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Resilience in Practice:
A Qualitative Study of Social Workers' Preparedness and Recovery in Military Conflict Contexts in Latvia and Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Title: Resilience in Practice: A Qualitative Study of Social Workers' Preparedness and Recovery in Military Conflict Contexts in Latvia and Azerbaijan

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Despite growing demands on frontline practitioners in conflict-affected contexts, the resilience and preparedness of social workers themselves remain significantly under-researched, particularly in post-Soviet settings shaped by ongoing displacement and political constraint. This thesis aimed to explore how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceived, practised and were supported in developing resilience during and after military conflicts, with a focus on practice with populations affected by the wars in Ukraine and Karabakh. The study was guided by van Breda's multilevel resilience model, Webb-informed critical social work, and the person-in-environment perspective.

A qualitative, phenomenological design was employed. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with practising social workers, managers and key informants across both countries, and data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.

Five themes were identified. First, participants described resilience as a dynamic, contested process involving inner strength, collective efficacy and meaning-making, with critical voices framing resilience discourse as a mechanism that normalises precarity among a feminised, low-paid workforce. Second, coping strategies ranged from boundary-setting and supervision to maladaptive self-sacrifice under chronic strain. Third, Latvian social workers were formally integrated into civil protection frameworks and designated as critical personnel, while Azerbaijani practitioners operated largely at the margins of formal crisis governance, relying on informal networks and community care. Fourth, policy frameworks, organisational cultures and cultural-systemic constructions of resilience shaped practice conditions differently across the two contexts. Fifth, practitioners negotiated professional identity, anti-war stances and advocacy under significant institutional and political pressure.

The study concluded that social workers' resilience is a multilevel, relational, temporally situated and politically contested process. Van Breda's model was confirmed and extended: temporality emerged as an under-specified dimension, and ethical resistance — sustaining rights-based and anti-war positions despite institutional risk — was theorised as the most politically demanding expression of societal-level resilience. Recommendations were directed at legislators, social service agencies, professional associations and training institutions in both countries.

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I. Introduction and Problem Area

1.1 Background and context

Armed conflicts and security crises in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have intensified over the past decade, reshaping everyday life and governance and exposing civilian populations to recurrent displacement, economic precarity, and psychosocial harm, with children and young people among the most affected groups. Social workers are positioned at the frontline of these crises, mediating between public institutions, civil society, and affected families; they are expected to provide protection, psychosocial support, and coordination of services under conditions of heightened political sensitivity and constrained resources (World Bank, 2022). Yet, compared with the extensive literature on clients' resilience, considerably less attention has been paid to the preparedness and recovery capacities of social workers themselves, particularly in countries shaped by post-Soviet transformations and current security threats (van Breda, 2018).

1.2 Resilience as a multilevel concept

In this context, the concept of resilience has become a key lens for understanding how individuals, communities, and systems respond to adversity. NATO defines resilience as a society's ability "to resist and recover easily and quickly" from shocks such as natural disasters or attacks on critical infrastructure, explicitly linking civilian and military domains and emphasizing preparedness, adaptability, and recovery at the systemic level (Southwick et al., 2014). Social work scholars have extended this idea by conceptualising resilience not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process that unfolds across multiple levels of the social ecology (Ungar et al., 2013). Van Breda (2018) proposes understanding resilience as the multilevel processes that individuals and systems engage in to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face or aftermath of adversity, distinguishing resilience as process from resilient as outcome, and warning against simplistic binary labels of "resilient" versus "non-resilient." For social workers operating in conflict-affected environments, this process-oriented, multilevel view is crucial, because outcomes are often constrained by political, institutional, and resource limitations that lie beyond individual control.

At the same time, critical resilience research cautions against using resilience discourse to shift responsibility for coping onto individuals while neglecting structural inequalities and power relations (Ungar et al., 2013). Southwick and colleagues (2014) emphasise that resilience is shaped by complex combinations of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors and that any serious analysis must attend to structural conditions that can either enable or undermine resilient responses. In social work, the strengths perspective underscores clients' and practitioners' resources and capacities for adaptation, but it also requires attention to the organisational and policy environments that support or constrain practice (Weick et al., 1989). This thesis adopts such a critical, multilevel understanding of resilience, focusing not only on social workers' individual coping strategies but also on how institutional, political, and cultural contexts in two different countries structure their opportunities to prepare for, withstand, and recover from conflict-related pressures.

1.3 Comparative context: Latvia and Azerbaijan

Latvia and Azerbaijan provide a particularly relevant comparative setting for this inquiry. Both have been affected by regional instability and displacement pressures, and both carry legacies of Soviet governance; yet they differ markedly in their political systems, welfare infrastructures, and integration into transnational security structures. Latvia, as a member of the European Union and NATO, has developed civil protection and social service frameworks that formally position social workers within national resilience and refugee integration agendas (Teperik et al., 2024). Recent research on societal resilience in the Baltics, however, reveals ambivalent public attitudes: although trust in NATO and civil defence remains relatively high, only a minority of respondents express confidence in national crisis decision-making or believe that their neighbours understand their roles during emergencies, suggesting a gap between formal preparedness strategies and grassroots social cohesion (Teperik et al., 2024). Latvia's rapid integration of Ukrainian refugees into education, housing, and social protection systems has demonstrated significant adaptability but has also placed new pressures on social workers, who must navigate evolving policy frameworks and complex client needs.

