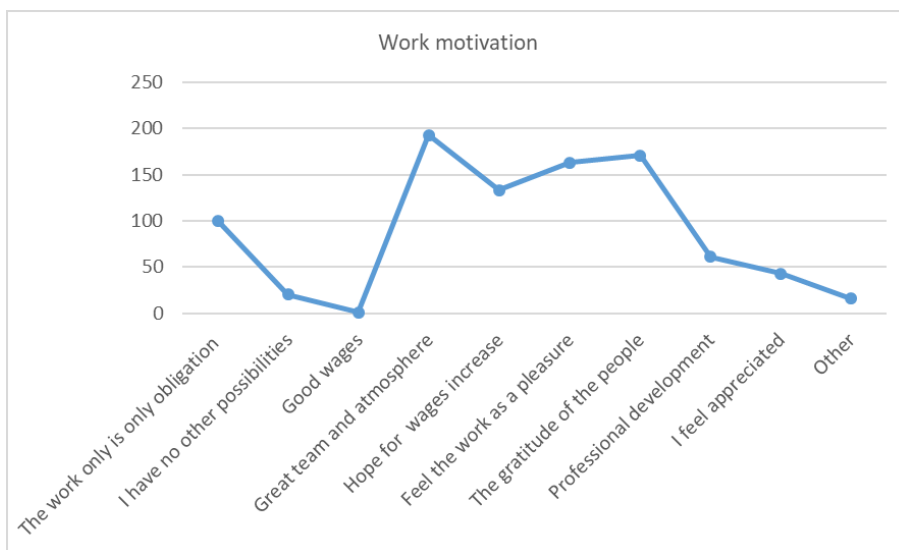
**Figure 6:** Participation in supervisions between 2015 and 2017 for each respondent

Considering that the role of the supervisions is to:

a) make sure that the standards for the profession and the social service are respected and effectively followed and are practically part of the good management (NASW, 2013, p. 5);

b) have the role to decreases the job stress from the specific of the social work.

So, half of the respondents are without supervision for three years. The provider’s responsibility (municipality or NGO) is also one of the crucial factors for demotivation of the social work specialist and undermining the services’ quality.

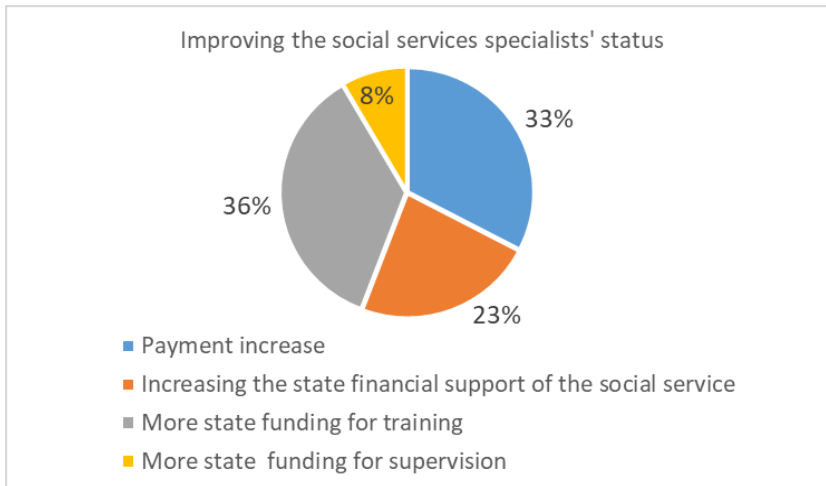


Source: Author’s survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

**Figure 7:** Work motivation of social care specialists

Although the findings above are directly related to the motivation of the human resources in the social services, the participants also answered a concrete question about their feeling about and from work. 43% of the respondents point out that the low public recognition of the profession is the main factor of their demotivation for development in the sector. No one from all 400 respondents finds his current wage as motivation for his work performance and development in the sector. Almost no one feels valued at work, and only 7% are seeing opportunities for professional development in the field. In this challenging situation, some positive motivation comes mainly from subjective personal feelings about the job and his role in society. Most positive, motivating impulses are from the gratitude of the people daily supported and from the respondents and their dedication to the meaning, principles, and values of social work.

Back in 2017, they were hoping for higher payments, regulations to guarantee regular training and professional courses for them, more social benefits, reduced working hours in some more challenging work social services and target groups, a bonus payment system, etc. They were expecting an increase of the financial standards for the social services' functioning to have the opportunity for more efficient and quality work with the people (users of the services).



*Source:* Author's survey, made for the National Alliance for Social Responsibility

**Figure 8:** Recommendations from the respondents

Between 2018 and 2020, no other survey on this topic was conducted, whatever from the national authorities, municipalities, or NGOs. During the debates about the new law in the sector, the discussed problems and the expectations from the social workers remain the same as back in 2017. Even now, after adopting the new normative framework, social workers still have to wait until 2022 for the changes.

The main concerns for the motivation of the specialist and the risk for the quality of the services should be taken more seriously by the responsible authorities. The last legislation changes from 2020 are in this direction but with the risk not to be sufficient and in time. For that reason, it is even more important for us to find how the regional authorities see these problems in their strategies for social services' development.



