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The Social Work Practice in the Assessment of the Best Interests of the Child in Lithuania and Latvia

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Abstract

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Keywords: Social work practice, best interests of the child, assessment, child protection.

The assessment of the best interests of the child is a foundational principle in child protection, rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This study explores how social workers in Lithuania and Latvia operationalize this principle in practice while navigating socio-legal systems. Drawing upon ecological systems theory, complexity theory, and critical theory, the research utilizes a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews with social workers and document analysis of relevant laws, methodological tools, and national guidelines. Key findings reveal that while social workers prioritize child-centered assessments, their ability to consistently uphold the best interests principle is limited by systemic challenges. These challenges include inadequate resources, challenges in interprofessional collaboration, and procedural rigidity. The study also highlights how cultural values, legal mandates, and power dynamics shape assessment outcomes, often resulting in tensions between policy ideals and practice realities. Through theoretical and methodological triangulation, this research emphasizes the need for enhanced training, supportive supervision, child-inclusive methods, and structural reforms to align national child protection systems with international standards. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities social workers face and their critical role in promoting children's rights and well-being.

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"An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest." - Benjamin Franklin.

Completing this thesis is not just finishing a chapter, but the result of many seeds planted in curiosity and hard work. This milestone, though marked by my name, stands on the shoulders of many.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the best interests of the child has been the subject of more academic analysis than any other concept included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It is one of the most important – if not the most important – concepts in the child right's context. However, it is one of the most difficult concepts to apply in practice (Khazova, 2016, p.27).

A social worker's role in child protection is complex, it includes advocacy, direct intervention, and coordination with courts, families, and other professionals, among other stakeholders (Fong, 2016). Holland (2004) emphasizes that when there are concerns about a child's welfare, assessing the child and family is one of the most controversial and complicated aspects of social work. As advocates for the welfare and rights of the child, social workers gather information, carry out in-depth studies, and offer recommendations about their findings (Lamponen & Aarnio, 2024). The assessment of the best interests of the child is a crucial aspect of social work practice, as it directly impacts the lives of children and their families. As defined by Fluke et al. (2020), assessment examines the situation of the child and family, the home environment, and the caregiver's ability. For this reason, assessment is considered a critical stage that demands knowledge, analytical and professional know-how, and practical skills to appropriately understand a child's situation (Lamponen & Aarnio, 2024). Helm (2016) also emphasizes that assessment is a step in the decision-making process where the outcome is determined by observing the existing circumstances and using the information at hand. Social Workers evaluate the information about situational elements in addition to historical data or background information. The goal of an assessment is to develop an understanding of the information gathered and justify the next steps meant to protect the child. Information collected is often focused on the child and the family (Helm, 2011; Horwath, 2007; Östberg, 2014). According to Helm (2016), when assessment is successful, it allows social workers to determine the appropriate course of action.

1.1. Problem statement and significance of the study

The best interests of the child is a key principle in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is widely accepted in child protection (Zermatten, 2010). It is meant to ensure that all decisions made on behalf of a child prioritize their well-being, safety, and development. Social workers are crucial in assessing and implementing this principle, especially in difficult situations.

They collect detailed information, assess different aspects of the child's situation, and suggest actions that prioritize the child's well-being (Fong, 2016). However, the application of the best interests of the child in practice is challenging. Studies have shown a disconnect between child protection policies and their actual application. Although laws stress the importance of prioritizing children's best interests, the execution often lacks effectiveness. For instance, studies have revealed that children's voices are not always adequately integrated into decision-making processes, leading to interventions that may not fully address their needs and perspectives. The findings from the social work and child protection system in Lithuania reveal that practices are primarily adult-centered, resulting in a misrepresentation of children's voices during intervention efforts (Eidukevičiūtė et al., 2021). Despite the emphasis on child protection and the importance of ensuring the best interests of the child in all decisions affecting children's welfare, there remains a gap or disconnect between policy and practice. This can lead to choices that do not genuinely consider the best interests of the child and could harm their well-being in the long run.

Overall improvement in child protection systems has been evident over the years. However, unique challenges can affect how we assess what is best for a child. In his 2009 article on challenges in child welfare social work, Parton critiques the child protection system for its narrow, legally driven focus. He argues that this limited perspective restricts professionals' decision-making and reduces their willingness to take proactive action. Thus, there is a need to create effective child protection practices, clearly defining the roles of administrators and professionals in decision-making (Parton, 2009; Munro, 2009). Furthermore, child protection efforts often face challenges such as lack of funding, high caseloads, societal attitudes that discourage intervention, and a lack of awareness of children's rights. Additionally, the complexity of cases and difficulties in interprofessional collaboration further complicate accurate assessments of the best interests of the child (Morris, 2008; Murphy, 2022; Revheim et al., 2025). These challenges highlight the urgent need for research that examines the realities of social work practice in assessing the best interests of the child. Focusing on Lithuania and Latvia, two countries with unique historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts that influence their child protection systems, the study compares the experiences of social workers and highlights the common challenges and effective strategies in assessing the best interests of the child. By investigating the factors that facilitate or hinder effective assessment, this research

offers valuable insights to help policymakers and practitioners improve child protection systems, enhance interventions, and support child-centered assessments.

1.2. General objective

To examine the role of social work practice in safeguarding the best interests of children in Lithuania and Latvia.

1.3. Specific objectives

1. Analyze the assessment process (identifying strengths, weaknesses, frameworks or methodologies, and opportunities for improvement).
2. Explore the impact of national legislation, policy frameworks, and methodologies on social workers' ability to assess the best interests of the child comprehensively.

1.4. Research questions

1. How do social workers in Lithuania and Latvia utilize existing frameworks and guidelines to assess the best interests of the child?
2. What are the challenges and barriers social workers face in conducting best interests assessments?

1.5. Structure of the research

The research has been presented in three main parts. The first part introduces the research, the use of theories to conceptualize the social work practice in the assessment of the best interests of the child, the review of literature, and the methodology. The second part contains data collection and analysis of data (Empirical and Analytical). Finally, the last part includes discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

2. THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD: STATE OF THE ART

In social work, theories provide a structured framework for analyzing cases, understanding clients, developing interventions, predicting results, and evaluating outcomes (Munro, 2002). Theories allow social workers to set aside personal biases and rely on evidence-based and multiple approaches to improve client well-being. This chapter explores the existing concepts, theories, and methods that help understand social work practice when assessing what is best for the child. The ecological systems theory provides a holistic view of child development by examining interconnected environmental layers. The complexity theory enhances this by recognizing the child protection system as a dynamic and unpredictable network. Critical theory further contributes by analyzing power imbalances and advocating for equitable practices. Integrating these perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of social workers' roles in addressing children's needs within complex societal systems. Ultimately, this combined approach aims to improve how social workers assess and respond to children's needs in an evolving and often unequal societal system.

2.1. Ecological systems theory and the child-centered approach

The ecological systems theory developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) purports that human development is shaped by various environmental systems, which are nested and interact with each other to influence an individual's behavior and development (Guy-Evans, 2024). The theory is structured around five main systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Berk, 2015). Analyzing the best interests of the child can be done most effectively by combining the ecological systems theory with a child-centered approach. According to this notion, the ecological systems theory suggests that a child's development, safety, and well-being are shaped by interconnected environmental systems and cannot be understood in isolation from the broader system in which they exist (Saraw, 2009; Department for Child Protection, 2023).

The child-centered approach mandates that the child's individual needs, rights, and perspectives are prioritized, recognizing their unique experiences and vulnerabilities. This involves actively seeking their participation in decision-making processes, respecting their opinions, and focusing

on their emotional, social, and developmental well-being (Cade et al., 2022). As Schofield (2005) points out, “child participation enhances the accuracy of assessment outcomes by increasing the understanding of their thoughts and hopes for well-being” (in Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2025, p.2). It is about acknowledging the child as an active agent, not a passive recipient, in their own lives (Cade et al., 2022). However, the child's individuality does not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers an important context, highlighting the various layers of environments that impact their growth (Reschly, 2019). In the *microsystem*, which includes the child's family, friends, and school, the child's well-being is closely tied to the quality of their relationships. The quality of a child's immediate environments, such as their home and school, significantly impacts their development. Poor environmental quality in these microsystems can lead to higher stress levels and deficits in executive functioning (Campos-Gil & Ortega-Andeane, 2020). Garbarino (2017) also mentions that a child's social relationships within the microsystems, including interactions with family members and peers, play an essential role in their socio-emotional competence and overall development. The concept of the best interests of the child is complex and multi-dimensional, encompassing both material-physiological needs (basic needs and survival) and contextual needs (psychosocial and emotional well-being). This complexity necessitates a thorough assessment of the child's micro-level environments to ensure their best interests are met (Mendes & Ormerod, 2019). To assess the best interests of the child, this research focuses on social workers' assessments of parent-child interactions, emotional bonds, and caregiving capabilities.

The *mesosystem* examines the multiple layers of environmental influence on child development. It represents the interconnections between various microsystems, such as the relationships between a child's family and their school or community settings. Williams & Crockett (2013) purport that the mesosystem forms a developmental niche where children move among multiple settings, impacting their cognitive and social development. According to An & Blanchard (2020), relationships within the mesosystem are bidirectional, meaning that changes in one microsystem can affect others. For example, parental involvement in school activities can enhance a child's academic performance, highlighting the importance of harmonious connections. Positive communication and collaboration between home and school are, therefore, crucial (Reschly, 2019). In the best interests of the child assessments, social workers evaluate the quality of relationships between the child and various microsystems, such as family, school, and

community. This research will incorporate the mesosystem to understand how the family, school, and other elements in the system affect the assessment of the best interests of the child from the viewpoint of social workers. Shean et al. (2005) highlight that social workers assess how these relationships impact a child's social competence and overall well-being. Positive interactions in school and with peers can significantly contribute to a child's development and are considered when assessing the best interests of the child. Understanding how these relationships interact can provide insights into the child's emotional and social development. Pino García & Bolaños (2022) also suggest that understanding the cultural context and the specific needs of the child within their mesosystem is important. Social workers must consider cultural traditions and community norms when assessing the best interests of the child (Figure 1).

Moving beyond the direct interactions between the child and the system, the *exosystem* focuses on indirect influences that shape a child's life. Pasupuleti et al. (2009) note that the work environment of parents, including job stress, satisfaction, and work-life balance, can indirectly influence a child's well-being. Social workers, therefore, need to evaluate how these factors affect the family dynamics and the child's development. Sacotte et al. (2023) also argue that economic stability and access to social services are crucial components of the exosystem. Social workers must assess the economic conditions of the family and the availability of social support systems, as these can significantly impact a child's well-being. Workplace pressures on parents, available community resources, and societal policies all influence a child's growth. Therefore, assessing whether the child's parents have family-friendly workplace policies, access to necessary community services, and understanding how financial stress affects family relationships is vital for promoting the well-being of children. The *chronosystem*, on the other hand, highlights the importance of time and historical context. Assessing the best interests of the child at the chrono level helps social workers understand the long-term effects of early experiences on a child's current and future well-being. This includes how past events and transitions influence present conditions and future outcomes (Settersten et al., 2013). Bluteau et al. (2017) also emphasize that understanding the chronosystem can inform policy and practice, ensuring that interventions are designed to support children through various transitions and changes over time. This can lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes (Figure 1). Finally, the *macrosystem*, encompassing cultural values, societal norms, and legal systems, demands a critical examination of broader societal influences on the well-being of the child. The child's best

interest is the main focus in both national and international laws and policies, as stated by Clarke & Walker (2019), making sure that the child's well-being is the top priority in decisions about their care. Hozova & Kyzlinkova (2023) also emphasize that social workers' decisions are heavily influenced by external factors such as legislative mandates, cultural norms, and regional policies. These elements create a structured environment within which social workers operate, often defining the scope of their interventions and the methods they can employ. Social workers must, therefore, familiarize themselves with local, state, and federal laws relating to child welfare, custody, and protection. This includes understanding how these laws define the “best interests of the child” and the criteria used in legal decisions to be able to effectively assess the child protection cases while ensuring the best interests of the child (Figure 1).

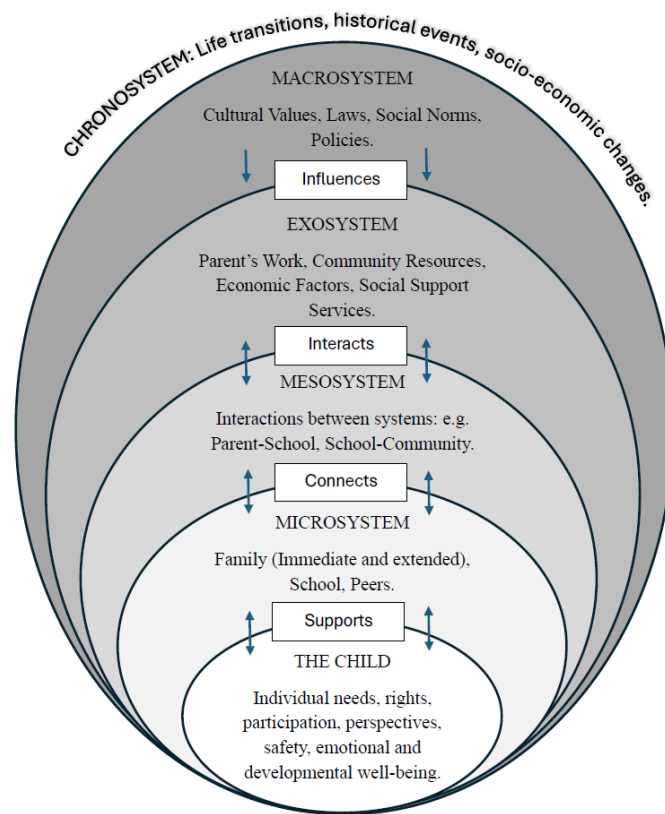


Figure 1. Ecological systems theory. Author's created.

The figure above illustrates how the child exists at the center of multiple interconnected environmental systems, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, each of which influences their development and well-being. To examine the best interests of the child through

the lens of ecological system theory, this research will adopt a child-centered approach. Combining this theory and approach involves placing the child at the center of assessment while considering not only the child's individual needs and rights but also the broader familial, social, economic, cultural, and temporal contexts that impact their life. This integrated framework can help identify and address the diverse needs and strengths of children comprehensively (Woodley, 2022; Garbacz, 2019).

It has been established that understanding the best interests of the child requires combining Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory with a child-focused approach. This approach keeps the child at the center while recognizing the significant impact of their surrounding environments, from close interactions in the microsystem and mesosystem to wider societal effects in the exosystem, macrosystem, and the changing chronosystem. Social workers using this combined view can better assess the child's unique needs, rights, and experiences in their environment, leading to more effective interventions. However, to fully understand the complex interactions and often unpredictable interplay between these components, there is a need to consider Complexity theory as discussed below.

2.2. Complexity theory to child protection systems

Complexity theory offers profound insights into physical, biological, and social systems and provides a fresh theoretical approach for social sciences (Schneider & Somers, 2006; Turner & Baker, 2019). According to Pinheiro & Young (2017), a complex system is characterized by non-linear interactions among its components, making it impossible to fully describe through them alone. At its core, complexity theory studies complex adaptive systems (CAS), which are diverse, adaptive, and networked (Park, 2017). Gillen & Canavan (2023) explain that a system is complex if it consists of many varied interrelated parts. This complex system consists of many interdependent parts that can operate independently while still impacting the system as a whole. Turner & Baker (2018) explain it as the principle of *interdependence*, where individual components in complex systems affect each other and influence actions, demonstrating the power of collective behavior. Child protection systems and social work practice are part of a larger network of services and support systems designed to protect children and support families. Complexity theory highlights the importance of understanding the interdependence of these systems. It is particularly relevant in child protection, where multiple factors such as family

dynamics, social environment, and individual behaviors interact in complex ways. This interdependence necessitates a collaborative approach where information sharing, joint decision-making, and coordinated action are crucial for achieving the best outcomes for children (Stevens & Hassett, 2007). Hood (2014) argues that in the context of child welfare, this means that collaborative efforts can lead to innovative solutions and better outcomes for children as professionals from different backgrounds bring diverse perspectives and expertise. Complexity theory also emphasizes the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability in complex systems, making collaborative approaches crucial in managing this uncertainty, as they allow for the pooling of knowledge and resources, enabling more adaptive and responsive interventions (Hood, 2014; Mikles et al., 2017).