Azerbaijan's context is shaped by the legacy of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts and the prolonged presence of more than 600,000 internally displaced persons, which has normalised

certain forms of displacement while leaving others politically sensitive (World Bank, 2022). Civil preparedness is strongly influenced by securitised governance and national sovereignty discourses, and social work remains under‑institutionalised within formal emergency and displacement responses (Rustamov et al., 2023). Research on psychological resilience and social connectedness in Azerbaijan suggests that strong familial ties, community networks, and cultural narratives of endurance play important roles in sustaining mental well‑being, yet formal service infrastructures are comparatively weak and social workers often operate at the margins of policy‑making and crisis planning (Rustamov et al., 2023). In such environments, social workers must negotiate complex expectations, balancing professional ethics, cultural norms, and political constraints while supporting children, youth, and families affected by conflict.

In Latvia, the civil protection system is built around a legal framework that defines disaster management as a shared responsibility between state institutions, municipalities, and local services (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016). The Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law obliges municipalities, when a disaster is threatened or has occurred, to “ensure evacuation of inhabitants from the territories endangered or affected by a disaster, and also to keep a record of these inhabitants, ensure temporary accommodation, feeding and social care” and to “ensure appropriate work and living conditions for the officials of State and local government authorities, and legal and natural persons involved in the disaster management” (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016, Articles 5–6). These provisions place social care and basic social support at the core of Latvian disaster management, and indirectly position social services and social workers as key actors in evacuation, temporary accommodation, and ongoing support to affected populations (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016). The State Fire and Rescue Service (In latvian- Valsts ugunsdzēsības un glābšanas dienests) is designated as the central operational body for civil protection and provides training materials and guidance for local actors in civil protection, emergency response, and crisis communication, further structuring how municipalities and local services—including social services—are expected to act in emergencies (State Fire and Rescue Service [VUGD], n.d.; Ministry of Defence, 2023).

This framework means that, in crisis situations linked to military conflict or large-scale displacement, Latvian social workers may be drawn into roles that combine traditional social work tasks with emergency social care functions such as coordinating shelter, ensuring access to food and basic services, and supporting evacuated populations (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016). For this thesis, these legal and institutional arrangements are important because they shape the exosystem and macrosystem within which Latvian social workers' resilience is enacted: their responsibilities in crises are formalised in law, but the actual extent of their involvement, preparation, and support depends on how these legal mandates are translated into local practice (Ministry of Defence, 2023; State Fire and Rescue Service [VUGD], n.d.).

In addition to the civil protection framework, recent regulatory developments in Latvia explicitly position social workers as part of the country's "critical personnel" during states of heightened readiness and potential mobilisation. According to Cabinet Regulation No. 355780, institutions performing critical functions, including state and municipal bodies as well as public and private legal entities, must identify the minimum necessary staff required to ensure these functions and designate them as "critical personnel" by position (Cabinet of Ministers, 2022). These lists, which include personal data and professional roles, are submitted electronically to the National Armed Forces reserve registration unit, with municipal institutions responsible for compiling and forwarding lists for their own services. Social workers are specifically classified as critical personnel within this system, which means they are formally recognised as essential for maintaining social care and related functions during crises and potential mobilisation scenarios.

This critical status is reinforced by Section 17, Paragraph one, Point 23 of the Law "On Emergency Situation and State of Exception", which stipulates that officials and employees involved in overcoming a national threat or ensuring the continuity of critical infrastructure and services are prohibited from terminating their civil service or employment relationships, or from discontinuing their direct job duties, during a state of exception, except where continuing would endanger their life (Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, 2013). For social workers designated as critical personnel, this legal framework implies not only heightened expectations of availability and continuity but also a potential restriction of exit options during acute crises, adding a coercive dimension to their formal role in national resilience.

Azerbaijan's long experience of internal displacement is reflected in a specific Law "On social protection of displaced persons and persons equated to them" (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999, with subsequent amendments), which defines displaced persons as those forced to leave their place of residence due to foreign military aggression, occupation, or regular shelling, and sets out state responsibilities for their resettlement and social protection. The law mandates a broad package of social protection measures, including provision of temporary living space, employment support, social security, medical support, access to education, and various transport, housing, and other privileges, with benefits continuing for at least three years after conditions for return or permanent resettlement have been established (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999). Resettlement is organised by relevant executive authorities, which are tasked with ensuring that camps or other accommodation meet necessary requirements for habitation, and displaced persons are entitled to full sickness benefits and targeted financial and in-kind assistance (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999). Although the law predates recent escalations, it remains an important part of the macrosystem structuring social protection for conflict-affected groups and implicitly situates social work within a broader state commitment to long-term support for displaced populations.

