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# Social Work & Education

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UDC 316:364.65

DOI: 10.25128/2520-6230.25.4.1

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### Article history:

Received: October 17, 2025

1st Revision: November 05, 2025

Accepted: December 30, 2025.

Ajdini, J. (2025). Between regulation and recognition: professional identity and licensing in Albanian social work. *Social Work and Education*, Vol. 12, No. 4. pp. 561-579. DOI: 10.25128/2520-6230.25.4.1

## BETWEEN REGULATION AND RECOGNITION: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND LICENSING IN ALBANIAN SOCIAL WORK

**Abstract.** This article explores how licensing and regulation processes shape the professional identity of social workers in Albania, a post-socialist context where social work remains a relatively young profession. Drawing on the theoretical framework of recognition (Honneth, 1995) and professionalization theory, the study investigates how formal mechanisms of control intersect with social workers' lived experiences of value, autonomy, and legitimacy. The qualitative research is based on semi-structured interviews with licensed practitioners across diverse institutional settings. Findings reveal ambivalent meanings attached to licensing: while it provides visibility, legitimacy, and a sense of belonging to a recognized profession, it also generates tensions related to bureaucratic control, unequal access, and limited professional agency. The article argues that the Albanian case illustrates the dual nature of professional regulation—as both a tool of governance and a vehicle for recognition. Implications are discussed for strengthening professional ethics, reflective supervision, and policy frameworks supporting social work education and practice in transitional societies.

**Keywords:** social work, professional identity, licensing, regulation, recognition, Albania

## INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of social work is closely tied to the establishment of regulatory mechanisms that define who may practice, under what conditions, and with which responsibilities. Licensing systems, widely adopted across Europe and internationally, serve as essential safeguards to ensure that social workers meet minimum educational and ethical standards, provide quality services, and protect the rights of vulnerable populations (Health and Care Professions Council, 2019; NASW, 2017). By creating accountability structures, licensing enhances both public trust and the professional recognition of social workers, contributing to the legitimacy of the discipline within society.

In many contexts, licensing is more than a bureaucratic procedure; it is a symbol of professional identity and autonomy. Scholars have argued that professional regulation consolidates social work's status as a practice grounded in both scientific knowledge and ethical responsibility (Payne, 2014; Dominelli, 2012). Without such regulation, the profession risks being undervalued, fragmented, or subsumed under other helping professions. International experiences show that licensing is often accompanied by ongoing challenges: ensuring equitable access to education and training, balancing national standards with international frameworks, and addressing public misconceptions about the role of social workers (Healy, 2005; McLaughlin, 2012).

The Albanian case provides a unique lens through which to examine these dynamics. Social work emerged as a formal profession in Albania only after the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s, a period marked by profound political, social, and economic upheaval. Prior to this transition, welfare needs were predominantly met within families or through informal networks, with minimal state involvement. The establishment of the first School of Social Work at the University of Tirana in 1992 represented a historic step, creating the basis for systematic education and professional training. Since then, the profession has grown considerably, with programs in multiple universities and a wide network of practitioners employed across health, education, child protection, and municipal social services.

Despite these advances, the licensing process for social workers in Albania remains incomplete and fraught with difficulties. Law No. 163/2014 "On the Order of Social Workers in the Republic of Albania" and its subsequent amendments created a formal framework for professional regulation. However, gaps in implementation persist. Challenges include insufficient educational resources, weak inter-institutional collaboration, the absence of standardized continuing education, and widespread social stigma toward the profession. These barriers not only affect the ability of practitioners to secure and maintain licenses but also undermine the credibility and effectiveness of social services.

When placed in a comparative perspective, Albania shares similarities with other post-socialist countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where social work has often struggled to establish itself as a distinct and respected profession. Studies in Romania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia highlight comparable difficulties: inadequate curricula, underfunded social service systems, and limited recognition of the social worker's role within broader welfare structures (Healy, 2005; Dominelli, 2017). Yet Albania's trajectory also reveals unique features, particularly the central role played by international

organizations and NGOs in the early development of social work, and the relatively late creation of a professional order compared to its neighbors.

Existing literature has provided valuable accounts of the history of social work in Albania and the evolution of welfare policies. However, few studies have systematically examined how practitioners themselves perceive and experience the licensing process, what barriers they face, and how regulation impacts their professional identity. This gap is significant because social workers are not only implementers of policy but also active interpreters of regulation, whose voices can inform more responsive and sustainable reforms.