Applying complexity theory to child protection systems requires understanding dynamic interactions within unstable boundaries (Gillen & Canavan, 2023). The fluidity of child protection cases challenges professionals to adapt, as initial judgments can quickly become obsolete (Munro, 2009). For this reason, Gillen & Canavan (2023) advocate for a complexity lens in risk assessment, focusing on processes and systems over procedures, demanding attention to detail, interconnected behaviors, and non-linear understanding. Complexity theory emphasizes that child development and family interactions are not straightforward. Minor adjustments can lead to major, unexpected results, which question the usual linear cause-and-effect perspective. This is especially important when evaluating risk, as it can increase or decrease in unexpected ways. By recognizing this nonlinear aspect, social workers can better notice small changes in the system, allowing for timely interventions and a deeper insight into the child's circumstances (Richardson, 2014).

In practical terms, Complexity theory transforms assessment practices by moving away from fixed evaluations to a focus on dynamic processes. This allows social workers to analyze interactions, relationships, and patterns over time instead of depending on single, isolated assessments. Stevens & Hassett (2007) explain that traditional risk assessment models often rely on static and linear approaches. Complexity theory, however, supports a more dynamic and flexible approach, allowing practitioners to adapt their assessments as new information and patterns emerge. This involves paying close attention to how family members interact, how support networks function, and how different agencies collaborate. By identifying patterns and

emerging issues within the complex system, social workers can uncover potential risks and protective factors that might otherwise be overlooked. This approach aids in investigating “multiple problems” and “complex needs” attributed to children within integrated service delivery (Devaney & Spratt, 2009; DfES, 2003).

Complexity theory, with its emphasis on interdependence, dynamic processes, and emergent properties, provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex nature of child protection systems and social work practice. It highlights the limitations of linear models and emphasizes the importance of adopting flexible, adaptive, and collaborative approaches to address the multifaceted challenges within the child protection system. However, while complexity theory sheds light on how these systems function with their uncertainties and non-linearities, it does not address the power dynamics, social inequalities, and potential for oppression that shape these very systems and the lives of the children and families they serve. There is therefore a need to explore critical theory; this lens goes beyond describing the complexities to actively interrogating the underlying social structures, biases, and ideologies that contribute to vulnerabilities and inequalities within the child protection system, paving the way for more emancipatory and just practices.

2.3. Critical theory and critical social work

The child protection system consists of various organizations and structures designed to keep children safe. This complex network consists of formal and informal components, including laws, policies, governance, and professional standards that are often positioned as objective mechanisms of support and protection (World Vision International, 2011). However, through the lens of critical theory, such structures are not seen as neutral; rather, they are understood as socially constructed and potentially oppressive, reflecting dominant ideologies that may marginalize or silence vulnerable populations. According to Agger (2013), critical theory is a multi-faceted perspective aimed at examining and challenging dominant social structures and institutions to promote emancipation and justice. It highlights “domination” and the drive to control natural and social environments, seeking to undermine institutions that uphold the status quo and advocating for decentralized decision-making through collaboration (Morris & Connolly, 2012). Critical theorists generally propose a constitutional connection between a society's structures and its members, where all individuals are impacted, albeit to varying degrees

and in diverse ways (Dant, 2003). This is related to the idea that knowledge produced by oppressive institutions is a distortion and misrepresentation of human experiences and wants because it has been ingrained in daily activities. For example, Critical theorists believe that modern societies perpetuate oppressive structures by promoting one dominant way of thinking in the form of “instrumental reason” (Dant, 2003, p. 160).

Some critical theorists disagree that theory and practice are two distinct spheres of human activity. They view theory and practice as fundamentally integrated in praxis, which reflects how individuals apply their theoretical understanding of reality in their lives (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Critical social work framework, which is adopted from the critical theory, is a cluster of perspectives engaged in by scholars striving for social justice in a world rife with oppression, domination, inequality, and injustice (Hurley & Taiwo, 2018). Critical theory in child protection emphasizes the need to tackle structural issues that affect children's rights and well-being. It encourages challenging unfair norms, supporting social justice, and ensuring fairness in child protection policies and practices. Social workers using this perspective analyze how societal issues like poverty, discrimination, and biases impact decisions about what is best for children (Lietz, 2009).

In the best interests of the child assessments, it is important to acknowledge marginalized groups as they can be overlooked or undervalued because of issues like poverty, limited education, or discrimination. The critical approach urges social workers to actively listen to and elevate these voices, making sure that all viewpoints are taken into account and that decisions do not merely echo prevailing societal stories (Healy, 2005; Hurley and Taiwo, 2018). Heino et al. (2024) also argue that intersectionality can be used to understand the complex power relations and multiple forms of oppression that affect children and their families. This method allows social workers to think about how different factors like race, gender, and economic status connect and affect what is best for the child. By using intersectionality, social workers can examine their power and privilege, making their assessments fairer and more just (Heino et al., 2024).

According to Fook (2002), complex social and historical constructs that result in what she refers to as the “moment of practice” should be the source of practice rather than just theory. Raising consciousness, empowering people, emancipatory practice, and critical reflection are all encouraged by critical social work and ultimately contribute to the advancement of social justice.

Noble (2020) suggests that social workers should be encouraged to engage in critical reflection, constantly questioning and evaluating their own biases and the systemic factors at play. This reflective practice helps in making more informed and just decisions regarding the child's welfare. Reflective practice as argued by Fook (2015) is a core component of critical social work, enabling practitioners to critically evaluate their actions and the broader social context. This reflective approach can help child protection workers navigate complex situations and improve their practice by reconnecting with the emancipatory values of the profession. This research will use critical theory to examine the elements that contribute to effective social work practice, as well as the tools and methods that support social workers in their assessment of the best interests of the child.

Using ecological systems theory, complexity theory, and critical theory together offers a complete way to understand what is best for the child. Each theory gives different but helpful perspectives. Ecological systems theory situates the child within a network of interconnected systems, complexity theory addresses the fluid, adaptive, and non-linear nature of social systems, and critical theory challenges practitioners to critically reflect on power, inequality, and structural barriers. Together, these frameworks enable a child-centered, holistic, and dynamic approach to social work assessment and intervention. These theories will inform the analysis of data and the interpretation of findings, providing a framework for understanding the challenges and complexities of social work practice in the assessment of the best interests of the child.

3. THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM AND THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Examining past research is essential for understanding research. Bryman (2016) emphasizes that it provides context and rationale for the research. This chapter will therefore focus on previous studies about the principles of the UNCRC, child protection systems, and social work practice.

3.1. The best interests of the child principle

The concept of the “best interests of the child” (BIC) is fundamental to child protection policies worldwide. It is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC,

1989), especially Article 3, which states that the best interests of the child should be the main focus in all decisions and actions related to children. This includes legal, administrative, social, and educational settings (Torrecuadrada, 2016; Zermatten, 2010). The term “best interests” refers to a child's well-being, which is influenced by factors such as age, maturity, parental presence, surroundings, and experiences. This concept should be understood following the UNCRC and other global legal standards (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2008). The Committee on the Rights of the Child proposes a three-fold concept in describing the best interests of the child:

1. A substantive right: the child's right to have their best interests assessed and prioritized;
2. A legal principle: meaning that if a law can be understood in different ways, the interpretation that best benefits the child should be chosen;
3. A rule of procedure: when making a decision that impacts a child or a group of children, it is important to assess how that decision might affect them, whether positively or negatively (in UNCRC General Comment No. 14, 2013).

The committee highlights that the best interests of the child is a flexible concept that involves various factors. The concept is not a rigid or one-dimensional idea; it is adaptable and influenced by context. This flexibility enables the BIC to be applied in various countries and legal frameworks, but it also leads to uncertainty in how it is put into practice (Hiitola & Pellander, 2019). Professionals must therefore consider various factors when assessing a child's welfare, including safety, well-being, developmental needs, family situations, and cultural backgrounds (Eekelaar, 2015). For instance, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2008), in determining the best interest of the child, requires taking into account four determinants depending on the individual child. First is the *child's perspective*, as they possess the right to express their views in any decision affecting them, with due weight given to their age and maturity; diligent efforts must be made to ascertain their genuine opinions, particularly when external influences may be present. Secondly, the *child's development and identity needs* are vital, including their cultural and community ties, continuity of background, age, sex, ability, health, education, and support for a successful transition to adulthood. Thirdly, *the preservation of the family environment and the maintenance of family relations* are generally considered to be in the best interests of the child, especially in decisions regarding family reunification; however, thorough assessments must be conducted to ensure that reunification does not expose the child to abuse or neglect. Lastly, *ensuring a safe environment*, providing necessary care, protection from

violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and safeguarding the child's overall well-being and development are of paramount importance (Kalverboer, 2016; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2008; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2013). International bodies such as UNICEF and the Committee on the Rights of the Child have sought to clarify the meaning of the BIC by developing guiding principles. Despite this, there is criticism that the BIC can be used as a rhetorical tool without clear criteria. Freeman (2007) argues that the term can become a “Trojan horse” for adult-centric interpretations of what is best for the child. The “best interests” standard is often criticized for its lack of clear definition and consistency, which allows for subjective interpretations that may reflect adult biases rather than the child's actual needs (Salter, 2012). Vandenhoe & Reynaert (2024) also mention that the interpretation of what constitutes the best interests of the child can vary significantly across different cultural and social contexts, further complicating the application of this principle in a universally fair manner.

Although the flexibility of the best interests of the child principle allows for considerations based on specific situations, it can also lead to personal interpretations and the risk of adult biases overshadowing the true needs and views of children. Moving forward, it is crucial to examine how the foundational principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, have shaped the evolution of the UNCRC and continue to influence specific legal instruments concerning children within the European Union (EU).

3.2. The impact of the UDHR and UNCRC on the child protection system in the EU

Globally, child protection systems have evolved through a combination of legal frameworks, social work practice, and international policy developments. A key milestone is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989, Article 3), which established the idea that the best interests of the child should be the main consideration in all issues related to children. The UNCRC emphasizes the child's right to be heard, the importance of family and community, and the state's role in ensuring protection and provision.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, was the first global proclamation to affirm that all individuals possess basic rights simply by virtue of being human, irrespective of their religion, race, gender, or nationality. This broad commitment set the stage for

creating more targeted human rights tools, particularly those aimed at protecting children (Basu, 2009). Article 2 of the UDHR, for example, states that everyone has the right to all the rights and freedoms mentioned in the Declaration, regardless of any differences (United Nations, 1948). Ssenyonjo (2016) highlights that this principle played a vital role in the advancement of children's rights by providing a solid basis against unfair treatment due to age or parental status. The UNCRC directly reflects and builds on this principle in its Article 2, which asserts that the rights in the Convention apply to all children without distinction. Therefore, the UDHR's comprehensive ban on discrimination was specifically extended to children in the CRC, ensuring that age or family circumstances do not result in violations of their rights.

Liefaard & Doek (2015) note that the UDHR has motivated the creation of both national and international legal systems aimed at protecting children's rights. Many countries have integrated the principles of the UDHR and the UNCRC into their laws and policies, ensuring that children's rights are respected in areas such as education, health, and protection from harm (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009). Child protection systems in Europe, especially in Latvia and Lithuania, are greatly influenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). These documents, along with several international treaties, establish the basis for contemporary views on children's rights within the EU. The UNCRC emphasizes the best interests of the child as both a protective necessity and a matter of justice and fairness (UNICEF, 2022). It outlines four key principles that are essential to understanding children's rights and evaluating their well-being:

1. Non-discrimination (Article 2): Children should not be treated unfairly on any basis, including age, gender, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status.
2. Best interests of the child (Article 3): The child's well-being must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them.
3. Right to life, survival, and development (Article 6): Children must be given the conditions to grow and thrive physically, mentally, and emotionally.
4. Participation (Article 12): Children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and those views must be given due weight (UNCRC, 1989).

These principles mark a major shift from traditional welfare approaches that viewed children mainly as vulnerable beings needing protection, to a rights-based view that sees children as active participants with their voices (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009). This change means not just protecting children from harm, but also empowering them to share their opinions and have those opinions considered. The European Union (EU), to protect the rights of children, has adopted

this new approach, as shown in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which focuses on involving children in policy-making and aims to prioritize their needs in EU policies. This includes efforts like the EU Children's Participation Platform, which seeks to enhance children's influence in EU decisions (European Commission, 2021). The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2009, Article 24) further supports children's rights by highlighting the need to consider their views and ensure their well-being in all policies and decisions (Drywood & Stalford, 2009; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009).

Within the EU, while all member states have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the interpretation and implementation of its principles vary due to cultural, legal, and institutional differences among the countries (Spratt et al., 2015). Gilbert et al. (2011) classify these systems into three typologies: child protection, family service, and mixed systems. This variation reflects cultural norms, political priorities, and historical legacies in how child welfare is conceptualized and implemented. Skivenes & Sørsdal (2018) argues that the definition of what constitutes the 'best interests' for example can vary based on national legislation, societal values, and the resources available and that the approach to balancing parental rights with child protection obligations may differ significantly between Nordic countries and Eastern European nations, which may adhere to more conservative or hierarchical family structures.

Nordic countries like Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden focus on a child-centered method in their child protection systems, which prioritizes children's rights, needs, and voices, in line with the UNCRC. Sweden, for instance, was a pioneer in this regard, enacting specific legislation in the early 1900s. The Swedish Child Welfare Acts of 1902, 1924, and 1960 indicate a continuous refinement and expansion of the legal framework for child protection in response to evolving societal needs and understandings of child welfare (Hestbæk et al., 2023; Pösö et al., 2014). Sköld & Markkola (2020) suggest that this early legislative action signifies a departure from viewing child welfare solely as a private family matter and indicates a growing societal recognition of the state's responsibility in safeguarding children. As societal understanding of children's needs and vulnerabilities evolved, child protection gradually became a more specialized area of state concern. Important laws for child welfare were passed in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark around the early 1900s, with Iceland and Finland doing the same in the 1930s (Sköld & Markkola, 2020).

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), like the Czech Republic, Croatia, Lithuania, and Latvia, have child protection systems shaped by their socialist past and their move towards democracy (Shmidt, 2023). According to Helland (2019), the socialist legacy had a significant influence on the initial state of child protection systems in Eastern European countries, particularly concerning the high number of children residing in institutions. The transition from totalitarian, communist societies to democratic systems, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, brought about profound changes marked by economic instability and social upheaval, which put significant strain on existing social welfare systems and led to new vulnerabilities for children (Williams, 2023). Understanding how Latvia and Lithuania have evolved in their national child protection systems requires consideration of their unique historical, political, and cultural backgrounds. Both countries emerged from the Soviet model, which emphasized state control over family life and offered minimal recognition of children's individual rights. As signatories to the UNCRC and members of the EU, both Latvia and Lithuania have undergone significant legal and institutional reforms to align with child rights standards (Linno & Strömpl, 2023; Tamutienė & Snieškienė, 2023).

Over the past two decades, CEE countries have undertaken significant efforts, driven by European and United Nations agendas, to deinstitutionalize children from large institutions and develop alternative, family-based care options (Williams, 2023). These efforts reflect a move towards international best practices that emphasize the importance of family environments for child development. Anghel et al. (2013) argue that these reforms have faced numerous challenges, including limited financial resources, a lack of specialized expertise, a dependence on external donors, and slow implementation despite the enactment of new legislation. Despite these challenges, there has been an increasing focus on developing local prevention services and alternatives to institutional care.

