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Summary “Contemporary European social work is based on the principles of collective responsibility, human rights, and social justice. The IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) declared that social work was, and always will be, a human rights occupation. Before for the described outcome of social work, the social work has required the aims, strategies and the methods of implementation. The preparation and adoption of the Social Care (Welfare) Act in 1995 followed the general principles of the corresponding law from 1925, in that the responsibility for organizing social welfare fell to local government. Thus, at the end of the 20th century, the main public social welfare organizer in Estonia is the local government and the local governments are part of the European Union since the year 2004.

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Summary “Contemporary European social work is based on the principles of collective responsibility, human rights, and social justice. The IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) declared that social work was, and always will be, a human rights occupation. Before for the described outcome of social work, the social work has required the aims, strategies and the methods of implementation. The preparation and adoption of the Social Care (Welfare) Act in 1995 followed the general principles of the corresponding law from 1925, in that the responsibility for organizing social welfare fell to local government. Thus, at the end of the 20th century, the main public social welfare organizer in Estonia is the local government and the local governments are part of the European Union since the year 2004.

Following an accountable approach, this research has aimed to explore developed accountability of social welfare in the rural local government.

The utilized methodology has been the collective case study (Mills 2010). I followed the information-oriented selection: the cases of maximum variation by size and location (Luck, Jackson & Usher 2006). Triangulation has been used as a procedure for acquiring data. Further analysis was conducted by using a taxonomic approach (Ragin 2011).

Findings : The lack of national regulation with a lesser understanding of social work has affected the local government's ability to interpret the best of available opinions. An agreement has been missing upon how the local government shares responsibility between the state, local

government and families. The current situation does not fp accountable: an unclear situation exists - who is the client in the rural local government? While pointing to the local-centered practice, whereby the local government's own practice of social work has been politically loaded.

Application : The question concerns the extent to which local governments should be responsible for ensuring that citizens' needs are met and how they should achieve this objective. Further, the main question is, how the knowledge about the value and goals of social work transfers into daily practice through understanding the contemporary rights of the EU citizenry and how to ensure the constitutional right of every citizen to receive the public benefit from a local government in case of need. Accountability of social work practice has given a place to fully involve service users and social workers in achieving better and safer results. On hand other, local citizens can participate in the development of services only through local social policy.

Keywords: case study, human rights, human services, rural social work, access to services, accountability.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Post-Soviet Model of Public Social Welfare in Local Government Professional social work in Estonia was restarted in 1991. Therefore, social work has been a new adoption of the post-communist society after regaining its independence. The preparation and adoption of the Social Care (Welfare) Act of Estonia in 1995 followed the general principles of the corresponding law from 1925. According to this,

the local government was responsible for organizing social welfare.

Estonian local governments have re-established the structures of local government, modelling them after the first period of independence. The administration of local governments concerns relations between central and local authorities, the way that they are structured, and the processes that they use to provide services at the local level (Chow & Austin 2008; Clegg & Bailey 2008).

In the 21st century, these local governments are part of the European Union. The new paradigm for European welfare is based on individualization and the ability of a person to cope with his/her life independently is in Europe very important. The orientation of European social policy has shifted from „protection shift“ to citizen-centred to empower every citizen, allowing active individual engagement. Sohlberg (2009) argued that fundamental rights are individual rights, independent of the identity of the beneficiary.

II. THE AIM AND METHODOLOGY

Since 1995, the main “organizer” of social work has been the local government. For 25 years (1995-20) social work practices in Estonian local governments have been growing very differently. Since 2004 Estonian local governments have been a part of the European Union. The focus of this research is on addressing rural local governments. This research aims to explore is the developed model of social work practice accountable in the local governments of rural Estonia.

The research strategy utilised has been the collective case study including meta-data from earlier papers. I employed information-oriented selection: the cases with maximum variation by size and location (Luck, Jackson & Usher 2006). The data of the case study has been based on a mix of evidence; triangulation has been applied as a method to acquire the data. The focus of my research has been on finding out does the dual welfare practice of local governments has been accountable. I followed the editorial analysisstyle

by Stake. It tackles recent events and issues and attempts to formulate viewpoints based on an objective analysis of happenings and conflicting/contrary opinions.

Based on Joshi (2013), the four elements of accountability are: setting standards, getting information about actions, making judgments of appropriateness, and sanctioning unsatisfactory performance. In the post-communist society, there was no qualification required by a person filling the position of a social worker (Raudava 2020,2018, 2017). Accountability in social work requires two dimensions, professionalism, and the knowledge-based nature of social work practice (Borrero, Martens and Borrero 2014; The Encyclopaedia of Canadian Social Work 2005, 303; Tsui & Cheng 2009). Therefore, elements of professional legitimacy and public order should be explored in accountability in administrative social work.

III. THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH

3.1 *The public order*

Responsibility for social welfare has been the jurisdiction of nation-states in the European Union. Local and central governments follow different rationales. While central governments must take responsibility for directing the nation, local government is primarily concerned with the public services affecting citizens in their everyday lives, whether it is providing refuse collection, road maintenance, or public social services.

In Estonia, the two laws, "The Social Welfare Act" and "The Local Government Organisation Act" (KOKS) list the social welfare obligations that are imposed on local governments. Local authorities are organised, and all matters of local life are resolved within the framework of the independent budget. The new law, "Local Government Finance Management Act" (passed 16.09.2010 RTI 2010, 72, 543; entry into force 1 January 2011(<http://www.legaltext.ee/text/en/2012X01.htm>), decreased the independence of the local government. However, the budget was restructured, and all local budgets are now part of the State's budget. Subsidiarity means that all

responsibilities of public authorities are fulfilled by the authorities closest to the citizen. Principles relating to local government (particularly the principles of subsidiarity) are reflected in the European Union Constitutional Treaty.

Since the local municipalities interpret their responsibilities in the field of social welfare organization in very different ways, the Chancellor of Justice Demanded a legal analysis of the situation in 2002. Regarding guaranteeing basic rights to the citizens, the general rule is that according to the 14th Article of the Constitution, every holder of public authority has to take certain responsibilities (Annus, Aaviksoo 2002). Central authorities have at least two types of responsibilities: 1) Primary Welfare Responsibility and 2) Responsibility to Enhance and Promote Voluntary and Municipal Welfare Services (Const. § 28, 3). According to the Constitution, the responsibility for social welfare services is placed on local authorities. The local welfare services are not to be equated with voluntary welfare services, since the municipality is a representative of the public authority (Annus, Aaviksoo 2002). The local government is convinced to be the main agent in the field of social welfare, especially in solving the problems of the availability of social services.

3.2 The Central-State benefits

Accorded to data, the type of state-centred practice refers to the state's decentralized duties. The local government administers subsistence benefits, disabled children benefit, and since 2014, the need-based (income-based) family benefit. The subsistence benefit is a form of state assistance for those in difficulty that is paid by the local government, administering the subsistence benefits is the most important task from State budget.

State's Welfare law and regulations control when and how welfare recipients' basic needs will be met (income-based control). In 2014, the first time, the Supreme Court of Estonia has publicized assessment to the subsistence benefit: "The limit of subsistence benefit is not comparable to the statistical minimum of

manageable income" (<http://www.nc.ee/?id=1479>). In 2023, the estimated subsistence minimum of 303.40 euros was the smallest amount that can cover the daily needs of a single-member household, i.e. a person living alone for 30 days, and is also the limit of absolute poverty.

3.3 The local-centred practice refers to the local government's own established practice.

The local governmental social welfare is the distribution of various types of social benefits, where the social benefits are separated for two standards:

- 1) The benefit enrolled of characteristics; the applicant has qualified as the term for example, the status (pupil, single, or disability); the age, the date (Christmas, the birthday) or the act (funeral);
- 2) The benefit is related to the level of income; the applicant has qualified as the situation of poor or crises; support to bear special care expenses for elderly and disabled people who are registered residents of the respective municipality.

For the individual level, it does help alleviate deep impoverishment only, the value of local benefits established at 20-100 € per applicant. In this situation, the question arises, Is the provision of financial support justified activity as postmodern-day perceptions or it does not? The social benefits are paid out from the budgets of local governments; thus the range of social benefits reflects directly the social policy of the respective municipality.

- 3) Decentralised social services (social services provided from the state budget) do not exist in the local government. Local social services are for example, home service, day centre). Under the Social Welfare Act, the local government is required to provide 13 social services, in addition to which other social services may be organised. The offered social services are not addressed in a systematic way that would result in a more individual approach to the client. The social worker intervenes or influences, but it allows the social worker to remain impulsive or to focus on

areas that seem to be more inspiring from his/her point of view. Direct face-to-face client work, which is one of the main methods of social work, was not described by "The Social Welfare Act" since 1997- 2024.

The list of social services, which is an obligation for local governments, has practically not changed since 2010. While the service standards for 13 social welfare services have been established by the Social Insurance Board (2018), the criteria for local social benefits have been established by local governments themselves.

The basis of social work practice includes an understanding of the process of identification and development of the client system that is adapted to work with individuals and families. Universal provision of social services in rural local governments does not yet exist. However, financial benefits and social services are not available to all at-risk groups. The responsibility of public agents is to guarantee the citizens the opportunity to receive necessary social services from the local government. It must be regarded as the responsibility of local government to synchronize information and plan activities following the European and state framework of laws and social policy. The right to receive assistance comes from the constitution, and the exercising of this right should not depend on the region and local authority, where the individual or the family lives. On the other hand, there are a small number of local residents who need the services, 1-2 people in the village. Inevitably, if the social services are only provided on the open market, then the people, who need the service, cannot afford the service.