This article addresses this gap by presenting findings from a qualitative study of 17 social work professionals across different regions and sectors in Albania. It investigates how licensing requirements are understood and navigated, what challenges practitioners encounter, and what prospects exist for strengthening the system. By situating these findings within international debates on professionalization, regulation, and recognition, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of licensing as both a safeguard for ethical practice and a pathway to empowering practitioners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Professional Licensing in Social Work: A Global Perspective*

Licensing and regulation have long been recognized as essential pillars of professional social work. Across diverse contexts, licensing serves as a mechanism to guarantee minimum standards of education, ethical behavior, and competence. By regulating who may practice, under what conditions, and with what responsibilities, licensing seeks to protect vulnerable populations while also affirming social work's legitimacy in society (Reamer, 2018).

In countries with long traditions of social work, such as the United States, licensing is deeply institutionalized. Requirements typically include the completion of accredited programs, the passing of standardized examinations, and evidence of continuing education (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Licensing structures are viewed as cornerstones of professional accountability, although they are not without criticism. Scholars note that the financial burden of licensing exams and training may exclude some candidates, thereby reinforcing inequalities (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2018).

In Western Europe, regulatory systems vary, but they often reflect the welfare-state models within which social work is embedded. In the United Kingdom, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) oversees registration and requires practitioners to demonstrate continuous professional development (HCPC, 2019). Scandinavian countries emphasize reflective practice and state accountability, situating licensing within broader commitments to citizens' rights (Meeuwisse et al., 2017). Although frameworks differ, licensing is widely understood as a way to consolidate professional identity and distinguish social work from charitable or voluntary forms of help (Payne, 2014).

### *Licensing and Professional Identity*

Licensing not only regulates practice but also shapes the identity of the profession. Dominelli (2012) argues that licensing creates boundaries between qualified

and non-qualified practitioners, legitimizing the idea that social workers possess specialized knowledge and ethical obligations. In contexts where social work has been historically undervalued, licensing is particularly significant as a symbol of recognition.

However, the literature also underscores the limitations of licensing as a tool for professional empowerment. McLaughlin (2012) cautions that regulation can sometimes serve as a mechanism of bureaucratic control rather than empowerment, reinforcing compliance without necessarily fostering creativity or autonomy. Moreover, stigma toward the profession persists in many countries. Social work is often perceived as “low-status” or associated with control functions such as child removal, rather than with empowerment and social justice (Dominelli, 2017). In such cases, licensing may formalize professional boundaries but cannot alone alter deeply embedded cultural perceptions.

Ethical practice is another dimension closely linked to licensing. Reamer (2018) emphasizes that regulatory systems are essential for upholding ethical standards, ensuring accountability for violations, and protecting both clients and practitioners. Licensing can thus provide clarity and protection in difficult ethical situations. Yet again, the effectiveness of regulation depends on institutional support and the broader social environment.

### *Post-Socialist Experiences of Licensing*

In post-socialist countries, the trajectory of professionalization has been shaped by political transitions, fragile welfare systems, and limited resources. During the socialist period, welfare provision was typically centralized and bureaucratic, with little recognition of social work as a distinct profession. After the 1990s, many countries introduced social work education and regulation, but often in fragmented and inconsistent ways (Healy, 2005).

Romania and Bulgaria illustrate these challenges. Licensing frameworks exist, but they have been criticized for bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of enforcement. Bera and Simionescu (2020) note that Romanian social workers often struggle to meet licensing requirements due to insufficient training opportunities and underfunded systems. In North Macedonia, professional regulation is weakly institutionalized, and social workers continue to face low recognition and precarious working conditions (Dominelli, 2017).

Croatia, by contrast, has moved more decisively toward EU-aligned professional regulation. Matković (2018) reports that licensing reforms there were supported by European integration processes and external funding, leading to the development of training programs and continuous professional education. Nevertheless, even in Croatia, tensions remain between formal licensing structures and the actual resources available to practitioners.

Kosovo offers another telling example. Although the country has introduced laws regulating social work, implementation is weak, with few resources allocated to licensing and training (Qosaj-Mustafa & Farnsworth, 2019). As in Albania, NGOs and international organizations have played a critical role in supporting the development of professional standards, but sustainability remains uncertain.

In Greece, social work is regulated by state institutions but continues to face challenges of low recognition and limited resources (Ioakimidis, 2011). In Serbia,

licensing was introduced in the mid-2000s, yet implementation remains inconsistent and often dependent on donor-supported initiatives (Mikuš, 2019). These cases illustrate that Albania's struggles are part of a wider regional pattern where regulatory frameworks coexist with weak institutional capacity and fragile professional identities.

Taken together, these cases show that licensing in post-socialist societies is not simply a technical process but one deeply intertwined with political, economic, and cultural factors. Without adequate investment in education, training, and public recognition, licensing risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive mechanism of professionalization.