Child protection systems worldwide are shifting from welfare methods to a focus on rights. This shift is influenced by important documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which highlight key principles such as non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, the right to life and development, and the right to participate. These principles have spurred legal and policy changes around the world, including in the European Union. However, the way these principles are put into practice varies

widely among member states due to different cultural, legal, and historical backgrounds. For instance, Nordic countries have different strategies compared to Central and Eastern European nations like Latvia and Lithuania, which are working through their post-socialist histories while trying to meet international child rights standards.

3.3. The child protection system in Lithuania and Latvia

Lithuania and Latvia are two of the countries that make up Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These countries have certain commonalities when it comes to child welfare, but they also have unique cultural, historical, political, social, and economic backgrounds that were greatly impacted by Soviet ideology. Anghel et al. (2013) highlight that the CEE countries are culturally very different, but some similarities are identified in child protection legislation and policy implementation. Lithuania's child protection system began to take shape after it gained independence from the Soviet Union in the 1990s. During the reformation and rebuilding period (1990-2004), the foundations of the child protection system were formulated, the goals were set, and the legal and institutional environment for their implementation was created (Tamutienė & Snieškienė, 2023). First, the Concept of Family Policy (1996) was enacted, and then the Law on the Fundamentals of the Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996). The latter act strengthened the goals of protecting the child, defining the rights, freedoms, and duties of the child, and the responsibilities of the protection institutions. Finally, the Child Guardianship Act (1998) regulated the guardianship of children in families and private residential group homes run by families.

The modern child protection model of the Soviet system was very different from the one that the UNCRC developed in independent Lithuania, which reflected the model that has been developed in more advanced countries. The Soviet child protection system itself was a source of institutional violence against the child. Given the Soviet legacy of child protection, policymakers had a double challenge to transform the old and harmful system into a modern system with the interests of the child (Tamutienė & Snieškienė, 2023, p. 471). Apart from the ratification of the UNCRC, Lithuanian non-governmental organizations also initiated new and effective forms of organization of services and methods, their representatives were invited as consultants to develop standards for social services and to seek ways to improve the quality and efficiency of services (Žalimienė & Rimšaitė, 2007).

Latvia faced a similar situation post-independence, needing to transition from the Soviet administrative system to a modern legal decision-making framework. As Linno & Strömpl (2023) highlight, the Soviet era's child protection policies were state-centric, emphasizing parental support, particularly for working mothers, and utilizing residential institutions for child socialization and workforce preparation. Following independence, Latvia undertook significant legal and policy changes, notably accepting the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992 and enacting the Protection of the Rights of the Child Law in 1998, which established a comprehensive framework for child protection. Shmidt (2023) connotes that one of the few post-Soviet nations that have successfully shifted from the Soviet administrative system to a legal decision-making order is Latvia. Latvia prioritized safeguarding the rights of children (Linno & Strömpl, 2023). According to Shmidt (2023), Latvia is the only post-Soviet country that shares data on child protection, including not just the suspension and loss of parental rights, but also the restoration of these rights, which accounts for 15 to 20 percent of all decisions. The current developments of the child protection system in Latvia are multifaceted, focusing on enhancing children's well-being, preventing violence against children, and improving family support and caregiving.

Lithuania's legislative foundation for child protection began with the Concept of Family Policy (1996) and the Law on the Fundamentals of the Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996), which laid down the rights, freedoms, and duties of children and the responsibilities of protection institutions. The Child Guardianship Act (1998) further regulated guardianship within families and private residential group homes. Post-2017 reforms, prompted by a public outcry over a tragic child abuse case, led to a new edition of the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child, emphasizing the prohibition of all forms of violence against children and the establishment of state and municipal institutions for child protection. In 2015, there was public anger after a four-year-old boy named Matukas was killed by his mother and her partner. Investigations showed that he had been neglected and mistreated for a long time, despite childcare teachers alerting the authorities about the abuse. This outrage led to a reform in child rights protection starting in 2017 (Tamutienė & Snieškienė, 2023, p. 471).

In reference to the UN (2024), there have been a series of improvements in the child protection system of Lithuania. Experts of the Committee on the Rights of the Child have commended Lithuania's legislation on violence against children (United Nations, 2024). These improvements the committee commended were related to the National action plan (approved in 2023) with measures to combat child poverty and social exclusion particularly among vulnerable groups by increasing basic social benefits by 42% compared to 2018, expanding family-based and professional foster care with foster care centres in all municipalities making it available for almost 80% of children, and strengthening child protection laws by banning all forms of violence, establishing “One Stop Centres” for family support, and introducing the Child Rights Line for reporting and consultation.

In Latvia, the Protection of the Rights of the Child Law of 1998 remains a cornerstone of its child protection system, defining violence against children and outlining measures for prevention and support. Recent amendments to the Criminal Law in 2018 further emphasized protecting children from domestic abuse. Latvia's policies also focus on enhancing parenting education, reflecting a commitment to preventive measures and the holistic well-being of children (United Nations, 2020; State Language Center: Republic of Latvia, 2022; European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2023). Current developments of the child protection system in Latvia are multifaceted, focusing on enhancing children's well-being, preventing violence against children, and improving family support and caregiving. Like Lithuania, Latvia has also put in measures to have a national action plan. Latvia's Child Guarantee National Action Plan (2023) outlines comprehensive measures to combat child poverty, focusing on material support for families, high-quality and inclusive education, free healthcare, adequate housing, and out-of-family care. It represents a significant step towards ensuring that all children in Latvia have access to essential services regardless of their background. The legal framework on child protection of both countries has distinct yet similar provisions for protecting the rights of the child. The general provisions of the Latvian Protection of the Rights of the Child Law (1998) have a section dedicated to defining terms such as abuse, out-of-home care, and child supervision service. Whereas the Lithuanian Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996) does not. However, both countries do not define the term “the best interests of the child” in their respective laws.

National laws, methodologies, and frameworks in Lithuania and Latvia for child-related cases formally recognize the BIC principle and align with international obligations. For instance, the Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights (1998), Section 6, directly highlights the best interests of the child in clause 2, stating that;

“In all activities in regard to a child, irrespective of whether they are carried out by State or local government institutions, public organisations or other natural persons and legal persons, and also courts and other law enforcement institutions, the ensuring of the rights and interests of the child shall take priority.”

The clause further emphasizes that decisions affecting children must focus on long-term, sustainable outcomes that promote their holistic well-being. It further outlines standards focused on children that prioritize their well-being, safety, and growth in decisions that impact them. It highlights the importance of long-term solutions that address their changing needs and circumstances, rather than temporary solutions, and at its core, is in the best interests of the child. Similarly, the Lithuanian Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996), Article 4, explicitly states that the legal interests of the child, although it does not specify it as the “best” interest of the child, the act still highlights that the “legal” interest of the child must always and everywhere be given priority consideration; “legal interests of the child must always and everywhere be given priority consideration”. Article 4 further emphasizes that every child shall enjoy equal rights with other children and cannot be discriminated against regardless of his parents' or other legal child representatives' gender, age, nationality, race, language, religion, convictions, social, monetary and family position, state of health or any other circumstances. This aligns with ensuring the best interests of each individual child without prejudice.

Latvia and Lithuania's laws prioritize the best interest of the child in all child-related matters, detailing different factors to consider when applying this principle. However, empirical studies and policy evaluations suggest that practitioners often interpret the BIC in varied and sometimes conflicting ways, depending on institutional culture, training, and resource availability (Clarke & Walker, 2019). One of the critical issues in both the Lithuanian and Latvian Acts is the lack of a concrete, standardized definition of the “best interests of the child.” According to Khazova (2016), many scholars have attempted to define the concept or identify key factors that determine what is in the best interests of a child. However, a definition that works for all situations is yet to be created, leading to considerable criticism from experts and practitioners.

Indeed, the concept is to a certain extent vague and sometimes leads to misunderstanding and confusion. On the other hand, it is due to its vagueness that the concept of the best interests of the child is applicable to very different situations where a child's interests are at stake. Flexibility comes at a price of vagueness (Khazova, 2016, p.27).

In Latvia's Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights (1998), the principle is acknowledged in Chapter 1, Section 6, stating: "In lawful relations that affect a child, the rights and best interests of the child shall take priority." Similarly, Lithuania's Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996) references the principle but fails to define it explicitly. In Article 4, Section 1, the law states: "Legal interests of the child must always and everywhere be given priority consideration." The legal framework focuses on ensuring the legal protection of children's rights, The law establishes child protection rights, responsibilities of authorities, and procedural safeguards, which implicitly align with the principle. The absence of a clear definition in both legal systems, however, leaves room for subjective interpretations.

Thompson (2019) suggests that the lack of a rigid definition allows decision-makers to tailor their approach to the unique circumstances of each child and family situation. This flexibility enables courts and child welfare professionals to consider a wide range of factors that may be relevant in specific cases. Moyo (2012) also states that the ambiguity of the concept prompts decision-makers to conduct a more comprehensive evaluation of a child's circumstances, considering multiple factors rather than relying on a narrow set of predefined criteria. However, Funderburk (2013) in his article on the best interests of the Child Should Not Be an Ambiguous Term argues that without a clear standard, judges and decision-makers often depend on their personal views or cultural beliefs. This inconsistency can lead to different outcomes in similar cases, which can compromise fairness in custody battles, child protection issues, and other family law situations. For instance, one court may focus on maintaining family ties, while another may prioritize immediate safety, even when the situations are alike.

Both Lithuania and Latvia have established child protection rights that emphasize safeguarding children from violence, neglect, and abuse. In Lithuania, Chapter 2 of the child protection law, for instance, gives provisions for the right to living conditions, but it does not specify the type of living conditions that a child has a right to. "The right of the child to living conditions is vital for his physical, intellectual, spiritual and moral development and shall be ensured by parents, other legal representatives of the child and municipal institutions" (Law on Fundamentals of Protection

of the Rights of the Child, 1996, Article 11). As Berrick et al. (2023) note, living conditions such as the degree of poverty, access to health services, and availability of education are related to the types of risks children face and the types of protection they require. This may be the reason why living conditions are left open to interpretation. The law also requires that children's opinions be considered in all legal proceedings, giving the children the right to be heard in matters relating to them. Article 19 states, “Right of the Child to Participate in Child Protection Programmes: A child shall have the right to take part, either on his own or through his legal representatives, in the preparation and implementation of child right protection programmes” (Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child, 1996).

Lansdown (2016, p.31) argues that “the determination of best interests, accordingly, must be rights-oriented, influenced by the views of the child, and take account of the capacities of the child to make decisions for him or herself.” He also emphasizes that it is not possible to pursue the optimum development of the child and his or her best interests if the child's perspectives are disregarded (Lansdown, 2016, p. 34). The Lithuanian child protection law highlights social support and inclusion for children, especially for those who lack parental care. Efforts have also been made to improve children's participation in legal proceedings, including the establishment of child interview rooms and amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure to prevent secondary trauma (Grigutytė, 2019; Morkvėnienė & Mazolevskienė, 2016). However, Tamutienė & Snieškienė (2023, p.483) argue that there are still many challenges in the practical implementation of the child protection act.

Like Lithuania, Latvia's child protection law guarantees children the right to life, development, and protection from harm, with specific mandates for state intervention in cases of abuse. Latvia also has provisions for the living conditions of children. In Chapter 2 of the law, Section 10 expands on the right to wholesome living conditions. The legal framework uses the adjective 'wholesome' in conjunction with living conditions and further goes on to mention adequate nourishment, clothing, accommodation, and a permanent place of residence:

(1) A child has the right to such living conditions and a benevolent social environment that will ensure his or her full physical and intellectual development. Every child shall receive adequate nourishment, clothing, and accommodation. (3) A child has a right to a permanent place of residence (Law on the Protection of Children's Rights, 1998, Section 10).

It also gives mention to children with special needs, an addition that must be commended. “A child with physical or mental disabilities also has the right to everything necessary for the satisfaction of his or her special needs” (1998, Section 10). The act also gives special mention about the need to include children in decision-making on matters related to them. Specifically, Section 6, titled “Principle of Protection of the Child,” outlines several aspects related to considering the child's views (Law on the Protection of Children's Rights, 1998);

In taking any decision in relation to the child, an account shall be taken of the child's best interests, it shall be necessary to aim for a solution that is sustainable for the situation of the child taking into account, according to the situation, the extent to which the measures are able to ensure... 7) participation of the child in decision-making processes related to him or her; 8) listening to the opinion of the child and taking it into consideration according to the age, maturity, and ability of the child to formulate an opinion (Section 6).

Section 27 also mentions considering the child's opinion in decisions related to separation.

(2) In the cases provided for in Paragraph one, Clauses 1 and 2 of this Section, a child shall be separated from the family if it is not possible to alleviate the circumstances unfavourable to the development of the child if he or she remains in the family. When separating a child from the family, account shall be taken of the accommodation of the child's opinion, if the child is in such age and has attained such a level of maturity that he or she is able to formulate his or her opinion, and also the possible consequences of separation for the child (Section 27).

These excerpts from the Latvian Children's Law clearly demonstrate the need for the participation of children in decision-making processes that affect their lives, emphasizing the consideration of their best interests and their right to express their views.

Latvia has also emphasized improving the multi-disciplinary environment for child well-being in their Children's Act (Kronberga & Idrissi, 2021). In Chapter 7, section 52.1, a provision is made on institutional cooperation,

In order to provide support to child victims of violence and their non-abusive relatives and also to ensure the possibility to take criminal procedural action, the interinstitutional cooperation programme “Child's Home” is implemented and it is ensured by the Child Protection Centre (Law on the Protection of Children's Rights, 1998, Section 52.1).

The “Child's Home” interinstitutional cooperation programme aims to provide a coordinated, child-centered response to cases of violence against children. It provides a coordinated approach to assess the child's needs and risks, offering medical, psychological, and social support to the child and their safe family member in one location. The program also supports legal actions for

children involved in cases of moral and sexual offenses. To minimize trauma and avoid repeated questioning, authorities are tasked to efficiently share and manage sensitive information, ensuring thorough case management while keeping data for analysis. The objectives of this cooperation are stipulated to ensure a swift response to instances of violence against children.

Lithuania and Latvia have made notable progress in bringing its child protection laws in line with international standards, especially the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which highlights children's rights to safety, growth, participation, and support (Kabašinskaite & Bak, 2006; Tamutienė & Snieškienė, 2023). As noted by Lansdown (2016), recognizing children's rights to participate and respecting their developing abilities are crucial for understanding and promoting their best interests; this principle applies to the entire UNCRC. Both countries strive to prioritize the needs and well-being of children in their legal and administrative frameworks. However, despite having these structures in place, the system is quite inflexible, which restricts social workers' ability to exercise discretion in their assessments.

3.4. The social work practice in the child protection system

Social workers are dedicated to assisting a wide variety of populations, including children, individuals with disabilities, those experiencing poverty or homelessness, medical patients, individuals suffering from addiction, refugees, aging individuals, couples and families, victims of violence or trauma, and individuals in the criminal justice system (University at Buffalo, 2023). As stated by Langford & Keaton (2022, p.51), the social work practice encompasses a diverse range of settings and roles, including micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. At the micro level, social workers provide direct services such as counseling, case management, and therapy, while at the macro level, they engage in activities such as research, policy development, and advocacy. The profession is guided by a commitment to promoting social welfare, advocating for social and economic justice, and upholding the social work code of ethics (University at Buffalo, 2023).

The School of Social Work (2011) states that social work involves several tasks that follow a cycle. Social workers engage, assess, plan, implement, evaluate, and then reassess until they reach termination and follow-up. This process, “The Planned Change Process,” was introduced to the social work profession in 1957 by Helen Harris Perlman. According to Kirst-Ashman

(2012), the development and execution of a plan or strategy aimed at modifying a client's condition, situation, or behavioral pattern to enhance their situation is referred to as the Planned Change Model. In a child protection case, a social worker usually steps in when there are worries about a child's safety or well-being, often due to abuse, neglect, or risky family situations. The involvement of a social worker is crucial for assessing the situation, providing support to the family, and ensuring the child's needs are met. Using the Planned Change Model by Perlman (1957) as a focus, the involvement of a social worker in a child protection case can be broken down into the following stages: assessment, planning, intervention, review/evaluation, and termination (Figure 2).