### **District level strategic development of social care services in the Bulgarian regions**

The regional development policy in Bulgaria is organized in the following national framework (Tsolov, Tanakov, 2020, p. 702):

- National Law for Regional Development, which describes the regions of planning and the national documents working for their development
- National Strategy for Regional Development;
- Regional development plans;
- Strategies for developing districts;
- Municipal development plans;
- Integrated urban development plans, all organized in a vertical hierarchy in the same order from the national to the municipal level.

The authors also underline the strong connection of these normative documents with other specialized national, regional, and municipality strategies focused on the social care system.

To be analyzed the regional policy in the sector, we are using 22 district strategies for the development of the social services from 2016 – 2020. The content analysis for the situation with the human resources in the region, working in the social care system and services; the goals and measures for improving their career opportunities; and the finances planned for developing the workforce in the sector.

“When compiling strategic documents at a regional and municipal level, account should be taken of the need to balance services and complete territorial coverage for the needs of the population” (Berberova-Valcheva, 2019, p. 95). The analysis of the NUTS 3 strategies shows clearly the human resources are of primary importance for the sector. All of them underlined the problem that local authorities have difficulties finding specialists for the social services in their regions – some of the strategies going further with that admission. The analyzed strategies declare that the lack of interest in social services is because of the payment in the sector, which affects the motivation of young specialists to enter the system. Most important is, almost every one of these strategies is written that one of the main risks or the significant risk for the development of the social services and their quality is the critically low payment for the staff in the sector.

At the same time, the examined documents are underlined that the demographic situations and other socio-economic factors from regional and national importance require the opening of more social services in the regions. In most of the strategies, the district has developed many services in the last period (2011 – 2015), but they still do not cover adequately and sufficiently the need of the citizens. In each of the 22 strategies for the development of the social services, there is a specific goal and measures for better conditions for the human resources in the system. Mostly in three directions for achieving this goal according to the

analyzed documents – training and courses for further qualification including for conducting of supervisions; opportunities to exchange good work practices with colleagues and social services from other municipalities in the region or with different regions; control of the quality of the work performed.

It is specifically written there that the primary source for financing the services stays the state budget. So, regions stated that they need more social services, primarily not local financial responsibility (possible but rare) and state-funded activities. In this situation, they don't plan extra funding for the services of their territories, and if they did, they do not include in these plans an increase of the payment for the staff. The pay for the social workers stays the state's responsibility, without much-expected co-financing from the municipalities.

Also, the training opportunities, including in all strategies are planned to be funded through EU projects and operations (Кондарев, 2020, p. 91), available for participating from municipalities, as well as from state projects for the training of the administration; also EU funded. The opportunities for exchanging knowledge and good practices are among the few things (for professional development) that the providers are paying for the social workers (participation fees, travel costs, etc.). Still, more often, national and international NGOs in the sector are providing part of the funding or even the entire expenses of seminars and other events to exchange good practices in the sector.

According to the examined strategies, the low payment for the social work specialist is the main problem for the quality and even for the functioning of the services. Still, almost all planned measures are including funding from the state budget. At the same time, in some of the strategies, more focus is given again to the municipality administration's social workers, responsible for controlling and representing the municipality as a provider of the services. There are more planned training and other further qualifications opportunities more concrete formulated in the strategies. For the social work specialist working in the services, such measures are mostly wishfully mentioned. In the new legislation, the training, further education, and supervision are included as a right to the social workers but still not supported by state and local funding.

“In Bulgaria, there is a constant uneven distribution of unemployment by regions and municipalities. The pronounced disproportions in the economic development of the different regions in the country, determined by the effect of different socio-demographic and economic factors, the inherited socio-economic and territorial structure, and the economic development during the transition, determine the great differences in unemployment” (Botseva, 2019, p. 177). The situation in the social care system differs from this conclusion. The social workers in the Bulgarian regions suffer not from unemployment in the sector but the insufficient attractiveness of the work positions in the social services. This problem has

no varieties in the different regions. Most of the district strategies for developing social services are similar on the level of problems and challenges. They reflecting the national policy plans in the sector, even the unsolved issues regarding the workforce motivation to stay in the system.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the strategies for the development of the social services in the Bulgarian regions until 2020 are not including working measures for the wellbeing and development of the social workers, financially guaranteed from the municipalities. At the same time, there is no national strategy for the sector with a set of measures financially guaranteed from the state budget in that area. Most of the funding for training and supervision of the social work specialists is planned on a national and regional level with financing from EU funds. National and regional strategies in the sector are still relying on soft measures (training but with EU funding; training for administrators and controllers of social services, but rare for the staff in the services; expectations of help from regional and local businesses for co-funding of the services, but less or rare from the municipalities).

Until the national and local government do not find an answer for the complex problems – payment in the sector, low prestige of the profession, missing social benefits and professional opportunities for career development and social stability of the staff, the long-lasting problems in the sector will increase the risks for the stability of the social care and support system in the Bulgarian regions.

The sector has a new national policy for particular payment standards of the social work specialist, organized to start in 2022. Until then, most of the problems are on the level from 2017 because the politics and measures after 2017 were in the mainline as before, although they are not shown here. The policy for social benefits and resources for training and supervision is still an open question even after the newly adopted legislation. The main, further research question for us in this regard will be the level of involvement of the municipalities for self-and co-financed services and the motivation of the social workers with provided training, supervision, and other social benefits.

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