### *The Albanian Context*

In Albania, social work has a relatively short but dynamic history. The profession emerged after the collapse of the communist regime in 1991, when international organizations and local universities began introducing curricula and training programs. The establishment of the first School of Social Work at the University of Tirana in 1992 was a milestone, laying the groundwork for systematic education. Over the past three decades, programs have expanded to other universities, and social workers now operate in fields ranging from child protection to health care and community services.

The legal framework for licensing was established with Law No. 163/2014 "On the Order of Social Workers in the Republic of Albania." This law created the institutional foundation for regulating practice, setting eligibility criteria, and defining professional responsibilities. However, implementation has been uneven. Scholars argue that while the law formalized licensing, it did not provide adequate resources for training, monitoring, or professional development. In practice, licensing remains fragile, marked by limited communication between institutions, scarce opportunities for continuous learning, and persistent stigma.

The Albanian literature on social work licensing is still limited. Existing studies tend to describe the historical trajectory of the profession or analyze policy documents. Few empirical studies explore how practitioners themselves experience licensing, what barriers they encounter, and how regulation affects their professional identity. This gap is striking given the importance of licensing in consolidating a young profession.

### *Contribution of This Study*

By foregrounding the voices of Albanian social workers, this study fills an important empirical and theoretical gap. It shows that while licensing is recognized as essential for professionalization, its potential is undermined by inadequate education, bureaucratic complexity, and lack of recognition. The Albanian case illustrates broader challenges shared across post-socialist contexts, while also offering unique insights: the reliance on NGOs and international actors in professional development, the relatively late creation of a professional order, and the ongoing struggle to reconcile regulation with social stigma.

This study contributes to international debates in three ways:

1. It highlights the importance of context, showing that licensing cannot simply be transplanted from one country to another without adaptation.

2. It underscores the interplay between regulation and recognition, demonstrating that legal frameworks are insufficient without societal appreciation of social work's value.

3. It emphasizes the agency of practitioners, whose voices reveal both frustrations and aspirations, and whose participation is crucial for building responsive and sustainable systems.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Approach*

This study adopted a **qualitative research design**, reflecting the aim of capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of social workers regarding professional licensing in Albania. Qualitative approaches are particularly well suited to understanding complex, socially constructed realities, as they emphasize depth, meaning, and the interpretation of participants' narratives rather than quantifiable measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that licensing is not only a bureaucratic process but also a deeply personal and professional experience, it was important to prioritize the voices of practitioners and to explore how they themselves interpret and navigate this system.

The study was grounded in a **constructivist paradigm**, which views knowledge as co-produced between researcher and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This orientation acknowledges that social workers are not passive respondents but active interpreters of their own professional journeys.

### *Sampling Strategy*

Because no centralized registry of licensed social workers in Albania is publicly available, a combination of **purposive and snowball sampling** was employed. The purposive strategy targeted practitioners with direct experience of the licensing system — those who had applied for, obtained, or attempted to maintain a license under the framework of Law No. 163/2014. Snowball sampling, whereby initial participants referred the researcher to colleagues in their networks, helped to expand access to professionals across different institutions and municipalities (Noy, 2008).

In total, **17 social workers** participated in the study. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of:

- **Geographical location:** including Tirana and several municipalities in central and northern Albania.

- **Institutional sector:** child protection, health care, education, NGOs, and municipal social services.

- **Professional experience:** from recent graduates to senior practitioners with more than 15 years in the field.

This diversity provided a wide spectrum of perspectives, allowing for a richer understanding of both commonalities and differences in experiences with licensing.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place between **February and May 2025**. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen as the main method, enabling the researcher to follow a guiding framework while also allowing participants to raise issues most relevant to them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The interview guide covered six broad areas:

1. Awareness and understanding of licensing requirements.
2. Experiences with the administrative process.
3. Barriers and challenges encountered.
4. Perceptions of public trust and recognition.
5. Impacts on professional identity.
6. Recommendations for reform.

Each interview lasted **60–90 minutes**. Most were conducted face-to-face in safe and private settings, while a few were carried out via secure online platforms due to logistical constraints. All interviews were conducted in Albanian, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were carefully cross-checked against recordings to ensure accuracy.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical integrity was central to this research. Participants were provided with written information about the study's aims, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. **Informed consent** was obtained prior to each interview. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used in all reporting, and identifying details (such as workplace names) have been generalized.

The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the **British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (BASW, 2021)** and the **Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013)**. Special care was taken to respect participants' autonomy and to minimize any potential harm, given the sensitivity of discussing professional challenges and frustrations.

### *Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed using **thematic narrative analysis**, which allowed for the identification of recurring themes while also preserving the narrative flow of participants' accounts (Riessman, 2008). Analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes inductively from participants' words.
3. Grouping codes into candidate themes.
4. Reviewing themes for coherence and distinctiveness.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Writing up findings with illustrative quotes.