In the *assessment stage*, social workers become involved in child protection cases when they receive referrals from other professionals or members of the public expressing concerns that a child is being harmed or is at risk of harm. Once a referral is made, social workers have a legal duty to investigate the situation. They begin by conducting an initial assessment to understand the family dynamics, the child's needs, and the associated risks. This involves gathering information from multiple sources, including the family, school, medical records, and any previous reports. According to Langford & Keaton (2022, p.52), the assessment phase is crucial as it lays the foundation for the planning and intervention stages that follow. Johnson & Yanca (2010) highlight five key tasks within the assessment stage: identifying the need or concern, understanding the nature of the problem, identifying strengths and resources, collecting relevant information, and analyzing the collected information. Based on the assessment findings, the *planning stage* continues. The social worker develops a plan aimed at addressing the identified issues. The goal is to help the client meet their needs or resolve the problem (Johnson & Yanca, 2010). This plan may include interventions such as counseling, access to support services for the family, or, in more severe cases, arranging alternative care for the child. Next is the intervention Stage, where the social worker collaborates with the family and other professionals to implement the agreed-upon plan. This may involve coordinating services, delivering direct support, and continuously monitoring the family's progress toward the plan's goals.

Then the *review/evaluation stage* follows. At this stage, the social worker assesses the effectiveness of the interventions and the overall progress of the family. Evaluation determines whether the plan is successful or if modifications are necessary. Walker and Beckett (2011) note

that this stage may occasionally require the social worker to reevaluate the entire case, re-examining each aspect before concluding. As such, the social work process often resembles a cycle rather than a linear sequence, as illustrated in Figure 2.

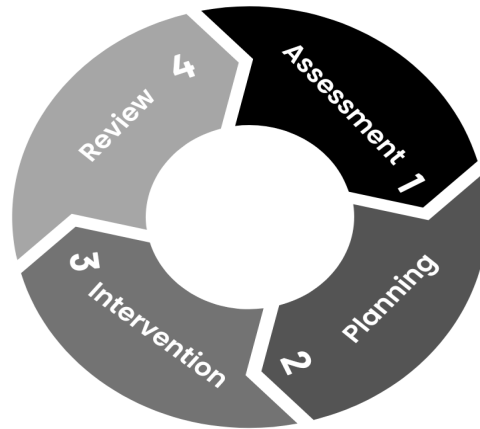


Figure 2. The social work process as a cycle. Author's created.

Once the goals outlined in the plan have been achieved and the child's safety and well-being are secured, the social worker's involvement may be reduced or brought to an end, this is the *termination stage*. However, follow-up support may still be necessary to ensure that the family continues to maintain progress and stability.

Child welfare social workers are required to protect children by using available legal processes, supervisory consultation, and immediate intervention in extreme circumstances. They are also responsible for documenting evidence and concerns to guide child protective intervention (Day et al. 2013). Additionally, social workers in child welfare must know and comply with local, state, and federal legislation, regulations, and policies. In cases where conflicts arise among competing expectations, child welfare social workers are directed to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics as a tool in their decision-making. They should also seek guidance from supervisors and/or other relevant professionals (NASW, 2013). Furthermore, child welfare social workers are responsible for collaborating with legal and judicial partners in child welfare to achieve outcomes in the best interests of the child. This collaboration and cooperation must occur between the fields of social work and law, as well as with the many levels of government and non-governmental organizations often involved in a child welfare case (Day et al., 2013).

Social workers play crucial roles in child protection systems, particularly within multidisciplinary child protection teams. Their responsibilities and contributions are multifaceted, encompassing coordination, communication, and support across various disciplines and systems. The NASW (2013) defines standards essential for social workers in child protection systems. These standards can be regarded as a basic tool for social work practice in child welfare, which may include prevention, parenting programs, family support programs, family-based services, family foster care, kinship care, residential group homes, adoption, and independent living.

Social workers practicing in the child welfare field often need to make critical decisions while working in stressful work environments that can include high caseloads and limited supervision, training, and support. Daniel, Scott & Taylor (2010) argue that detecting the signs of neglect and identifying children's needs is more challenging and complex to deal with. An article written by Professor Nigel Parton, which delves into the challenges of practice and knowledge in child welfare mentions some key challenges that affect social work practice in the child protection system, among these is the reduction in areas of discretionary decision-making for social workers, with frontline practitioners having to follow increasingly detailed procedural guidance. This can limit their ability to use their professional judgment and expertise effectively (Parton, 2009). He also mentions that the child protection system has become overloaded and is not able to cope with the increased demands made of it. This overload leads to potentially missing cases that might require immediate interventions. There is also a concern that the system is less ready to intervene and more oriented towards remedial rather than preventive measures.

3.4.1. Critical social work practice with children

Social work goes beyond just helping people adapt to their social and economic situations by altering their behavior or lifestyle to prevent negative outcomes like losing their home or, in extreme cases, their children and freedom. It is not just about risk assessment or distributing resources, and it certainly is not only focused on child protection (Rogowski, 2024). This is where critical social work comes in, amounting to emancipatory social work, a practice that “is person-centered, empowering, critical of power structures and systems of resource distribution that undermine the well-being of many” (Dominelli, 2010, p 2).

According to Healy (2001), the core mission of critical social work is to promote social justice through social work practice and policy making. To this end, critical social workers have pursued practice theories that prioritize social structural analyses and promote collaborative approaches to action. She highlights that social workers must recognize the significant impact of social factors such as class, race, and gender on the challenges they encounter, and it is crucial for them to critically assess how their actions and the policies they implement can lead to varied outcomes. They should focus on working together with the people they serve instead of taking a top-down approach. This means that social workers, service users, and academics should all collaborate as partners, while still recognizing their different roles. The goal is to support marginalized communities and drive social change. Weiss-Gal et al. (2012) argue that four main ideas define critical social work in practice. For this study, the first two ideas were highlighted. The first idea emphasizes a holistic approach, meaning there is no clear separation between individual and society or between working with children and working with families. The objectives of critical social work blend personal and societal goals. Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel (2013) highlight that effective social work often requires collaboration in teams and a comprehensive approach that addresses a child's physical, emotional, and social well-being. The second aspect focuses on being aware of power differences between social workers and those they serve. Social workers must navigate the power dynamics inherent in their roles, balancing the need to protect children with the need to respect and support families. This involves ethical reflection on how power and care intersect in practice (Nissen & Engen, 2021).

As noted by Rogowski (2024), critical social work with children represents an approach grounded in emancipatory practice that addresses systemic injustices while supporting vulnerable young people and their families. He also highlights that the evolution of critical perspectives in child welfare has increasingly incorporated intersectional approaches, recognizing that children's experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping aspects of identity. This perspective views children not as isolated individuals but as social beings shaped by multiple environmental factors. Robb & Montgomery (2019) state that critical social work practice with children uses specific approaches to assessment and intervention that prioritize emancipatory goals. These approaches begin with comprehensive assessments that consider both individual needs and broader social contexts, examining how structural factors such as poverty, racism, and other forms of discrimination may affect children's well-being. Bolin (2018) emphasizes the

importance of allowing children to express their opinions on matters that impact their lives. This means recognizing the obstacles to their involvement and providing opportunities for them to share their views.

McDonald & Rogowski (2023) highlight that effective critical social work practice requires navigating challenges while maintaining a focus on social justice and the well-being of children. Practitioners often face various challenges, including bureaucratic constraints, policy inconsistencies, and the need for greater family empowerment mechanisms. For this reason, the NASW (2013) suggests supervision as a crucial support structure for critical social work practice, particularly given the emotionally demanding nature of child welfare work. Effective supervision goes beyond administrative oversight to include educational and supportive functions, creating space for reflection on practice challenges and ethical dilemmas. Quality supervision can help practitioners maintain their critical orientation despite pressures to conform to conventional approaches. It also emphasizes that ethical practice in critical social work with children requires adherence to professional standards while maintaining a critical perspective on how these standards themselves may reflect dominant cultural values. The standards for social work practice in child welfare guide ethics, values, qualifications, professional development, advocacy, and collaboration. These standards establish a foundation for ethical practice while recognizing the need for ongoing critical reflection (NASW, 2013).

Social workers, guided by fundamental values and ethical standards, handle challenging situations through a structured process that includes assessment, planning, intervention, review/evaluation, and termination. Their responsibilities range from offering direct assistance and coordinating services to working with legal and judicial entities, always focusing on the best interests of the child. Nonetheless, social workers encounter major obstacles such as heavy caseloads, scarce resources, and increasingly rigid procedures, which can affect their ability to make sound judgments. Critical social work provides a useful perspective for tackling these challenges by promoting a comprehensive approach, awareness of power dynamics, and collaborative relationships with service users to foster social justice and facilitate significant improvements in the child protection system. By integrating principles of social justice, human rights, and reflective practice, social workers can provide more effective and compassionate care to children and their families.

3.4.2. *Assessment of the best interests of the child*

Child welfare professionals have a legal and moral duty to act in the best interests of children. They frequently make important decisions that influence children and their families (Taylor, 2010). Such decisions include the determination of whether to separate a child, who is purportedly subjected to maltreatment, from their home or to facilitate the reunification of a foster child with their biological family (Farmer et al., 2011). Assessment is a crucial part of child protection intervention, which aims to develop an understanding of information gathered and justify the next steps meant to protect the child (Helm, 2011; Horwath, 2007; Östberg, 2014). In the child protection system, Helm (2016) defines assessment as a step in the decision-making process, where the outcome is determined by observing the existing circumstances and using the information at hand. Social workers evaluate the information about situational elements in addition to historical data or background information of the child and family, the home environment, and the caregiver's ability. For this reason, assessment is considered a critical stage that demands knowledge, analytical and professional know-how, and practical skills to appropriately understand a child's situation (Lamponen & Aarnio, 2024; Fluke et al., 2020). Holland (2004) emphasises that assessment is successful when it allows social workers to determine the appropriate course of action. Llorens (2016) states that when determining what is best for a child, we should consider their views, identity, care, safety, vulnerability, rights to health and education, and the importance of family and relationships. As social workers make assessments, they draw on a range of discourses available to them from their education, personal background, theoretical understandings, legislation, national policy 'orientation' to child welfare, and organizational cultures (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011, p.549).

Holland (2004) links various social work assessment approaches in childcare to broader decision-making models. The *rational decision-making model* assumes access to complete information and stable conditions, ignoring values, context, and political influences, making it poorly suited to the complexities of social work, particularly in assessing human behavior. The *organizational process model* emphasizes how institutional routines, risk aversion, and internal information flow shape decisions. The *government political model* highlights how decision-making is influenced by negotiation and power struggles within bureaucracies, often driven by competing interests. Empirical studies have shown that social workers' assessments are

shaped not only by professional judgment but also by organizational and cultural factors (Sheppard, 1990; Campion, 1995; Pithouse, 1998; Scott, 1998 as cited in Holland, 2004). Holland (2004) also identifies three major themes in assessment. That is, *diagnosis*, *prediction*, and *broad social evaluation* each reflect different professional orientations over time. While these models provide useful insights into the complexity of assessment, none fully capture the details required in assessing the best interests of the child. A more holistic, reflective, and context-sensitive model is needed. One that acknowledges the interplay of structural factors, practitioner judgment, and the lived realities of children and families.

Cleaver and Walker (2004) propose that an ideal assessment approach should be more comprehensive, taking into account the complete spectrum of strengths, needs, and challenges faced by children and their families, along with the broader context of their living conditions. To support this, they created an Assessment Framework (Figure 3, in Cleaver & Walker, 2004, p.82) designed to help professionals collaborate with relevant agencies and engage children and families whenever possible. This ensures that the overall assessment, along with any plans and interventions, reflects their input.

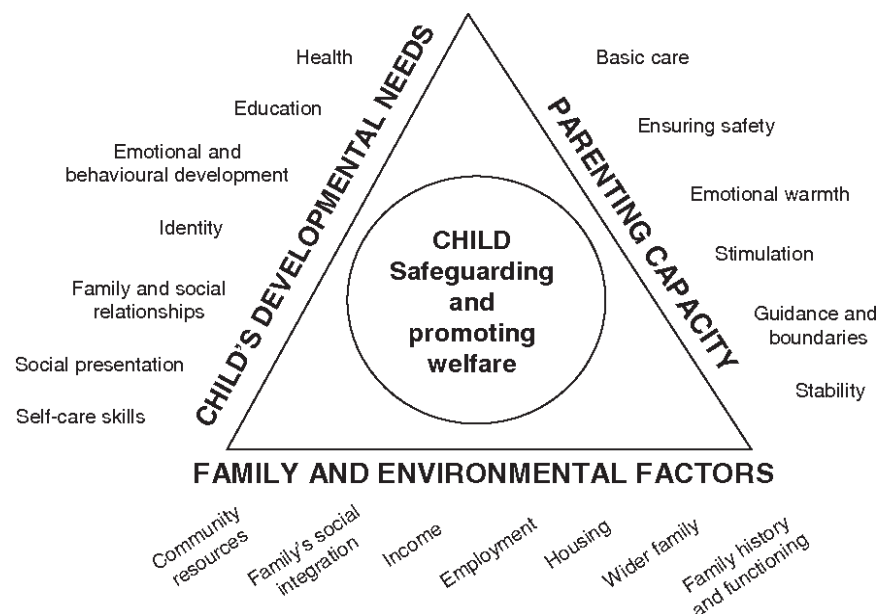


Figure 3. The assessment framework. Adapted from Cleaver & Walker, 2004, p.82.

There are various assessment frameworks, principles, and themes, focusing on the practical, ethical, and institutional factors involved in determining what is in the best interests of the child. Key themes include child involvement, thorough assessment, teamwork among professionals, and the importance of professional discretion. Effective child assessment requires *a holistic and contextual approach* that considers the child's development, parenting capacity, and environmental influences, as supported by tools like the UK's Assessment Framework (Munro, 2009; Winter, 2011; Department of Health, 2000). Multiple studies also highlight the *interprofessional work approach*, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between schools, social services, health providers, and legal professionals (Horwath & Morrison, 2007). However, barriers such as information silos, institutional hierarchies, and resource constraints often hinder cooperation. Practitioners, therefore, frequently rely on *professional discretion*, that is, intuition and experience, to assess complex cases. While this can allow for flexibility, it also introduces variability and potential bias into decision-making processes (Parton, 2009). This is why research stresses the need for *child participation*, ensuring that assessments include the child's voice (Lundy, 2007). Yet in practice, children's views are often overlooked, particularly in systems where adult authority dominates.

Assessing the best interests of children in social work is a complex and dynamic process. It requires a combination of legal requirements, ethical considerations, and practical application. The literature highlights the critical need to conduct comprehensive and context-sensitive assessments that center the child's voice and promote collaboration across disciplines. While various assessment models and frameworks provide guidance, the final determination of the best interests of the child requires sound professional judgment based on theoretical knowledge and a commitment to the fundamental rights and best interests of the child as set out in international conventions. Going forward, further research and critical reflection on assessment practices must be conducted to refine methodologies, address existing challenges, and ensure that the decisions made truly serve the highest interests of the children involved.

4. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the procedures implemented during the research, including the methods employed, the participant criteria, the analysis process, and the ethical issues.

4.1. Qualitative research design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, guided by interpretive and constructivist perspectives, to understand the experiences of social workers in Lithuania and Latvia regarding the assessment of the best interests of the child. By focusing on the meaning derived from the social workers' experiences, the qualitative method allowed for a rich understanding of their practices, challenges, and influencing factors in child protection, offering comprehensive insights often missed by quantitative approaches (Brannen, 2007; Bryman, 2015).