3.4 Information about social services

Public information aims to inform the local people about the opportunities of service available. Public information is a public duty, each local government is obligated to provide information. All information about local affairs required to be public has been published on the website of the local government. Free and easy public access to the information of the Government is guarantee to be a part of being accountable.

The situation has been very different during the research period when data collecting started. The following titles were used on websites: 'Social Care and Health Care', 'Social Care', and 'Social'. After reform, local governments must use the same web design and the terms of the use are "social work" or "social services." Beginning in the 21st century, most local governments used the term "social care" or "social work."¹¹ However, information is difficult to find because foreign terminals and complex sentences are used.

Estonia is famous as a high-tech digital nation. The local governments have developed a procedure for applying for social benefits on the Internet. This affects the ability of the rural population to access social services or even to apply for social benefits. Although Estonia is considered a country with a high rate of internet use, the elderly and disabled people often do not have a computer or internet connection. Also, some single parents have had difficulties accessing the internet. Digital solutions could be an alternative but not made compulsory in the current circumstances. Estonian national progress remains inconsistent in this area.

3.5 Making judgements about appropriateness

The challenge is the question for the social worker profession. Estonia has been dominated in recent history by the principle of collegial decision-making - boards or panels, where the board or panel total was formed by local residents; this continues in the 21st century. However, independent social worker positions did not exist in local governments previously.

Social commissions and the practice, in which decisions regarding the client will be made in the township government or town council, were the result. Currently, there is no explicit requirement that all civil servants in the social welfare department should have a social worker education. According to the data, the social affairs committee sees their responsibility to the public, since they are dealing with small communities. Thus, they do not let personal accusations arise against the social worker.

On the hand other, the framework of decisions in local government have prevented professional social work, the decision-making process regarding the clients is distributed among different levels, the practice damages the independence of the social worker, and the social worker does not protect the rights of the client. The decision-making process of a case study is harmful to the client; social workers must protect the rights of clients.

The distribution of state benefits does not require a professional as the state sets conditions for calculating benefits based on mathematics: household income - expenses documented by accounting-type documents.

The distribution of various social benefits takes place in committees elected by residents. Therefore, unfortunately, I argue that the decision process at the client level is unaccountable in cases.

3.6 Assessment

Discuss for the control of local government, after the re-establishment of independence from the Soviet Union, county governments were restored; each county had a social department. During the early years, the county governments had their own independent budgets, which allocated money for the reconstruction of the social welfare system again; however, in each county, this was done differently. County governments took over the responsibility of administering nursing homes and children's homes, and as a representative of the state government, conducted supervision of local governments. The responsibilities and the opportunities of county governments have been steadily reduced over the years; the main role in the social field has now become control over the use of state budgetary funds. After the loss of county governments, the control was transferred to the Social Insurance Board. The substance benefit money is paid into the local budget from the State budget; the receipt of the funds is strictly regulated; the use of the funds is under the State's oversight. The subsistence benefit is incorporated, as a national support package, into the STAR (Social Affairs

Ministry) programs, which allows the use of the benefit to be more easy control.

The Ministry of Social Affairs has gathered statistics from local governments and providers of social services over the years. The IT "STAR" program launched in the winter of 2010, demands client work reports from social workers in addition to, statistical data and subsistence benefit calculations. The Ministry of Social Affairs compiles data to produce overall statistics but does not show the description of the situation on the ground. The social workers have argued that the program requires too much attention, and they do not have time for face-to-face client work. The bureaucracy has increased, but at the same time can not describe the positive impact on everyday local practice.

During the long period between 2002- 2011 there was no consistent public control over the social services of local government. The National Audit Office of Estonia published two reports in 2012: "Assumptions for Provision of Public Services in Small and Remote local authorities" and "Child Welfare and Child Protection as Local Government Functions need more specific rules".

As for the evaluation and assessment of the output of social services in the local government, the framework of the *social worker/social affairs committee* and *council/municipal council* is responsible for evaluation. However, the practice of evaluation is not accountable, and a detailed overview is laid out as the next item. The standards and certificates for the field of social work or social care are non-existent; therefore, control does not exist for social services in the local government.