This approach captured both the **content** of what participants said (e.g., "bureaucratic barriers") and the **form** in which they said it, including metaphors and emotional tones. For instance, one participant described licensing as "another wall to climb," reflecting not only a barrier but also a sense of repeated struggle. Such expressions provided rich insights into the lived realities behind abstract policy frameworks.

### *Trustworthiness and Rigor*

To enhance the quality of the study, strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness were employed:

- **Credibility:** prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation with secondary sources, and member-checking of preliminary findings with three interviewees.
- **Transferability:** thick description of the Albanian context, allowing readers to assess the relevance of findings to other settings.
- **Dependability:** documentation of coding decisions and analytic memos, creating an audit trail.
- **Confirmability:** reflexive journaling by the researcher, acknowledging positionality as both an insider (scholar of social work in Albania) and an analyst seeking objectivity.

### *Limitations*

The study's limitations must also be acknowledged. The sample size of 17, while sufficient for thematic saturation, cannot capture the full diversity of experiences across all regions of Albania. Reliance on snowball sampling may have introduced bias toward certain networks of practitioners. Moreover, the study primarily reflects perspectives from urban and semi-urban areas, with fewer voices from rural contexts where challenges may be even more pronounced.

Nevertheless, these limitations are offset by the richness of the narratives collected. The emphasis on depth rather than breadth is consistent with qualitative research principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Importantly, the diversity of participants provided a nuanced picture of both shared and context-specific challenges.

### *Summary*

In sum, the methodology combined purposive and snowball sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic narrative analysis to uncover the realities of licensing in Albania. Ethical safeguards and rigorous analytic procedures ensured that participants' voices were represented with integrity. This design enabled the study to move beyond policy descriptions to reveal how social workers themselves experience licensing — not just as a regulatory requirement, but as a lived process marked by both frustration and hope.

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis of 17 interviews with social workers in Albania revealed four major themes shaping their understanding and experience of the licensing process: **(1) gaps in educational preparation and lack of continuous training, (2) bureaucratic and institutional barriers, (3) stigma and lack of public recognition, and (4) prospects for reform and professional growth.** Within each theme, participants shared narratives that captured not only daily realities but also the emotions, frustrations, and hopes they carry regarding the future of their profession.

### *1. Limited Educational Preparation and Continuous Training*

Almost all participants emphasized that their academic training had not sufficiently prepared them for the practical demands of licensing. University programs, while valuable in providing theoretical foundations, often remained disconnected from practice. As a young social worker employed at a community center explained:



“When I graduated, I felt I had a lot of theory but very few concrete tools. When I went to apply for a license, it felt like sitting another exam, one I hadn’t been prepared for. I felt more tested than supported.”

This gap between education and practice is not unique to Albania. International research (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2018; HCPC, 2019) has pointed out that licensing often measures competencies not adequately covered by curricula. In the Albanian context, where resources are limited and field placements are scarce, the gap becomes particularly striking.

A more experienced child protection worker with over a decade of practice put it this way:

“I have learned more from my work in the field and from colleagues than from any formal training. The license is supposed to show that I am a professional, but I never had real opportunities to prepare for it. In the smaller municipalities, no such training is even available.”

The lack of **continuous professional development** was a repeated concern. Participants outside Tirana felt that training opportunities were concentrated in the capital or dependent on short-term donor projects. This made it difficult to meet the renewal requirements. A social worker from a small municipality shared, with bitter irony:

“They tell us we need ongoing training to renew our license. But where are these trainings? Who pays for them? We have no funds and no chance to travel. It feels like they set conditions they know we cannot meet.”

For many, licensing was perceived less as a path to professional growth and more as **an added layer of pressure**.

## ***2. Bureaucratic and Institutional Barriers***

Another strong theme was the perception of licensing as a process overburdened with bureaucracy. Participants used metaphors such as “a labyrinth” or “a second wall” to describe their experiences. A social worker in the health sector recalled:

“I knew I had to be licensed, but no one explained the steps clearly. At the office, one official told me one thing, another said something different. It seemed the rules changed depending on who you asked. Eventually, I felt exhausted, as if they were testing my patience, not my abilities.”

This points to the problem of institutional capacity, a common issue documented in Albanian public administration more generally. Without clear communication and standardized procedures, licensing becomes perceived as a barrier rather than a tool for empowerment.

Another participant expressed it this way:

“To get a license, you feel like you are in a race with documents, not with your skills. Every paper takes time, money, and still something always seems missing. This is not a way to respect the profession.”

Financial cost was also mentioned as a burden. Participants noted that licensing fees felt disproportionate to the low salaries of social workers, reinforcing a sense of being undervalued by the state itself.