4.1.1. Study population, sampling criteria, and technique

The study population consisted of social workers $n=10$ from child protection organizations in Lithuania and Latvia who assess the best interests of the child and implement current policies. Focusing on this group offered insights into the practical application of policy and the everyday challenges they face. Sampling, as defined by Bryman (2015), involves selecting a segment of the population to represent the whole. The following criteria in selecting the participants were used: The participant should be a professional working actively with children in Lithuania or Latvia, either be working directly with children or with administration, policy frameworks, or methodologies relating to children; and have a minimum of one year of experience in child protection to ensure they have practical experience to draw upon. Purposive and Snowball sampling technique was used to collect data from participants using an interview guide (Bryman, 2015). The principle of data saturation, continuing to recruit participants until no new significant information emerges from the interviews (Naeem et al., 2024).

4.1.2. Data collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These interviews, as suggested by Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), enable open-ended and flexible questions to investigate personal experiences and new themes. Interviews with social workers focused on their experiences, perspectives, and practices in assessing the best interests of the child. Two interview guides were used: one for practitioners working directly with children and assessments (Micro-level), and another for those involved in laws, policies, and system directives (Macro-level). Questions were organized according to the Ecological Systems Theory (see Appendices C and D). The interview guide was designed to allow flexibility in exploring emerging themes and individual experiences related to child welfare assessments. It focused on several key areas, including the frameworks and guidelines social workers use during assessments, as well as the factors they consider when determining the best interests of the child. Participants were also asked about the challenges and barriers they face in the assessment process, along with the strategies and practices that support effective assessments. Additionally, the guide examined the role of interprofessional collaboration and the influence of systemic factors on assessment practices.

4.2. The data and document analysis

The collected data was transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription (Cope, 2009; Huang et al., 2023), which prioritizes clarity and readability by omitting unnecessary elements while preserving meaning. The transcribed data were then analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006, p. 87) six-step thematic analysis, a method for identifying patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Utilizing MAXQDA for coding and visualization, the analysis of ten interviews generated 121 codes, leading to the identification of 8 main themes and 21 sub-themes relevant to the research questions. The following six-step thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006, p.87) was used: (1) familiarization with the data (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

The researcher began the analysis by getting familiar with the data while transcribing interviews, reviewing field notes, and re-listening to recordings to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences. A detailed line-by-line coding process was followed, generating both descriptive and interpretive codes. These codes were then grouped into initial themes, such as “Systemic Challenges,” using thematic mapping to visualize relationships. Themes were refined through cross-checking with the original data, ensuring clarity, relevance, and alignment with research questions. Finally, the report was presented with well-defined themes and sub-themes, together with participant quotes, and interpreted in the context of existing literature.

Document analysis was also used to assess documents, including both printed and digital materials, and then paired with other qualitative research methods to enhance triangulation to develop a deeper understanding of the topic under study (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2015; Morgan, 2022). To minimize the influence of possible biases that may arise from relying on just one study the following documents were analysed: legal frameworks (Law on fundamentals of protection of the rights of the child, the republic of Lithuania and Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights, the republic of Latvia), methodologies (In the best interests of the Child, Methodological Guide for Assurance of Principle, Lithuania and Methodological Material for Social Work for families with children, Latvia), and assessment tools (Assessment form for needs of assistance for child and/or family, Lithuania and Assessment Material for Social Work for Families and Children, Latvia). Flick (2018) proposes that a researcher might use purposive sampling for a document analysis. This technique was therefore used to sample documents to be analysed for this study. Also, to ensure the reliability of the documents selected, the following validating factors proposed by Kridel (2015) were used to decide which documents to include in this study (Figure 3);

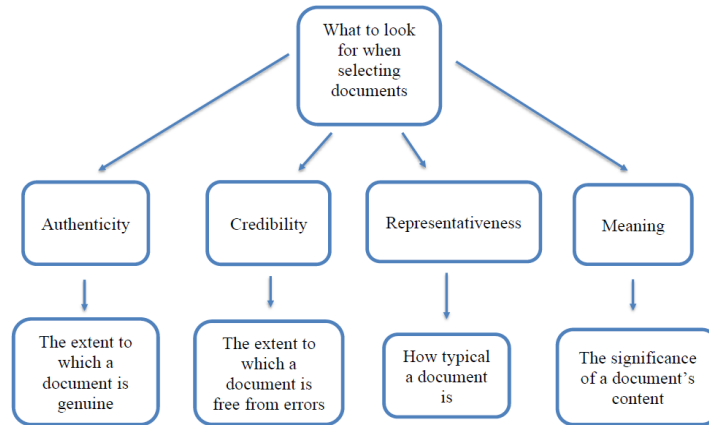


Figure 4. Factors to use for selecting documents. Adapted from Kridel, 2015.

These factors guided the inclusion of documents based on their authenticity, which refers to the genuineness of the document; credibility, indicating the absence of errors; representativeness, assessing how typical the document is within its context; and meaning, which considers the significance of the document's content (Kridel, 2015).

To provide a broader contextual understanding of child protection policies and practices in Lithuania and Latvia, document analysis was conducted alongside interview data. This analysis of relevant documents offered valuable insights into the legal and policy frameworks within which social workers operate, as well as the specific tools and procedures they employ in their daily practice.

4.3. Ethical considerations

Participants were informed about the study's purpose before inclusion. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed. All participants received and signed a consent form (see Appendix B) outlining the study's goals, their rights, and the use of audio and video recordings, which will be deleted after the study concludes. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, following Treadwell's (2017) recommendation to use labels such as A, B, C. In this study, participants were identified as MI# (Micro) and MA# (Macro) during transcription and analysis (See Appendix F).

4.4. Limitations of the study

Interviews took place online, which might have affected how well the interviewer connected with the participants. Online platforms usually do not provide the same immediate and detailed communication as in-person meetings, which could lower the quality of the answers. Language barriers posed a significant challenge, as the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the first language for many participants. This limitation may have led to difficulties in conveying complex ideas effectively. Although efforts were made to ensure clarity through rephrasing and repetition, some meaning could have been lost in translation. While acknowledging the researcher's potential influence, reflexivity strategies were employed to mitigate bias. According to Weston & Sanders (2021), although complete objectivity is unattainable, qualitative researchers may employ strategies to mitigate subjectivity, such as peer supervision, reflexivity, and transparent documentation of the research process. Even with these limitations, the study offers important insights into the challenges of social work in determining what is best for the child and adds to the current knowledge in the field.

5. THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD IN LITHUANIA AND LATVIA

This research presents a comprehensive analysis of social work methodologies employed in assessing the best interests of children in Lithuania and Latvia. The triangulation strategy is used to identify the relationship between policy, practice, and the role of social workers in the assessment of the best interests of the child in Lithuania and Latvia. Based on interviews conducted with social workers, the findings highlight key themes: (1) the necessity for holistic assessments of child welfare, (2) the importance of interprofessional collaboration, and (3) systemic challenges, including limited resources and societal attitudes towards violence. These findings reveal both the advantages and shortcomings of existing practices, providing an understanding of the relationship between policy, frameworks, and professional decision-making. Interviews have given this research important perspectives on how practitioners think and assess situations, but they reflect only their views; therefore, using triangulation enhances the

credibility, validity, and depth of research findings by cross-verifying data from different perspectives (Sciberras & Dingli, 2023).

5.1. The principle of the best interests of the child in the national institutional framework and policy guidelines

Prioritizing the best interests of the child is a key part of child protection laws around the world. It focuses on ensuring the child's well-being in every decision that impacts them. This principle is especially important in custody cases, where factors like emotional connections, safety, and the abilities of parents are considered to decide what is best for the child (Bagenda & Carbonilla, 2024). Additionally, the principle has evolved through international standards, notably the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which mandates that children's interests be prioritized in legal proceedings (Parkhomenko, 2024). Despite its importance, the best interests principle faces criticism for being overly simplistic and not adequately addressing broader social issues like poverty and family dynamics (Huefner & Ainsworth, 2024). Lonardo (2022) emphasizes that the concept of “best interests” is often criticized for being indeterminate, leading to varied interpretations in legal contexts.

The Lithuanian methodological guide (Intè et al., 2024) was published under the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. The Latvian methodological guide was also developed as part of a European Social Fund (ESF) project and coordinated by the Ministry of Welfare. The project involved collaboration between various stakeholders, such as social workers, researchers, and professionals in psychology and social work (Ministry of Welfare, 2020). Both documents indicate that the methodology adaptation was led by the government and aimed at standardizing and improving child protection assessments nationwide. However, the Latvian methodology included greater collaboration with independent agencies and NGOs compared to the Lithuanian methodology, which involved individual researchers from academia. The Lithuanian methodology is centered around the concept of the best interests of the child. Unlike the Lithuanian child protection act, which does not explicitly mention the concept, the methodological guide defines the concept as “the well-being of the child and the proper implementation of all the child's rights” (Intè et al., 2024, p. 19). It aims to provide practical knowledge and tools to help child protection professionals understand and apply this principle in their daily work. The guide is aligned with the UNCRC

and complements the Lithuanian Children's Act when it comes to the practical application of the concept of the best interests of the child. It also acknowledges the criticisms of the concept and suggests that the best interests of the child are viewed flexibly and dynamically, encompassing various constantly changing issues related to the child, and must be adapted to each specific case individually (Intè et al., 2024).

The Latvian methodology, on the other hand, is more family-centered, integrating a holistic view of the child's well-being within the family structure. While focusing on social work with families, it also addresses the best interests of the child within that context. It emphasizes how social workers always ensure that actions and decisions taken are in the best interests of the child. According to the guide, “Social workers actively discuss existing role dilemmas and potential conflicts to reduce them and ensure that the decisions and actions taken are in the best interests of the client – the family with children.” (Ministry of Welfare, 2020, p. 42). In contrast to the Lithuanian methodological guide, the Latvian guide lacks a specific definition of the best interests of the child; nevertheless, it does mention this concept multiple times. The principle of the best interests of the child are included in several statements, for instance, in understanding confrontation as appropriate when it aligns with the *client's best interests*, in emphasizing the need for regular review of removal decisions with the goal of family reunification when safe, and in legal provisions that support returning children to their biological parents as soon as it is deemed to be in their *best interests*. Additionally, the methodology highlights the importance of supporting parents in making informed decisions and cooperating with service providers to resolve crises in ways that prioritize the *best interests of the child* (Ministry of Welfare, 2020).

The principle of the best interests of the child remains a fundamental yet complex concept in child welfare systems, as shown by the methodologies in Lithuania and Latvia. Lithuania offers a clear definition and a systematic method for applying this principle, while Latvia incorporates it into a wider family-focused context without a specific definition. Both methodologies align with the best interests principle, however, there remains a challenge due to subjective interpretations and systemic constraints. Despite these variations, both methodologies stress the importance of ongoing assessment, tailored approaches for each case, and flexibility to promote child welfare.

The interview results reveal that assessing the best interests of the child is inherently complex and situational. Participants emphasized the need to assess a broad range of factors such as the child's age, family history, and socio-environmental circumstances. This complexity shows that no single principle or action can universally define the best interests of the child, as different cases require tailored approaches.

“So I think it is having in mind that the best interests of the child is something that cannot be explained in one sentence. So the main principle is that we evaluate the best interests of the child in every particular situation.” (MA2)

“A child and their interests in Lithuania are very important because they represent the future generation. By taking care of children today, we prevent future problems for adults. The goal of institutions is to ensure that all decisions are made with the best interests of the child in mind. Of course, the physical and psychological safety of the child is very important.” (MI5)

Participants from both countries (Lithuania and Latvia), regardless of their professional standing, mentioned similar factors to consider when assessing the best interests of the child. These factors were embedded in the basic needs.

“I think that the first or primary factors are those concerned with the safety and the health of the child, definitely.” (MA1)

“Physical needs like food, clothing, and safe environments to grow up... and emotional ones like security and support.” (MI2)

“We mostly assess the basic needs of the child... emotional belonging, safe attachment, and safety in relationships” (MI3)

“...the surroundings of the child. I mean physical and emotional...how does the house look? Is it clean? Does it have all the necessities? Is there a shower, kitchen?” (MA2)

“...we use special assessment forms where we look at the child's situation and needs in three categories. Child's Development, which includes the child's health, education, family social relationships, and emotional and behavioral development. Parenting skills and Social factors.” (MA5)

While the principle of the best interests of the child remains central to child protection, its practical application varies across contexts and is shaped by institutional frameworks and professional judgment. From the interviews with participants in Latvia and Lithuania, it is evident that the national policies and institutional frameworks heavily influence social work practices. In Latvia, the deinstitutionalization of child protection services has led to significant changes, such as an increased emphasis on family-based care. One participant remarked that in

the past fifteen years, there has been a shift in understanding the need to put the family first when it comes to assessments and decision-making.

“Fifteen years ago, institutionalization was the norm for children with severe disabilities. Today, the focus has shifted to supporting families first...Latvia's child protection law in each year, there is something new. For example, we didn't have a definition of what neglect is in the beginning, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Now we have 2 years ago defined precisely how and what the signs are in the family” (M11).

Another emphasized how social workers are more interested in how the family system is developing.

“...the social workers also are obligated to assess the whole context of the social situation of the family and what are the best interests of a child...because we are more interested in how the family system is developing” (M13)

Despite these advancements, gaps between policy and implementation persist. Limited resources, lack of personnel, and bureaucratic inefficiencies often disrupt the delivery of services. Social workers emphasized the need for policy revisions to include more robust funding mechanisms and streamlined access to health and educational services.

“I can say that at the moment we have realized that we have very good written documents guidelines, policies, and legislation looks very good but in practice I can tell you that we have lack of social workers firstly, we also have lack of social services, people wait in queues for years to access for example home or daycare center for severely disabled people...we lack carers.” (M11)

“There's a gap, and I can say it's 100% because when we have laws like orphan law or Child Protection law...And in the law, we have that parents are responsible for their kids and their well-being. But they are dragging them (the children) to court and asking them to say that they are good parents, you know, and it's very difficult to explain because in law it is very beautifully written. But in real life, it's not working...And I think it's not because the law is bad. I think because people are pronouncing the law in different ways, as it reads, I hope you understand what I mean.” (MA3)

In Lithuania, participants stated that laws regarding child protection are very strict and must be adhered to by professionals, and may be politically inclined.

“The laws regarding child protection are very strict. We have step by step algorithms that say how we should work, and it's at the legislative level. Meaning that we are very dependent on the political background of Lithuania on who the Minister is. As child protection officers, it's just our line of work that depends on the legal acts, and we cannot create anything by ourselves.” (MA2)

In Latvia, social work professionals working in the orphan's court also emphasized the need for more strictness in child protection, especially when it comes to decision-making that may affect the best interests of the child.

“What I think is, it is very important to follow the child protection legislation... It always has to be about the law and the instructions, because if someone wants to make a decision, it's not based on the law. It's not a good decision because we all need to make sure that the kids are safe in their families.” (MA4)

While both countries emphasize the importance of the best interests of the child principle, their differing approaches reveal challenges in balancing standardized procedures with the flexibility required for individual cases. The next section explores the role social workers play in navigating these challenges, highlighting how their professional judgment, training, and collaboration shape child protection outcomes on the ground.

5.2. The role of social workers in the child protection system

Social workers are essential professionals in coordinating specialized services, providing emotional support, and integrating knowledge from other professionals to ensure effective decision-making in child protection cases. Their involvement is crucial in promoting children's rights and facilitating their recovery and reintegration into society. Social workers act as advocates for children, preparing social reports and facilitating court proceedings for those in conflict with the law. Also, ensuring that children's voices are heard and their rights to participate in the process are respected is a role of social workers in child protection. This includes talking to children during assessments and investigations (Hayes & Spratt, 2009; Ilham et.al., 2023; Kosher & Katz, 2025). Lauri et al. (2021) suggest that when children are not communicated with, their voices and perspectives are often missing from the assessment. This can lead to incomplete or biased assessments that do not fully capture the child's needs and experiences. Lamponen & Aarnio (2024) also suggest that social workers are responsible for assessing the child's needs and deciding the best course of action. This involves evaluating the child's psychosocial situation, parental capacity, and available family and community support.