IV. DISCUSSION

The ideological stream, New Public Management (NPM), emphasized the use of market mechanisms in the public sector to make managers and providers more responsive and accountable. Today's public agencies must demonstrate that they value diversity, understand and respect diverse cultures, and plan and provide culturally relevant and responsive

programs and services (Chow & Austin 2008). Therefore, the public organizations must be accountable. From the perspective of social work, accountability could be viewed through the interaction between professionalism and social work practice (Borrero, Martens, and Borrero 2014; Tsui & Cheng 2009; The Encyclopaedia of Canadian Social Work 2005, 303). As stated in Thomas (2013), accountability in social work means being obliged and responsible to others.

Social work can be defined in relationship with social welfare where the administration of social work transforms into human services. The practice of social work in Europe relates to social policies, depending on local history and traditions. The development of social work in Estonia has impacts from the first period of Estonian independence; from the experiences of the "Old Europe" and the Soviet period (Raudava 2013). The central government has decentralized most of all social welfare duties to the local government. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, Estonia's main public social welfare organizer was the local government. They have been a part of the European Union since 2004. The low state support combined with neoliberal ideology, the unclear duties, and the major contrast between regional economic environments have been important challenges in local governments. The social services have linked to social welfare budget (*de jure*, the local budget is part of the state's budget).

Social work was and always will be, a human rights occupation (Healy 2008). Human rights are integral to social work theory and practice. Human rights have been the declarative power concerning the legal system. The declarative situation changed when human rights and social services became legally binding in the European Union. Estonia is associated with the European legislation aimed to protect human and fundamental rights. Following the basic principle of the legal system where higher-level law is superior to lower-level law, the state's legal framework should conform to the European orders where the European laws regulate the rights of citizens.

Social work practice is based on the process of identifying and developing a client system that is tailored to work with individuals, families, and the community. According to the Estonian Social Welfare Act, target groups are children, people with disabilities, the elderly, prisoners freed, and people with emergency social needs. The core characteristics of local social welfare are the following: a) social benefits from the local budget; b) local social care services; and c) face-to-face services offered by the local social worker.

It is important to recognize that both the nature and purposes of social work are constructed within diverse social and political environments and take rather different forms in different societies. The foundation of practice in social work includes an understanding of the process of identification and development of the client system - it is adapted to work with individuals, families, groups, and communities. In their work, the social worker focuses on three main aspects: 1) definition of the client's needs (Coulshed & Orme 2006, 43); 2) contribution to the maintenance of social institutions; and 3) contribution to the preservation of the community (Payne 2005, 25) while ensuring the protection of the client. In other words, social workers act on micro, meso, and macro levels (Brueggemann 2005). The client system is the collection of people that the social worker is assigned to help.

Changing contexts of social work practice has given the place to fully involve service users and carers in delivering better and safer outcomes.

The procedure for obtaining social benefits needs to be more thought through and the distribution needs to be more accountable, only then can mutual trust and balance in the community be maintained.

A service user-led and relation-focused approach is an essential point in the discussion of accountability. This requires the local government to work effectively with people and families to make the most of their emotional and practical assets as well as access the social services and support they need. On the other hand, the users

as co-producers take up their civic roles as members of communities by cooperating with service managers and professionals or by building their services (Munday 2007).

Accountability in social work requires two dimensions, professionalism, and the knowledge-based nature of social work practice (Borrero, Martens and Borrero 2014; The Encyclopaedia of Canadian Social Work 2005, 303; Tsui & Cheng 2009). According to the results of early research, however, in the post-communist society, the local government did not have an official requirement for a professional social worker (Raudava 2018). From 2024, a requirement has been established that a social work official working in a local government must have a professional education.

The question concerns the extent to which local governments should be responsible for ensuring that citizens' needs are met and how they should achieve this objective. Further, the main question is, how the knowledge about the value and goals of social work transfers into daily practice through understanding the contemporary rights of the EU citizenry and how to ensure the constitutional right of every citizen to receive the public benefit from a local government in case of need.

V. CONCLUSION

The focus of social work is on promoting social change; the social work profession contributes to social change – there are a multitude of intervention domains depending on the subject problem area. According to van de Luitgaarden (2009, 39, 249), the criteria in social work practice are unique, they cannot be turned into objective numeric values. Its uniqueness makes weighing the results - as well as establishing functional relationships between criteria - impossible. Because these steps are necessary in analytical approaches, major social work decisions refer to intuition rather than analysis.

Accountability of social welfare involves laws, scientific knowledge, and, without forgetting the values of social work.

Like in the other European countries, the actual challenge of the Estonian public discussion is how the complex governance system where the national state with local governments shared the responsibility provides the public services. In particular, the controversial conversion of citizens into clients has led to a radical conceptual change in the provision of services and participation in European Social Welfare. In the new three level state, the client-centered paradigm of social welfare should rise into focus. There exist still many clashes with the European Social Model where local governments have either misunderstood their responsibility or have not sufficiently fulfilled their obligations. On hand other, local citizens can participate in the development of services only through local social policy.

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