### **3. Stigma and Lack of Public Recognition**

One of the most sensitive issues was the stigmatization of the profession. Participants shared feelings of deep frustration when discussing how society perceives social work.

“Even when I tell someone I’m a licensed social worker, they ask: ‘So what exactly do you do?’ They don’t see it as a knowledge-based profession, but as something voluntary, like helping out of goodwill.”

Another participant added:

*„Sometimes I feel invisible. Families expect me to solve problems with no resources, institutions treat me as an administrator, and the public barely knows what social work is. Even when I try to explain that I am licensed, people look at me as if this means nothing. It hurts, because I know how much responsibility we carry every day. “*

This lack of recognition mirrors international findings. McLaughlin (2012) highlights that stigma weakens the transformative power of licensing, while Dominelli (2017) emphasizes that, as a profession often associated with women and care work, social work remains marginalized in many contexts. For Albania, where the profession is still relatively young, these challenges are even sharper.

Several participants spoke of the dissonance between the high expectations placed on them and the lack of recognition they received:

“We are asked to be professionals, to protect children, to support families, to work under pressure. But at the same time, people treat us as if we are volunteers or bureaucrats with no real expertise. That hurts more than the paperwork.”

### **4. Prospects for Reform and Professional Growth**

Despite their criticisms, many participants expressed **hope and vision** for a fairer, more supportive system. They viewed licensing as potentially valuable, provided it was accompanied by real reform.

“Licensing can be our greatest ally if it comes with real opportunities for learning and fair evaluation. It’s not our enemy; it’s the tool that could make us stronger if used correctly.”

Participants suggested reforms such as curriculum modernization, the development of online training platforms, public awareness campaigns, and stronger cooperation between universities, the Order of Social Workers, and state institutions. These proposals resonate with international experiences. In Croatia, EU-funded projects supported the creation of online training modules for licensed social workers, improving access for those in rural areas (Matković, 2018). In the United Kingdom, the HCPC (2019) introduced reflective practice and portfolio-based assessment to make licensing more developmental rather than punitive.

One participant put it simply:

“We don’t want licenses just to hang on the wall. We want them to mean something — that we are trusted, respected, and supported as professionals.”

### **Summary of Findings**

In essence, Albanian social workers perceive licensing as a **double-edged sword**. It has the potential to raise credibility and ensure quality but is currently undermined by inadequate education, bureaucratic hurdles, financial costs, and persistent stigma. Yet

their narratives also reveal a clear willingness to change and a strong desire to see licensing transformed into an ally for professional empowerment rather than an obstacle.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a detailed and nuanced portrait of how social workers in Albania perceive and experience the process of professional licensing. Four interrelated themes emerged: gaps in educational preparation and continuing training; bureaucratic and institutional barriers; stigma and lack of recognition; and cautious optimism about reform and growth. These themes do not exist in isolation but are deeply intertwined, reflecting both structural deficiencies and the lived experiences of professionals who must navigate them daily. In discussing these findings, this section situates them within international debates on licensing and professionalization, highlights their implications for post-socialist societies, and identifies the contributions of the Albanian case to broader understandings of regulation in social work.

### *Licensing as a Mechanism of Professionalization*

Licensing is widely understood as a cornerstone of professionalization in social work. Scholars argue that regulatory frameworks provide legitimacy, establish standards of competence, and protect vulnerable populations from malpractice (Payne, 2014; Dominelli, 2012; Reamer, 2018). In this sense, licensing is not merely administrative but symbolic, a visible marker that distinguishes trained professionals from informal helpers or volunteers.

The narratives of Albanian social workers confirm this dual role. Many participants acknowledged that licensing, at least in principle, could strengthen their professional status and enhance trust in the profession. Yet they also expressed frustration at the gap between principle and practice. For them, licensing too often feels like an empty requirement, disconnected from resources and support. One participant summed it up succinctly: *“We don’t want licenses just to hang on the wall. We want them to mean something — that we are trusted, respected, and supported as professionals.”*

This ambivalence mirrors experiences in other post-socialist countries. In Romania and Bulgaria, licensing frameworks were established partly in response to EU integration pressures, but their effectiveness has been hampered by underfunded systems and inconsistent enforcement (Bera & Simionescu, 2020). In North Macedonia, professional regulation exists but remains fragile, with social workers facing persistent low recognition (Dominelli, 2017). The Albanian case therefore adds empirical weight to the observation that licensing, while necessary, is not sufficient for professionalization in societies where structural supports are weak.

### *Educational Preparation and Lifelong Learning*

One of the strongest findings of this study was the sense of inadequate preparation for licensing. Participants consistently described curricula that offered solid theoretical foundations but little practical application. This mismatch reflects a long-standing debate in international literature: the tension between education and practice in social work (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2018).