In Latvia, assessments of the best interests of the child are mostly conducted by social workers and professionals of the orphan's court, these assessments are the foundation for decision making when it comes to protecting the rights of the child. In the Latvian methodology, the role of the social worker is to promote the family's social functioning, social inclusion, and strengthen the parents' capacity through information and support (Ministry of Welfare, 2020). Social workers prioritize keeping children within their biological families whenever possible, and their primary goal is to provide support services to families before resorting to child removal. This aligns with Latvia's legal stance, where the orphan's court plays a crucial role in family law cases. Social workers collaborate with the orphan's court, which is primarily responsible for evaluating child welfare cases. The methodology outlines a multi-stage process for assessing families and children. In situations involving the removal of a child from their family in Latvia, social workers monitor, evaluate, and report to the orphan's court. A participant validated this by stating that circumstances demand that a social worker informs the orphan's court about signs or indications of abuse or insufficient parental duties after an observation has been done.

"...A social worker is not making decisions about the ability of the parent to perform the parent's duties, but a social worker is observing and decides that if such a sign or indication happens, we have to inform the orphan courts." (MI3)

In Lithuania, case managers, including social workers, also observe and assess (evaluate) the family. According to the Lithuanian methodology, the first step in the process of ensuring the best interests of the child is the assessment of the best interests of the child, formally and informally. Assessment is defined in the methodological guide as "monitoring the situation of a specific child, collecting, analyzing and summarizing information about his or her needs and their satisfaction, rights and their implementation" (Intè et al., 2024, p. 63). Unlike Latvia, which is more reliant on the orphan's court to make decisions, social workers in Lithuania work hand in hand with the child rights protection service to come up with the best outcomes for the child. Decisions of child removal are, however, not at the discretion of social workers.

"Since we work in case management, I could mention that we indeed follow the established laws, deadlines, and regulations. The Child Rights Protection Service makes decisions about the child's situation, and while our opinions may differ, we often seek a unified solution by holding consultations to find the best outcome." (MI2)

"...Our main goal is the best interests of the child and their safety; this is the most important thing. However, if parents are unable or unwilling to change their behavior,

such as substance abuse, we refer the case back to the child welfare authorities, who make the appropriate decisions on whether to remove the child or not.” (MI5)

Social workers may find it difficult to advocate for the best interests of the child if they are not part of the decision-making process. This can lead to decisions that do not align with the child's needs or circumstances (Lauri et al. 2021). Toros (2019) also suggests that if social workers are not included in the decision-making process, they may not fully understand how their evaluations are implemented. This can create a gap between the results of their assessments and the interventions that are carried out. She also adds that social workers may struggle with accountability for outcomes, as they may not have had a say in the decisions that affect the child's welfare (Toros, 2019).

Social workers in both countries provide recommendations based on thorough assessments to assist courts, legal systems, or agencies in determining actions that align with the best interests of the child. They cannot make decisions on their own, especially regarding the removal of children from their families. This duty rests upon the orphan's court in the case of Latvia and the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Agency in the case of Lithuania. When social workers are limited to only evaluating a child's circumstances and are not part of the decision-making process, various challenges can emerge that hinder the success of child protection initiatives.

5.2.1. Recognizing the child's perspective of their experience and development needs

The key factors in assessing the best interests of the child also include the child's voice. According to Bagenda & Carbonilla (2024), listening to children helps ensure their emotional needs and opinions are respected, which is vital for holistic well-being. Interviews emphasized the need for the child's perspective to be included in all decisions relating to their best interests. Participants made mention of how important it is that children themselves can take part in decision making and the role of the social worker to ensure the child feels comfortable doing so.

“...talk to the child. So one thing that they evaluate is the child's opinion here...we try to let the child explain how she or he feels at home.” (MA2)

“...it is important that children themselves can take part in decisions. When that concerns their well-being...” (M12)

“In my practice, I always ask the child's opinion and I ask parents if I can talk with the child as well...But I know lots of social workers in Latvia are not talking to the children. Because in our child's court (orphan's court), there are specialists who by law are qualified to talk with the child.” (MA3)

From MA3's response above, Latvia has specialized professionals who are trained and mandated by law to talk with children when it comes to court cases (custody). The participant went on to elaborate on how she includes the voice of the child in her practice.

"...Of course, I talk with the child only with the permission of parents...It's sometimes very easy when we are in one room. I ask, is there a possibility that I can now talk with your teenager? They said Yeah, that's no problem. And then I said OK, maybe you can wait outside. I have just a quick question. Like I make this small conversation good for the child because it's not always that they can say everything when the parents are around." (MA3)

A participant from Latvia also pointed out the difference between parents' rights and children's rights, particularly in custody cases. She brought to light how the social workers working in the social services are more inclined to being family oriented and taking into account how to keep the family together, while the custody court pays more attention to the rights of the parents and went on to suggest that more focus should be on the rights and needs of the child.

"I think we should focus more on the child, on the individual needs of the child. It's also a Latvian experience, unfortunately, that our practice is, and of course, it's not wrong or something, but it's focused on work with family, and at the same time, it's also in the child protection frame. It's like a custody court and social service...In a way, it seems that the custody court should be more with the child and their individual needs, and the social service should work more with the family to achieve the best support for the child. But in practice, one of the organisations is working more on legal aspects of the parent rights and things like that, and the other on the family. These are situations where there's some gap between them" (MA5)

Social workers in both Latvia and Lithuania play a vital role in the child protection systems by conducting thorough assessments, fostering collaboration among professionals, and advocating for the best interests of the child. Despite their crucial contributions in assessing children's circumstances and providing recommendations, they often face limitations in the decision-making process, particularly concerning the removal of children from their families. This responsibility primarily rests with the orphan's court in Latvia and the state child rights protection and adoption agency in Lithuania. To fully understand the complexities involved in prioritizing the best interests of the child, it is crucial to examine the inherent power dynamics and systemic challenges that can influence social work practice.

5.2.2. Working collaboratively to assess the best interests of the child

Many professions, such as social work, depend on interprofessional collaboration to effectively assist clients. For instance, a school social worker often partners with educators to address the mental health needs of students within the classroom setting. Social workers consistently engage in collaborative efforts with other professionals to advocate for their clients (Lockhart et al., 2018). D'Amour et al. (2005) explain that interprofessional and interdisciplinary are commonly confused and often used interchangeably. To distinguish the terms, it is helpful to think of interdisciplinarity as concerned with knowledge and interprofessionality with practice. In the case of the results from the participants interviewed, it can be deduced that interprofessional collaboration was the main focus.

The Latvian methodology emphasizes the importance of collaboration in the assessment process and has a dedicated section that provides definitions for different forms (Inter-institutional cooperation, interprofessional collaboration, and team collaboration) of collaboration that take place in the assessment process (Ministry of Welfare, 2020). The methodology provides detailed information on the cooperation between social workers and psychologists and psychotherapists, emphasizing clear communication about the purpose of referrals, the content of opinions, and the boundaries of confidentiality. The Lithuanian methodology also emphasizes the role of specialists in working with children and families, and by extension, in assessments. While it does not use the exact term "interprofessional collaboration" as explicitly as the Latvian methodology in the provided excerpts, it highlights the involvement of various professionals. The Law on the Fundamentals of the Protection of the Rights of the Child in Lithuania however establishes the obligation for employees of education, personal healthcare, social services, law enforcement, and other institutions and bodies, as well as non-governmental organizations whose work is related to the upbringing and care of children, to report cases of child rights violations or endangerment. This implies information sharing and potential collaboration in assessing a situation (Intè et al., 2024).

Highlighting current collaborations and challenges, MA1 and MA5 from Latvia emphasised how there are rules stipulated by the government that address the need for collaboration, and also mentioned the duty of social workers to initiate and facilitate collaborations with other professionals or stakeholders.

“There is a rule of government that stipulates that every municipality has to have a children’s rights protection coordination team...“social workers have a duty to bring together stakeholders” (MA1)

“At least for this first part of the assessment, when this case comes into the child protection system, the assessment is provided together with social services and the custody court. So it's like a team...(MA5)

“We have many meetings and inter-institutional cooperation with other organizations and institutions, and decisions are made after hearing from the family itself. Then, together with other specialists and their recommendations, a support plan is created.” (MI5)

The Council on Social Work Education, CSWE (2018), explains that social workers collaborate with individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities to help address a wide array of societal challenges. Participants agreed on how important having an interprofessional team to work on cases of children can go a long way in making assessments and interventions more effective. *“In the ideal version would be multi-professional teamwork, but in reality, the healthcare and the educational system are not paid for additional hours working with social workers.” (MI1)*. However, despite the promise of interprofessional collaboration and the organizational and policy/practice mechanisms that are in place to promote this type of collaborative practice, interprofessional collaboration is challenging (Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011). MI2 remarked, *“Professionals are not always cooperative, and this makes it harder to fully support the child or gather information about their environment” (MI2)*. According to Mellin et al. (2011), some of these challenges relate to the method of training in various professions; the differences in terminology used among professions; and the limited understanding of other professions’ roles, responsibilities, and scopes of practice. *“We collaborate with schools, but not all of them want to work with us because they don’t fully understand our activities.” (MI2)*. Among the professionals that were mentioned as collaborators in child protection cases, doctors and teachers were mentioned as the most challenging professionals to collaborate with.

“I cannot say that all physicians are reluctant to cooperate, but the main tendency is that this is one of the challenges, how to bring physicians and social workers in one room, maybe not literally, but at least on one page...” (MA1)

“...interdisciplinary cooperation also with the field of education and the field of health. In health, those are those that are the most problematic. We have a lot of challenges in identifying some first signs of abuse and mobbing and things like that in schools, and starting the process of giving some support” (MA5)

The necessity and benefits of interprofessional collaboration in child protection are evident in both Latvian and Lithuanian methodologies and the experiences of social workers. While formal structures and policies exist to promote teamwork, including inter-institutional coordination teams and legal obligations for information sharing, the practical implementation faces significant challenges. These challenges, as highlighted by participants, include a lack of cooperation from some professionals, particularly in the healthcare and education sectors, stemming from differing professional cultures, terminology, and understanding of roles. Overcoming these barriers is crucial to fully realize the potential of interprofessional collaboration in achieving more effective and holistic support for children and their families.

5.3. Power dynamics and systemic challenges

Protecting the best interests of children presents challenges in different legal and cultural settings. Kanics (2016) notes that these challenges include societal views that restrict children's rights, weak legal systems, failure to acknowledge the unique needs of accompanied children, and uneven enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all of which obstruct effective child protection. Participants from Lithuania and Latvia highlighted similar issues as mentioned by Kanics (2016). MA2 from Lithuania, for example, touched on societal attitudes that limit children's rights and how these attitudes often affect how cases of violence against children are reported.

"I would say that we can create all the laws we want, but if we do not change the perception of the people, then nothing changes because usually all those violations of children rights, they happen within closed doors...may be if we hear a child screaming every night in their neighbor's house, it's not that you have to report it instantly, but maybe you can just knock to the door and ask if everything is alright. Maybe you need some help." (MA2)

"Sometimes the wait for services can be very long, several months, and the family loses motivation to wait, so they don't go anywhere and end up waiting in line for several more months. This is due to a shortage of specialists, which is related to funding. Of course, there is a lack of additional free services for children with developmental disorders. There is a shortage of free speech therapists, special education teachers, and free extracurricular activities for children, such as dance, sports, and music classes. There is also a lack of free services for children from different backgrounds, migrants who speak Ukrainian, Russian, or English. So, when a family needs this kind of support, it is very difficult to offer them anything." (MI5)

Other participants from Latvia also mentioned barriers to interventions, such as long waits for service delivery, especially among child psychologists.

“...it's the old story about lack of suitable available services or for example if child needs psychologist there is no psychologist or you have to wait 1-2 months availability of health system resources like medical rehabilitation there is a lot of complaint about this that they cannot access physiotherapy occupational therapist so the child development goes further and he could gain more if we can different educational programs lack of lack of social workers case overload so in fact the quality of how we can evaluate assess and intervene” (M11)

“...psychologists are not available, in timely manner, sometimes, psychiatrists, and there is also a lack of, let's say, immediate accessibility of services, for example, if you could imagine, also in other municipalities, there, the accessibility of services, is even, let's say, more restricted.” (MA1)

An example of a case of child abuse and systemic challenges was given by one participant who emphasized the need for a faster process when it comes to service delivery.

“The biggest challenge that I remember from January was a girl, she was sexually abused in the family, and I put information about her situation to the police, and they actually checked my information for 3-4 months before they started to do something. And it was very hard because I saw a situation. It's got worse, worse mentally in the family, and I straight away gave a rehabilitation programme for the girls who went through that kind of stuff. But when I asked the police to do things quicker, they said it's our process and we can't do anything about it. And it's like it's hard for me to understand because I reported the situation. We need to put the child in a safe place. But before we could do it, I had to wait for an answer from the police. They had to do expertise and lots of counselling with her, and so on. But it was hard for me because I thought it was obvious that everything went wrong because she said that she got abused, and we were just waiting for a response from the police. I think it should be a faster process.” (MA3)

One of the participants (MA5), who is a macro-level professional directly engaged with policy on the flip side, made mention of challenges that are related to practice.

“I think that some very tragic cases are taking place where professionals are. I don't know if maybe it's because of the workload or small wages or something, but you see that, that, that they are not responsible for what they are responsible for. So I believe it's about the personal level or reflection process, which also should be provided by municipal social workers, social services, or any place of work.” (MA5)

Social workers in child welfare often face the challenging task of balancing professional discretion with legal mandates when assessing the best interests of the child. This balance is crucial as it directly impacts the decisions made regarding child protection and welfare. Several authors acknowledge that in navigating the complexities of child protection, social workers

employ discretionary decision-making. While drawing upon laws and systematic guidelines, social workers consider individual and holistic assessments alongside evolving circumstances and potentially conflicting perspectives. This discretionary approach enables them to tailor interventions to the unique needs of each child and their context. However, this can also lead to variations in practice and potentially unequal access to protection and support. While legal mandates provide a necessary framework, they can sometimes be perceived as inflexible limitations on professional judgment (Caspersen & Paulsen, 2023; Lamponen & Aarnio, 2024; Segatto et al., 2020). As Kettle (2018) describes, social workers often function as "tightrope walkers," carefully balancing closeness and distance, as well as navigating power dynamics with both other professionals and clients, demanding careful negotiation and the ability to challenge other professionals respectfully. According to participant MI1 from Latvia, she balances between the legislation process and that of personal discretion, mostly taking into account broader socio-economic factors.

“Sometimes we participate in the legislation process...Sometimes, of course, we can also change existing municipality rules, especially when it comes to social assistance or need-based benefits. I mean, these are our main activities, how we are taking into account other broader socio-economic factors.” (MI1)

MA2, a participant from Lithuania, however, gave an insight into how following the legal acts is a must and how restrictive it is, preventing them from creating anything by themselves as child protection officers. *“As child protection officers, it's just our line of work that depends on the legal acts, and we cannot create anything by ourselves” (MA2)*. The participant also gave a detailed description of how the inflexibility of the legal act affects response to child protection cases and assessments, highlighting the tension between Lithuania's strict legal timeframes for responding to child protection cases and the need for thorough, well-prepared assessments in non-urgent situations. Although the legal framework is strong and structured, the pressure to respond quickly can undermine the quality of investigations, leading to fearful families, uncooperative children, and missed signs of abuse. Legal reforms should therefore allow more flexible timelines in non-immediate danger cases to ensure more effective and meaningful child protection outcomes.

“...In 2018 it was decided that it is very important to react to every report very fast. Meaning we have time slots of 1 hour, 6 hours, and 3 days. But what we see now is that if we have a situation and there is a police officer, then it's important that child protection

specialists come in no more than an hour. That's all right. But if we talk about other cases, for example, when we get a report from the teacher that there might be physical violence at home. It doesn't mean that the child is currently very unsafe, because it probably has happened for a few years, and nobody reacted because nobody knew about it. But now, the teacher reports it. We know about this, and following our laws, we have to react in six hours. We try to ensure the safety of the child as soon as possible. But when we go to the family home, everyone is scared. We did not have the time to collect all the information to get ready for the interview...So in this way, I think that Lithuania's legal act should change and that we should make some more time for the specialist to get ready for the contact of the family in cases when there is no immediate danger. If we talk about an instant danger, then, yes, everyone should react as soon as possible. But in cases like the example I gave, it's much more important to react in good quality to make sure that we come there and we are ready” (MA2)

According to Klutz (2017), an effective social worker embodies a combination of professional skills, moral virtues, and personal attributes that facilitate successful client interactions and interventions. The integration of these elements is crucial for navigating the complexities of social work practice. Participants from this research champion the need for these attributes; however, a profession like social work, which according to participant (MA3) can be draining and even sometimes challenge her ethics.

“It's quite hard because of the lack of time from other institutions, and just waiting and waiting for them to offer assistance or needed resources. It's very bad for my mental health as well because I'm worried about the situation in the family I'm working with...And then comes ethics that I need to stop myself. I need to say I did my best.”(MA3)

Participants from both countries pointed out the use of supervision to deal with challenges that arise in their practice. Unlike the Lithuanian methodology, which does not explicitly mention professional supervision for social workers, in the Latvian methodology, regular supervision is emphasized as important for a social worker, especially when starting practice. In the Latvian methodology, for instance, social workers are mandated to initiate supervision. It also defines supervision as consultative support on issues related to work and professional activities (Ministry of Welfare, 2020).

Participants from Lithuania mentioned having supervision every year, individual supervision, and supervision with colleagues. They have five hours of free psychological help a year. One also emphasized how her relationship with her colleagues is of great help to her and the main source of help.

“So in the institution that I work in, we take this issue very seriously, I would say that we understand that this job is very dreadful. Sometimes it's just so emotional. You get involved in the situations and sometimes do not notice that you are just involved. So what we mainly do is we use supervision as a way to help our specialist, I have supervision every year. My individual supervision, then the supervision with my colleagues... So I would say that the main source for me is the supervision and my colleagues” (M14)

One participant from the macro-level pointed out how these supervisions are 70% funded by the state, and the need for all social workers to be engaged in supervision for 20 to 21 hours per year. She also stated that the state is running training for social workers to help them improve their practice.

“We are trying to encourage people to use support for supervision, like supervision like not overseeing, but reflection process like coaching and supervision. We have requirements for social workers that they should have in this supervision process throughout the year, all the time, and they have some 20 to 21 hours per year” (M15)

Supervision is a critical component in the field of social work, providing numerous benefits that enhance the effectiveness of social workers. It enhances the skills of social workers by offering ongoing learning opportunities and helpful feedback. Supervision also serves as a valuable resource for preventing burnout by providing emotional support and a chance for reflection, and also supports work teams by fostering a collaborative environment and addressing team dynamics (Akesson & Canavera, 2018; Schavel et al., 2019).

The principle of the best interests of the child remains a guiding yet multifaceted standard in the child protection systems of Latvia and Lithuania. Although both countries uphold this principle through national frameworks and professional practices, differences in methodology, legal interpretations, and systemic capacities shape their practical application. Social workers play a central role in assessing and advocating for children's welfare, yet face significant challenges such as rigid legal mandates, limited resources, interprofessional collaboration challenges, and power imbalances within decision-making structures. While laws focus on safety and risk, a social worker may see the value of keeping family ties and cultural identity when determining what is best for the child. This requires a careful balancing act, where social workers must justify their decisions based on both legal requirements and professional judgment. Ultimately, bridging the gap between policy and practice and allowing for greater flexibility and collaboration is essential for strengthening child welfare outcomes in both countries.

6. DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL TRIANGULATION

To gain a comprehensive understanding of this study, theoretical and methodological triangulation has been applied in this discussion section. Triangulation is a methodological approach in qualitative research that involves using multiple methods, data sources, theories, or researchers to enhance the credibility and validity of research findings (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Santos et al., 2020). Santos et al. (2020) also define theoretical triangulation as applying multiple theories to interpret the data and methodological triangulation as using different methods to study the same phenomenon, such as combining interviews and surveys. By combining these two approaches (theoretical and methodological triangulation), the research validates its findings through various sources and enhances the analysis with different theoretical frameworks. The use of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and three main theories, which are ecological systems theory, complexity theory, and critical theory, provides a well-rounded view of how social workers in Lithuania and Latvia assess the best interests of children within their child protection systems.

6.1. Child-centered assessment in practice following Ecological systems theory

The findings of this study demonstrate a strong commitment among social workers to implement child-centered assessment while highlighting the holistic well-being and opinions of children on micro, meso, macro, exo, and chrono levels. They take into account not just the family environment (microsystem) but also the wider impacts of schools, communities, and societal values (meso and macrosystem). This aligns with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The theory highlights how different layers within the environmental system are connected, starting from the close microsystem (child and family) to the wider macrosystem (sociocultural beliefs and policies).

Interview results show that it is crucial to assess the surrounding, basic needs, and social factors that affect the child. According to Jun-Tai & Barbour (2014), the microsystem encompasses the child's direct interactions with their immediate surroundings, such as family, school, and peers. They also argue that when assessing the best interests of the child, it is important to consider the

quality of interactions within the microsystem. This includes evaluating the child's relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. All participants emphasized the need to assess a broad range of factors such as the child's age, family history, and socio-environmental circumstances. This approach matches the microsystem's focus on the child's direct interactions with their surroundings. Participants mentioned assessing basic needs, which include emotional belonging, safe attachment, and safety in relationships. The use of an assessment form to help assess the child's situation and how social factors are one of the key indicators when assessing the best interests of the child was also highlighted (MI3; MA2).

Both the Latvian and Lithuanian assessment tools also contain assessment forms with sections dedicated to assessing the basic needs and the surrounding environment of children and families. In the Lithuanian and Latvian children's acts, for instance, there are dedicated clauses that highlight the living conditions for children. The document also contains the Basic Needs Assessment Criteria (BACs) form and the Initial Assessment of Living Conditions form. These are central assessment tools focused specifically on identifying basic needs related to childcare and potential neglect. It assesses various aspects of a child's life categorized under physical care of the child and the child's safety in his or her neighbourhood, and the family's place of residence. The Lithuanian document, on the other hand, has the Child and/or Family Support Needs Assessment Form, which assesses the child's development, parenting skills, living conditions, and community resources. These documents verify the statements of participants and highlight the importance of assessing family relationships, living arrangements, and the socio-environment of the child.

Participants from both countries also highlighted the need to have a child-centered approach to assessments of the best interests of the child. One social worker specifically emphasized that it is important that children themselves can take part in decisions, especially when it comes to their well-being (MI2). According to Henward et al. (2019), the child-centered approach emphasizes the importance of considering the child's perspective, needs, and rights in all decisions affecting them. This approach is grounded in the belief that children are capable of making meaningful contributions to their own lives and should be given opportunities to express their views and preferences. The legal frameworks, methodologies, and assessment tools of both countries endorse the need to give the child a voice during assessments and case management procedures.

In the Lithuanian and Latvian children's acts as discussed in chapter 3 of this study, there are dedicated clauses and sections that highlight the participation of children in cases and decisions related to them.

Although all participants agree with the tenets of this approach, the findings show that there is a strain in how the child-centered approach is delivered in practice, especially in Latvia. One participant from Latvia noted how there is a constant need to gain the permission of a child's parent before she can engage with the child. She, however, highlighted that professionals in the orphan's court are mandated by law to speak with children with or without the consent of the child's parents (MA3). The study uncovered inconsistencies in how much weight is given to the child's perspective, despite policies mandating participation. This reflects a disconnect between the theoretical ideal of child-centeredness and the realities of practice, where legal guidelines, cultural norms, and workload pressures sometimes reduce meaningful engagement with children. The child-centered approach is closely linked to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes the child's right to be heard in all matters affecting them (Ray, 2009). For this reason, social workers need to exercise this principle without any hindrance to ensure the best interests of the child.

Lastly, the findings highlight how societal attitudes toward violence against children and resource allocation reflect the macrosystem's broader cultural and policy influences on child protection and the assessment of the best interests of the child. For example, Lithuania only prohibited corporal punishment of children in 2017, after “lengthy discussions and several attempts,” indicating significant cultural resistance to this change. Despite the law's passage, “a large part of Lithuanian society still does not support this legislation”, revealing a disconnect between legal standards and cultural attitudes that directly impacts reporting behavior (Buzaitytė-Kašalynienė et al., 2024). A 2011 report from Latvia on Adverse Childhood Experiences of Young Adults revealed that emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, yet it often goes unrecognized by victims, perpetrators, and institutions alike. This widespread lack of recognition underscores how cultural norms can normalize certain harmful behaviors, thus impeding their identification and reporting (Velika et al., 2012). Interviewees pointed out that societal reluctance to report abuse and inadequate resources for child welfare services were major barriers (MI1). The macrosystem (cultural and institutional frameworks)

fails to adequately support social workers in their daily practice. One of the participants who is directly involved in the macro-level (policy) acknowledged that social workers were facing challenges but gave suggestions on how social workers can be reflective in their practice without touching on solutions to these challenges (MA5).

Although provisions have been made in the legal acts of both Lithuania and Latvia, and planned upgrades on methodologies are underway, there is a need for a shift in implementation strategies, alongside legislative reforms to foster environments where social workers receive the needed resources and assistance to effectively assess cases and come up with interventions that are in the best interests of the child.

6.2. Interprofessional collaboration and system complexity

The dynamic and unpredictable nature of child protection cases, as described by participants, aligns with complexity theory. Complexity theory highlights that child protection systems are complex adaptive systems, where interactions between various factors lead to emergent and unpredictable outcomes (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015; Gillen & Canavan, 2023). Social workers need to adopt flexible and adaptive strategies, continuously reassessing the situation and adjusting their interventions as new information emerges.

The findings in this study show the dynamic challenges of applying uniform frameworks to unique cases. For example, while Lithuania and Latvia have standardized risk assessment tools, participants highlighted how non-linear the assessment of the best interests of the child is, emphasizing the need for flexibility in tailoring assessments to individual circumstances (MI2). This aligns with the theory's principle that systems must adapt to complex and unpredictable needs. This study has also revealed interdependence between various professional roles in child welfare, emphasizing that no single actor can independently ensure the best interests of the child. Participants noted that providing quality support without collaboration is impossible (MI5). Klaveren et al. (2024) argue that professionals' perceptions of case complexity and their preferences for interprofessional collaboration are positively associated. As case complexity increases, the importance and influence of different professions within the interprofessional team become more equally distributed, enhancing team cohesion and adaptability. However, challenges in interprofessional collaboration disrupt the social worker's consistency in ensuring

the best interests of the child. Interview results showed that professionals are not always cooperative, and this makes it harder to fully support the child or gather information about their environment (MI2; MA2). The challenges in interprofessional collaboration highlighted by participants align with complexity theory's emphasis on the difficulties of coordinating actions in complex systems, where multiple actors with different perspectives and priorities interact. Participants described collaboration as both essential and challenging, often hindered by bureaucratic delays, poor communication, and a lack of shared understanding of the “best interests” principle.

The results of the study also emphasize the concept of bifurcation in complexity theory, where small changes in the system can lead to major shifts. It highlights the challenges that occur in complex systems with conflicting priorities and how a breakdown in interdependence can impact a social worker's ability to assess what is best for the child. Darlington et al. (2005) explain that this interdependence means that challenges in one system, such as resource limitations or institutional capacity, can significantly impact the effectiveness of collaboration across systems. He also states that these challenges are often compounded by mutual mistrust and a lack of supportive structures at the organizational level. As suggested by one participant, there is therefore a need to build stronger relationships of trust between professionals through good communication (MA3). As previously mentioned, Bungert (2010) states that frequent, timely communication among providers increases service integration more effectively than top-down mandates, but requires trust built through repeated positive interactions. In complex adaptive systems, trust functions as a nonlinear amplifier. Once a threshold is crossed, collaboration improves greatly, whereas shortcomings lead to vicious cycles of blame and withdrawal.

There are sections in the Lithuanian and Latvian methodologies that highlight the need for interprofessional collaboration. In the Latvian methodology, for instance, social workers are mandated to be at the forefront of ensuring collaborations with other professionals. The methodology emphasizes that social workers are responsible for building and managing collaborative teams of specialists through a dynamic process that involves establishing team rules, organizing meetings, coordinating activities, and initiating supervision (Ministry of Welfare, 2020). The Lithuanian methodology also endorses interprofessional collaboration as an important approach to ensuring the best interests of the child. It highlights that safeguarding a

child's well-being requires seamless cooperation, information sharing, and coordinated actions among various state institutions, including child protection, social services, education, and law enforcement (Intè et al., 2024).

Despite structural efforts of the legal acts, methodologies, and assessment tools of Lithuania and Latvia, social workers still have a challenge in gaining the needed assistance, information, and cooperation from professionals when assessing the best interests of the child.

6.3. Power, inequality, and reflective critical social work practice

Critical theory in social work focuses on addressing social injustices and inequalities. It views social problems as the result of various forms of oppression and injustice (Rogowski & Le Thi, 2025). The theory encourages social workers to examine how power dynamics may disadvantage certain groups, such as children or marginalized families, within the child protection system. Social workers need to be aware of these power dynamics and actively work to promote more equitable and empowering practices.

The gap between good legislative plans and how they work in real life shows the importance of critical theory in connecting policy statements with actual practice. For instance, even though child protection laws in Latvia and Lithuania require interprofessional collaboration, many participants pointed out major obstacles to making this happen. Although strong laws such as the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996) of Lithuania and the Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights (1998) of Latvia are in place, there are still issues in applying them because of systemic challenges. One participant mentioned lack of funding as one of the reasons why interprofessional collaborations are not effective (MI3). The effects of time constraints on other parts of the assessment process was pointed out by another participant who emphasized how a fixed timeframe has been allocated for assessments making best interests assessments ineffective as social workers or case managers do not have the needed time to collect all needed information that can enhance the assessment and intervention process (MA2). The findings revealed a tension between social workers' efforts to advocate for children's rights, balancing professional discretion with the state's duty to protect, and systemic barriers such as slow bureaucratic processes and resource constraints. For instance, the reliance on underfunded services disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, limiting equitable access to care.

One participant emphasized the lack of free services for children with different backgrounds (MI5). This underscores the need to address structural inequities that hinder the realization of children's rights.

Apart from systemic challenges, critical social work also involves critical reflection and deconstruction of social issues, encouraging practitioners to question and challenge existing power structures and social norms. This reflective practice, according to Janebova (2018), helps social workers understand the structural causes of individual problems and promotes minimal intervention strategies that respect clients' autonomy. Participants made mention of the use of supervision as a tool for reflective practice. Choi (2017) suggests that supervision is essential for the professional growth of social workers. It enhances their professional efficacy in various areas, including client support, practice theory, practice skills, and research. Regular and educational supervision significantly impacts these areas, promoting continuous professional development. Unlike the Lithuanian methodology, which does not explicitly mention professional supervision for social workers, in the Latvian methodology, regular supervision is emphasized as important for a social worker, especially when starting practice. As stated in the methodology, increasing professional effectiveness is the main outcome of supervision, which can include a wide range of issues (Ministry of Welfare, 2020, p. 57). There is therefore a need for more trained supervisors, especially with a social work education background, who can relate to the ethical dilemmas social workers who work with children face in their day to day work. O'Donoghue & O'Donoghue (2019) emphasize that supervisors with a social work background are well-versed in ethical theories, principles, and decision-making models, which are essential for guiding social workers through ethical dilemmas. They can foster an environment where ethical sensitivity and dialogue are integral to the supervision process (Moorhead & Johnson, 2010).