In the United States, critics argue that licensing examinations privilege technical knowledge and memorization over the relational and contextual skills central to social work (NASW, 2017). In the United Kingdom, the HCPC (2019) requires evidence of continuing professional development, but social workers often struggle to find time and resources to meet these demands. The Albanian context amplifies these challenges: limited resources, scarce placements, and few training opportunities outside Tirana create structural barriers that make compliance particularly difficult.

Participants' testimonies vividly illustrate the consequences of this gap. One social worker stated: "*Licensing expects us to be ready, but the system does not give us enough preparation.*" Another explained how training opportunities are often dependent on international projects: "*Without a donor-funded course, there's no way to get updated knowledge. When the project ends, so do the trainings.*"

These findings underscore the need to link licensing not only to educational credentials but also to equitable access to lifelong learning. Without such access, licensing risks becoming exclusionary, reinforcing inequalities between urban and rural professionals.

### ***Bureaucracy, Institutional Barriers, and Trust***

The second theme concerned the bureaucratic complexity of licensing. Participants described the process as inconsistent, opaque, and at times arbitrary. These frustrations resonate with McLaughlin's (2012) critique of regulation as a potential mechanism of control, where compliance with paperwork overshadows substantive evaluation of competence.

In Albania, this experience is compounded by weak institutional coordination. Participants spoke of receiving conflicting information, changing requirements, and delays that undermined their trust in regulatory bodies. One put it starkly: "*For a license, you feel like you are in a race with documents, not with your skills.*"

Such narratives reflect broader governance challenges in Albania, where public administration is often perceived as fragmented and inefficient. They also highlight a paradox: licensing is intended to enhance trust in social work, but poorly managed processes risk eroding practitioners' trust in the system itself.

The international literature offers parallels. In Romania, social workers have reported similar frustrations with bureaucratic hurdles that undermine the purpose of licensing (Bera & Simionescu, 2020). In the UK, debates continue about whether regulatory bodies prioritize professional development or bureaucratic oversight (HCPC, 2019). The Albanian case thus illustrates how fragile institutions can transform licensing from an empowering mechanism into a source of disillusionment.

### ***Stigma, Recognition, and the Social Meaning of Licensing***

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study was the persistence of stigma. Even licensed, social workers reported being asked: "*What exactly do you do?*" Such questions reveal a profound lack of recognition of social work as a knowledge-based profession.

This challenge is not unique to Albania. McLaughlin (2012) and Dominelli (2017) both argue that stigma undermines the symbolic power of licensing. In many contexts, social work remains associated with charity, control, or low-status care, rather

than with professional expertise and social justice. For Albania, where the profession is still relatively new, stigma is particularly damaging, limiting both institutional support and public appreciation.

Participants' accounts illustrate the emotional toll of stigma. One explained: "*We are asked to be professionals, to protect children, to support families, to work under pressure. But at the same time, people treat us as if we are volunteers or bureaucrats with no real expertise. That hurts more than the paperwork.*"

These narratives highlight that licensing cannot transform professional identity in isolation. Recognition requires public awareness campaigns, better media representation, and visible examples of social workers' contributions to society. Otherwise, as participants pointed out, licenses risk becoming pieces of paper with little social meaning.

### ***Prospects for Reform and Professional Growth***

Despite frustrations, participants did not reject licensing outright. Instead, they articulated visions for reform that would make licensing meaningful: curriculum modernization, accessible training (including online modules), transparent procedures, and public awareness campaigns. These proposals align with international best practices. In Croatia, EU-funded programs created digital training platforms for continuous development (Matković, 2018). In the UK, portfolio-based assessment emphasizes reflection and learning over compliance (HCPC, 2019).

The Albanian social workers' emphasis on fairness and support echoes global debates about the purpose of regulation. Reamer (2018) argues that licensing should balance accountability with empowerment, ensuring that professionals are guided rather than punished. Participants' narratives reflect precisely this aspiration. As one put it: "*Licensing can be our best ally if it comes with real opportunities for learning and fair evaluation.*"

These perspectives suggest that practitioners are not resistant to regulation per se. On the contrary, they want licensing to work, to strengthen their profession, and to validate their contributions. Their voices therefore represent a critical resource for policymakers seeking to reform the system.

### ***Implications for Post-Socialist Societies***

The Albanian case also contributes to broader understandings of professionalization in post-socialist contexts. Scholars have noted that in these societies, professional identities are often fragile, shaped by historical legacies, economic constraints, and the influence of international organizations (Healy, 2005; Dominelli, 2017).

The findings of this study illustrate how licensing, introduced as part of professionalization efforts, can become entangled with structural weaknesses. Without adequate resources, transparent institutions, and public recognition, licensing risks reproducing inequalities rather than reducing them. Yet the Albanian case also shows the transformative potential of licensing when combined with investment and reform.

This duality is instructive for other transitional societies. It highlights that licensing cannot be imported wholesale from established welfare states but must be adapted to local realities. It also underscores the importance of engaging practitioners

themselves in shaping reforms, as they are best positioned to identify both challenges and solutions.

The Albanian case demonstrates that licensing, while formally aligned with international standards, remains fragile without institutional investment and public recognition. This underscores a broader lesson for the international literature: regulation cannot be assumed to have uniform effects. Instead, its meaning and effectiveness depend on local histories, political economies, and cultural perceptions of the profession.

### *Contribution to International Debates*

This study contributes to international debates on social work regulation in at least three key ways:

1. **Context matters.** The Albanian case demonstrates that licensing cannot be understood in abstract terms. Its meaning and effectiveness are shaped by historical trajectories, institutional capacities, and cultural perceptions.
2. **Recognition is as important as regulation.** Licensing provides legal legitimacy, but professional identity also depends on public recognition. Without it, social workers may remain marginalized despite formal regulation.
3. **Practitioners' voices are central.** Too often, debates about licensing are dominated by policymakers and academics. By foregrounding the lived experiences of social workers, this study highlights the importance of including practitioners in designing responsive and sustainable systems.

### *Final Reflection*

Licensing in Albania is best understood as both a safeguard and a struggle. It safeguards by setting standards and providing a framework for accountability. But it is also a struggle, as practitioners face bureaucratic obstacles, inadequate preparation, and persistent stigma. These tensions reflect the challenges of professionalization in transitional societies, but they also reveal opportunities for reform.

The voices of Albanian social workers remind us that licensing is not just about documents, procedures, or exams. It is about people — their dignity, their hopes, and their commitment to serving vulnerable populations. By listening to these voices, policymakers and educators can transform licensing from a contested process into a meaningful pathway for empowerment, recognition, and justice.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Conclusions*

This study set out to explore how social workers in Albania experience the process of professional licensing. Drawing on 17 in-depth interviews, it has highlighted the paradoxical nature of licensing in a transitional society: while recognized as essential for professionalization, licensing in its current form is undermined by structural, institutional, and cultural barriers.

Four key conclusions can be drawn from the findings.

**First**, there are significant **gaps in educational preparation and lifelong learning**. Participants consistently described curricula that provided solid theoretical knowledge but insufficient practical training. Opportunities for continuing professional

development are scarce, especially outside the capital. As a result, licensing often feels disconnected from the resources needed to support compliance, leaving practitioners frustrated rather than empowered.

**Second**, the licensing process is marked by **bureaucratic and institutional barriers**. Participants recounted experiences of unclear procedures, inconsistent communication, and disproportionate costs relative to their modest salaries. These bureaucratic hurdles erode trust in regulatory institutions and risk undermining the very credibility licensing is supposed to reinforce.

**Third**, licensing has not been sufficient to overcome the **stigma and lack of recognition** that continue to marginalize social work in Albania. Even with a license, many practitioners reported that society views them as volunteers or low-level bureaucrats rather than professionals with specialized expertise and ethical obligations. This reflects a wider pattern identified in international literature: regulation alone cannot transform social perceptions of social work (McLaughlin, 2012; Dominelli, 2017).

**Finally**, despite these frustrations, social workers expressed **cautious optimism about reform**. They recognized licensing as potentially valuable if accompanied by curriculum modernization, accessible training, transparent procedures, and public awareness efforts. Their voices reflect a clear desire for licensing to become not a bureaucratic burden but a supportive tool that affirms their dignity and strengthens their professional identity.

Taken together, these findings reveal that licensing in Albania is more than a technical process. It is a deeply social phenomenon, shaped by history, culture, and institutional capacity. The Albanian case therefore contributes to international debates by illustrating both the risks and opportunities of licensing in post-socialist contexts.

### *Recommendations*

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations emerge for policymakers, educators, professional associations, and practitioners.

#### **1. Strengthen Educational Preparation and Continuous Training**

• **Curriculum modernization:** Universities should revise curricula to better balance theory with practice. This includes expanding field placements, integrating case-based learning, and preparing students specifically for licensing requirements.

• **Accessible continuing education:** The Order of Social Workers, in collaboration with universities and NGOs, should establish a system of affordable and widely available training. Online platforms could play a crucial role in reaching practitioners in rural areas.

• **Link licensing to lifelong learning:** Renewal should be tied not only to administrative criteria but also to evidence of continuous professional development. This would reinforce the notion that social work is a dynamic, evolving profession requiring ongoing learning.