While the Lithuanian methodology might not delve into the details of professional supervision for social workers to the same extent as the Latvian methodology, it does mention supervision in the context of overseeing and controlling the protection of children's rights and coordinating care. By addressing systemic barriers and strengthening support mechanisms like supervision, social workers in Latvia and Lithuania can be better equipped to uphold children's rights and advance more equitable, effective interventions.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to investigate how social workers assess children's best interests in Lithuania and Latvia. Using ecological systems theory, complexity theory, and critical theory, it explored how social workers deal with child protection systems, the challenges they encounter, and the impact of laws and methods on their work. Through qualitative methods like interviews with social workers and document analysis, the study highlighted key themes in child protection, such as the importance of comprehensive child-centered assessments, the benefits and challenges of interprofessional collaborations, and the ongoing structural and systemic challenges that hinder effective assessments.

While social workers prioritize comprehensive assessments centered on the child, their implementation is influenced by various factors such as case specifics, available resources, and the skills of the professionals. Ecological systems theory is therefore essential for grasping child protection efforts and determining what is best for the child, emphasizing the importance of a child's relationships, environments, and developmental needs. Despite this theoretical grounding, long-term planning (chronosystem) and interprofessional collaboration (mesosystem) were often underdeveloped. Adding another layer of understanding is complexity theory, which helps us acknowledge that child protection is unpredictable and interconnected. Even small changes in a child's environment can lead to major and unexpected results. Furthermore, critical theory sheds light on the pervasive influence of power dynamics, deeply ingrained cultural biases, and the limitations imposed by institutions on social work practice. Social workers often feel limited by strict laws and burdened by heavy workloads, which can hinder their ability to focus on the needs of children. A major challenge remains in bridging the gap between well-intentioned laws and their practical implementation, as even strong legal systems often struggle due to bureaucratic issues, cultural norms, and on-the-ground realities. Most importantly, the study highlights the experiences of frontline workers, revealing the human and ethical challenges involved in assessing the best interests of the child. The results point out key areas needing immediate focus, such as policy changes, better cooperation between agencies, and more support for workers to ensure the best interests of the child are effectively assessed.

The idea of putting the best interests of the child first is key in child protection, but applying it is far from straightforward. Social workers in Lithuania and Latvia face many cultural, legal, and

institutional challenges. Their work to protect and support children is commendable, but limited. This research affirms that while social work practice continues to evolve, it must be supported by responsive policies, collaborative systems, and continuous professional development. By focusing on the child in both words and actions, and giving workers the necessary tools and freedom, child protection systems in both countries can better align with the true intent of the UNCRC.

7.1. Recommendations for policy and practice

1. Operationalize the “best interests of the child” principle in law: Although both Lithuania and Latvia acknowledge the best interests of the child in legal frameworks, the concept remains vaguely defined in practice. National legislation should provide clear criteria and guidance for applying this principle across all stages of child welfare proceedings.
2. Streamline interprofessional collaboration through standardized protocols: Establish national frameworks to ensure consistent communication and coordination among child protection agencies, schools, health services, and law enforcement. Implementing shared digital case management systems can reduce fragmentation and duplication. For example, a centralized, secure platform could enable real-time information sharing and updates, promoting a unified approach to safeguarding children. UNICEF, in collaboration with Primero, developed the Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS+), a web-based system that supports case management for at-risk children through intuitive forms and clear workflows covering identification, registration, assessment, planning, referrals, service tracking, and case closure. Lithuania and Latvia could adopt such platforms to strengthen interprofessional collaboration.
3. Invest in resources for child protection services: Governments should prioritize funding for child welfare departments, ensuring adequate staffing, training, and access to necessary tools for conducting comprehensive assessments.
4. Strengthen legal mandates for child participation: Laws should be revised to require mandatory consultation with children during assessment and planning processes, aligned with Article 12 of the UNCRC. Mechanisms for child advocacy and representation should also be established.

5. Enhance training and supervision for social workers: Develop targeted training programs that cover the application of ecological systems theory in real-world assessments, managing interprofessional collaboration in complex cases, and addressing bias, inequality, and intersectionality in assessments.
6. Adopt dynamic and holistic assessment Tools: Replace overly rigid or checklist-driven tools with more flexible frameworks that allow for contextual and evolving understanding of each child's circumstances.
7. Promote reflective and anti-oppressive practice: Embed critical reflection into day-to-day practice by encouraging practitioners to examine how power, culture, and systemic structures influence their decisions. Practice models should explicitly support equity and inclusion.
8. Create safe spaces for children's Voices: Develop and implement child-friendly methods (e.g., visual tools, play-based interviews) to actively engage children in decisions about their care and safety.

7.2. Recommendations for future research

1. Include children's voices in future studies: Future research should incorporate children's perspectives on how they experience assessments and child protection interventions. Their input is essential for validating child-centered approaches.
2. Conduct comparative studies across EU regions: A broader regional study could offer insights into how historical and cultural contexts shape child protection across post-socialist and Western European states.
3. Evaluate the impact of recent reforms: Longitudinal research is needed to assess how recent legal and policy changes, for example, Lithuania's post-2017 reforms, have affected outcomes for children and families in practice.
4. Explore intersectionality in child Protection: More in-depth studies should explore how factors such as ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status intersect in shaping child protection experiences and outcomes.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A



RIGA STRADINS UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE
Welfare and social work department
Informed Consent

Date: 22 August 2024

By this I certify that Priscilla Wilson is the 2nd -year full-time student in Erasmus Mundus European Joint Master Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY) program and is carrying out her research for her Master thesis on the topic “The social work practice in the assessment of the best interests of the child in Lithuania and Latvia”. Aim of the research: to examine the role of social work practice in safeguarding the best interests of children through the assessment process.

I hereby confirm that she is acknowledged of the research ethics in social science and social work ethics in her research activities, including the following principles:

- Interviewees will be given information about the purpose of the research project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the research project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially, including data analysis and presentation, and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.
- It is kindly asked for your cooperation so that the data gathering as part of an ongoing research project can be completed.
- The recorded interviews will be used only for this research purpose and will be deleted after the research.

ESWOCHY is implemented by the universities of the Consortium, that is Mykolas Romeris University (Lithuania), Riga Stradins University (Latvia), The Catholic University in Ruzomberok (Slovakia), and ISCTE University Institute of Lisbon (Portugal).

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APPENDIX B



INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Date __ / __ / 2024

The following is a presentation of how I will use the data collected in the interview. In order to ensure that projects meet the ethical requirements for good research, I promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for me to document what is said during the interview and helps me in the continuing work with the project. In my analysis, some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data I collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student Information:

Priscilla Wilson, prwilson@stud.mruni.eu

Supervisor Information:

Anna Broka, Dr. PhD in social work, anna.broka@rsu.lv

Signature of the Interviewee: _____

APPENDIX C

	Interview Question (Micro-level Professionals)	Theme or Aim of the question
	Ecological Systems Theory	
	<i>Micro level questions</i>	
1.	What factors do you consider most important when assessing the best interests of a child? Why?	Assessment criteria
2.	How do you assess the physical (basic) needs of the child in your social work practice? • Access to proper food, • Sanitation (warm water, sanitation) • Housing conditions (overcrowding, deprivation) • Health care? • Safety Are there additional/ specific measures (assessment criteria) in order to identify and assess the needs of the child with disabilities or special needs?	Assessment criteria
	How do you involve the child in the assessment process, and what methods do you use to ensure their voice is heard? Example...	Understanding of 'best interests'
4.	What are other factors that affect the children's needs?	
	<i>Meso-level questions</i>	
1.	How do you assess the impact of the child's environment (e.g., role and capacity of extended members of the family, school, community) on their well-being? Are there specific methods or guidelines ...? How do you identify the resources and other support systems within the family, school, and neighborhood?	

2.	How do you balance the child's needs with the family's circumstances when making an assessment? (e.g., parenting skills, disability, mental health, substance-abused parents, parents who are ex-offenders/convicts)	Assessment Criteria
3.	Can you describe a situation where your understanding of the best interests of the child conflicted with other perspectives (e.g., the family's needs, legal system)	Understanding of 'best interests'
	<i>Exo level questions</i>	
1.	How do you collaborate with professionals from other disciplines (e.g., educators, psychologists, medical professionals) to assess and protect the best interests of the child? Which institutions are important to ensure the best interests of the child? Which institutions do you wish were more involved, and would you like to strengthen collaborations with?	Interdisciplinary collaborations
2.	What are the main challenges you face in interdisciplinary collaboration, and how do you address them? Could you provide an example from your practice?	Interdisciplinary Collaborations
3.	Which other external factors (e.g., funding and policy changes) influence your ability to implement interventions effectively? Can you share an experience where institutional policies or resources limited your ability to act in the best interests of the child/ needs?	Systemic Challenges.
4.	What challenges do you encounter when trying to access essential services (e.g., health care, education, mental health services) for the children in your social work practice?	Challenges and constraints
	<i>Macro level questions</i>	

1.	Which cultural norms and values in Lithuania/Latvia influence the definition of the best interests of the child?	Understanding of 'best interests'
2.	How do national and local policies in Lithuania/Latvia shape your practice in assessing the best interests of the child?	Policy Influence and Practice
3.	What are your experiences with current policies aligning with the practical realities of assessing the best interests of the child?	Policy and Practice
	<i>Chrono level questions</i>	
1.	How has your understanding of the best interests of the child evolved throughout your career?	Understanding 'best interests'
2.	How have the assessment framework or models changed in LV/LT to address the best interests of the child? (before and now) How are you able to adjust them to suit the cases you work on?	Assessment
3.	How do you manage cases where your professional judgment conflicts with institutional or policy directives?	Effective Practice
4.	What strategies do you use to cope with the emotional and ethical challenges that arise in your work? How can social work practice transform the child protection system?	Effective Practice

Table 1. Semi-structured Interview Guide based on the research questions, objectives, and ecological systems theory - Micro level

APPENDIX D

	Interview Question (Macro-level Professionals)	Theme or Aim of the question
	Ecological systems theory	
1.	What would you suggest are the primary factors considered when determining the "best interests" of a child?	Micro: Understanding the best interests of the child
2.	How does the social welfare department/Ministry of Welfare ensure that the principle of the "best interests of the child" is consistently applied in the casework? What assessment tools or methodologies have been created to help social workers with assessments?	Macro: best interests of the child
3.	How do broader social and economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and housing insecurity, influence the social welfare department's/ ministry's work in protecting the best interests of children? How does the Ministry track the success and impact of child welfare policies, and are there mechanisms for feedback from social workers and families?	Exo: Understanding the best interests of the child Assessments and interventions
4.	How does your department promote collaboration and communication among different professionals involved in child welfare cases, such as social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and legal experts? In your opinion, how can the challenge of effective collaborations be solved	Collaborative Approach
5.	What are the primary challenges and benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration in your department? What are the challenges and opportunities in interagency collaboration?	Meso: Collaborative approach
6.	What are your experiences with current policies aligning with the practical realities of assessing the best interests	Macro: Policy and Practice

	of the child?	
7.	How does the social welfare department/ Ministry advocate for changes in policies or legislation to better protect the interests of children?	Macro: Policy and Practice
8.	How is the department addressing the shortage of social workers, particularly in rural or underserved areas? How do you ensure they have access to essential services that can help protect and meet the needs of children?	Effective Practice
9.	What are your suggestions on what to prioritize to improve the social work practice in child protection?	Effective Practice
10.	What strategies should be enforced to ensure child protection policies are adequately enforced?	Policy and Practice
11	How can social work practice transform the child protection system?	Critical Social Work

Table 2. Semi-structured Interview Guide based on the research questions, objectives, ecological systems theory - Macro level

APPENDIX E

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
best interests of the Child	Prioritizing the Child's Perspective	Recognizing the child as the expert in their own experience.
	Holistic child well-being	The comprehensive consideration of a child's developmental needs. Emotional, physical, health, environment, and education.

Assessment and Intervention	Comprehensive Assessment	The importance of gathering a range of information.
	Tools and frameworks	Institutionalization of step-by-step actions and standardized forms.
	Parental Capability	Parents' mental health and ability to provide a nurturing environment
Interprofessional Collaboration	Cooperation Challenges	Difficulties in facilitating cooperation between case managers and professionals, especially family doctors and teachers.
Child Protection Legislation	Policy and Practice Gaps	Discrepancy between the written policies and their actual implementation.
Systemic Challenges	Barriers to intervention	Challenges in providing timely and effective interventions.
	Bureaucratic Dominance	Primacy of legal and political processes over professional discretion.
	Societal Perceptions of Family	Underlying societal values and norms shape child welfare practices.
	Perceptions of Violence	Discussions about how child protection specialists perceive and understand violence.

Power Dynamics	Tension between Subjectivity and Objectivity	Balancing professional discretion and legal guidelines.
Role of Social Workers		Assessing family and child needs and coordinating services.
Effective Practice	Reflective Practice and Continuous Improvement	Importance of self-evaluation and adjusting strategies based on the evolving needs of the family.
	Supervision	State and municipality-funded and obligatory supervision.
	Incomplete case file documentation	Specialists often provide only conclusions without supporting details.

Table 3. The themes, sub-themes, and emerging themes from the interviews.

APPENDIX F

No.	Code	Level	Profession	Country
1.	MI1	Micro-level	Social Worker	Latvia
2.	MI2	Micro-level	Social Worker	Lithuania
3.	MI3	Micro-level	Social Worker	Latvia
4.	MI4	Micro-level	Social Worker	Lithuania
5.	MI5	Micro-level	Social Worker	Lithuania

6.	MA1	Macro-level	Head of District Department	Latvia
7.	MA2	Macro-level	Lawyer and Senior Advisor	Lithuania
8.	MA3	Macro-level	Former social worker with families with children, but now is the Head of training (Social Services)	Latvia
9.	MA4	Macro-level	Head of Legal Department	Latvia
10.	MA5	Macro-level	Director of the Children's Policy Department	Latvia

Table 4. Profile of the participants in semi-structured interviews

APPENDIX G

Kind of document	Country	Source of document	Document	The aim of including the document
Legal Act: Children's Act	Lithuania	Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania	Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child	The best interests of the child principle
Legal Act: Children's Act	Latvia	Latvijas Vēstnesis	Law on the Protection of Children's Rights	The best interests of the child principle
Methodological Guide	Lithuania	Lithuanian integrated library information system	Geriausiu Vaiko Interesu: Principo Užtikrinimo Metodinis Vadovas	Assessment Interprofessional collaboration Effective practice

			(Methodological Guide to Ensuring the Best Interests of the Child Principle)	
Methodological Guide	Latvia	Ministry of Welfare	Metodiskais Materiāls Sociālajam Darbam: ģimenēm ar bērniem (Methodological Material for Social Work for Families with Children)	Assessment Interprofessional collaboration Effective practice
Assessment Tools	Lithuania	Latvijas Vēstnesis	Dēl Atvejo Vadybos Tvarkos Aprašo Patvirtinimo (On Approval Of The Case Management Procedure)	Assessment Effective practice
Assessment Tools	Latvia	Ministry of Welfare	Metodiskais Materiāls Sociālajam Darbam: ģimenēm ar bērniem (Methodological Material for Social Work for Families with Children)	Assessment Effective practice

Table5. Documents used for analysis

APPENDIX H

Non-plagiarism declaration

Submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY):

- Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College;
- Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work;
- Contains proper citation and references from my prior scholarly work; and
- Has listed all citations in the List of References.

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize and will result in a failing grade in the programme.

Date: May 20th, 2025

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Priscilla'.

PRISCILLA WILSON