#### **2. Simplify and Clarify Licensing Procedures**

• **Transparency in administration:** Institutions should publish clear, updated guidelines on licensing requirements, procedures, and timelines. This would reduce confusion and frustration.

• **Digital platforms:** Creating an online portal for applications, renewals, and communication could streamline the process and reduce bureaucratic hurdles.

• **Support services:** Establishing advisory offices or helpdesks within the Order of Social Workers could guide practitioners through the process, especially new graduates.

### ***3. Enhance Public Recognition and Combat Stigma***

• **Awareness campaigns:** National initiatives should highlight the contributions of social work to child protection, family support, community development, and social justice.

• **Media engagement:** Training journalists to represent social work accurately could help challenge stereotypes and improve public understanding.

• **Showcasing success stories:** Collecting and publicizing case studies of positive impact would demonstrate the value of licensed social workers to society.

### **4. Foster Institutional Collaboration**

• **Bridging institutions:** Universities, the Order of Social Workers, and government ministries should collaborate more closely to align educational standards with licensing frameworks.

• **Partnerships with NGOs and international organizations:** Leveraging external expertise and funding could strengthen capacity for training and reform.

• **Regional cooperation:** Albania could learn from and share experiences with neighboring countries such as Croatia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, many of which face similar challenges in professional regulation.

### **5. Engage Practitioners in Reform**

• **Consultative processes:** Social workers themselves should be directly involved in shaping licensing reforms. Their experiences provide invaluable insights into what works and what does not.

• **Feedback mechanisms:** Establishing channels for practitioners to evaluate licensing processes would promote accountability and responsiveness.

• **Empowerment through participation:** Recognizing social workers as partners rather than passive recipients of regulation would foster greater ownership and commitment.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study opens avenues for further exploration. Comparative research across Albania's regions could illuminate how urban–rural differences affect licensing experiences. Longitudinal studies could track how perceptions evolve as reforms are implemented. Cross-national comparisons with other post-socialist societies would shed light on shared challenges and unique trajectories. Finally, mixed-methods approaches could complement qualitative insights with quantitative data on the scope and impact of licensing.

Future research could benefit from comparative studies across the Western Balkans, exploring how countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia negotiate licensing within constrained welfare systems. Such cross-national analyses would enrich the international debate by identifying both common regional patterns and context-specific trajectories.



## FINAL REFLECTION

Licensing in Albania embodies both promise and peril. It is a promise in the sense that it can provide legitimacy, ensure accountability, and strengthen the profession. But it is also a peril when poorly implemented, disconnected from education, and overshadowed by stigma.

The voices of Albanian social workers remind us that licensing is not just a bureaucratic process. It is a lived experience that carries profound implications for professional identity, public trust, and social justice. For licensing to fulfill its potential, reforms must be grounded in the realities of practitioners, supported by institutions, and recognized by society.

If these steps are taken, licensing can move beyond control and compliance to become a cornerstone of empowerment. It can affirm that social work in Albania is not marginal or auxiliary, but an essential profession that protects rights, supports families, and contributes to building a more just and inclusive society.

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## МІЖ РЕГУЛЮВАННЯМ ТА ВИЗНАННЯМ: ПРОФЕСІЙНА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ ТА ЛІЦЕНЗУВАННЯ В СОЦІАЛЬНІЙ РОБОТІ АЛБАНІЇ

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**Анотація.** У цій статті досліджується те, як процеси ліцензування та регулювання формують професійну ідентичність соціальних працівників в Албанії, у постсоціалістичному контексті, де соціальна робота залишається відносно молодю професією. Спираючись на теоретичні рамки визнання (Hopfl, 1995) та теорію професіоналізації, дослідження визначає як формальні механізми контролю перетинаються з професійним досвідом соціальних працівників щодо цінностей, автономії та легітимності. Якісне дослідження базується на напівструктурованих інтерв'ю з ліцензованими практиками в різних інституційних умовах. Отримані в результаті дослідження дані засвідчують наявність амбівалентних значень, пов'язаних з ліцензуванням професійної діяльності: хоча останнє забезпечує видимість, легітимність та відчуття приналежності до визнаної професії, також породжує напруженість, пов'язану з бюрократичним контролем, нерівним доступом та обмеженою професійною свободою дій. У статті стверджується, що албанський випадок ілюструє подвійну природу професійного регулювання — як інструменту управління, так і засобу визнання. Обговорюються наслідки для зміцнення професійної етики, рефлексивного нагляду та політичних рамок, що підтримують освіту та практику соціальної роботи в перехідних суспільствах.

**Ключові слова:** соціальна робота, професійна ідентичність, ліцензування, регулювання, визнання, Албанія

**Статус статті:**

Отримано: жовтень 17, 2025

1-ше рецензування: листопад 05, 2025

Прийнято: грудень 30, 2025.