In addition to legislation on displaced persons, the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Social Service" (2011) provides a detailed legal framework for social services and the role of social workers. This law defines social service as a set of complex measures aimed at addressing the social problems of persons or families living in difficult life conditions and enabling their equal participation in society, and it specifies that social workers are responsible for assessing, determining and responding to needs in accordance with state standards. It sets out key principles of state policy in social services, including respect for human rights, humanism, non-discrimination, confidentiality, targeting, fairness, accessibility, social integration and the improvement of quality of life, as well as public participation. The law also outlines state duties such as forming and implementing social service policy, developing a unified classification of services, creating the necessary infrastructure, supporting the involvement of municipalities, NGOs and private actors, and ensuring guaranteed volumes of social services for persons in difficult life conditions. For this thesis, the law is significant because it institutionalises social work within a wider social service system that is formally rights-based and standard-driven,

while at the same time locating decision-making power and control over access, assessment and placement largely in state bodies and "relevant executive authorities", which has direct implications for how social workers understand their professional role and room for manoeuvre in conflict-affected contexts.

1.4 Problem area and knowledge gap

Despite these high demands, there is a notable lack of research that centres social workers' own experiences of resilience in these two national contexts. Much of the existing resilience scholarship in social work focuses either on clients or on practitioners in Western European and North American settings (van Breda, 2018). Cross-cultural studies argue that resilience is culturally mediated and locally expressed, and that what counts as resilient practice is always interpreted through particular knowledge systems, values, and narratives (van Breda & Theron, 2016). In Azerbaijan, for example, religious faith, extended kinship networks, and national narratives of survival may constitute key components of resilience for both clients and practitioners; in Latvia, civil society organisations, EU-linked governance frameworks, and community-based initiatives may play a more prominent role (Teperik et al., 2024). However, little is known about how social workers in these two countries themselves conceptualise resilience, how they experience their roles in conflict-related crises, and how institutional and cultural factors shape their possibilities for resilient practice.

1.5 Aim, research questions, and objectives

Within this theoretical and contextual frame, the overall aim of the thesis is to explore how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive, practice, and are supported in developing resilience during and after conflict-related crises. More specifically, the study seeks to understand how social workers define resilience in their professional roles; which strategies and competencies they mobilise to sustain their own well-being and that of their clients; how they experience their integration into, or exclusion from, formal civil-defence and crisis-preparedness structures; and how these processes are shaped by institutional and cultural environments in each country.

The research is guided by the following primary questions:

1. How do social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive and practice resilience in their professional roles during and after military conflicts?
2. What strategies and competencies do they use to support their own and their clients' recovery in contexts such as refugee influxes or renewed armed hostilities?
3. To what extent are social workers included in national or local preparedness and civil-defence planning, and how do they experience this inclusion or exclusion?
4. What elements can be identified between Latvia and Azerbaijan in terms of policy frameworks, practice conditions, and lived experiences of resilience among social workers?

These questions are operationalised into the following objectives: (1) to explore the lived experiences of social workers involved in conflict-related and refugee-related social work in Latvia and Azerbaijan; (2) to examine how resilience is conceptualised and enacted in social work practice in the two countries; (3) to identify strengths, gaps, and tensions in national and local preparedness and recovery systems as they relate to social work; and (4) to contribute to theory-building in social work by integrating critical social work and multilevel resilience models with phenomenological, practice-based insights.

II. Theoretical and analytical framework

This chapter presents the main theoretical perspectives and core concepts that guide the analysis of social workers' resilience in Latvia and Azerbaijan. The framework combines critical social theory, van Breda's multilevel definition of resilience, and the person-in-environment perspective in social work, and uses these to structure how the empirical material from social workers and key informants will be interpreted.

3.1 Key concepts

To ensure conceptual clarity and consistency throughout the thesis, three core concepts are defined at the outset: adversity, resilience, and social worker resilience in conflict and displacement contexts.

Adversity. In this thesis, adversity refers to sustained or acute conditions that threaten the well-being, functioning, or professional practice of social workers, including war or military conflict, forced displacement, chronic resource shortages, political pressure, and exposure to clients' traumatic experiences. The focus is on adversities linked to military conflict and its consequences (for example, refugee influxes, internal displacement, and security crises) as they shape social workers' contexts in Latvia and Azerbaijan.

Resilience. Following van Breda (2018), resilience is understood not as a fixed personality trait but as "the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity." This definition emphasises four elements:

- Resilience is a **process**, not a static quality.
- It is **multilevel**, occurring at individual, organisational, and societal levels.
- It involves **engagement with adversity**, rather than the absence of risk.
- It is judged relative to **expected outcomes** in a given context.

This thesis distinguishes resilience-as-process (the actions, strategies, and interactions that support adaptation) from resilient outcomes (for example, sustaining professional functioning, maintaining ethical standards, or contributing to service continuity under pressure), while recognising that processes and outcomes are interdependent.

Social worker resilience in conflict and displacement contexts. Building on these definitions, social worker resilience is understood here as the multilevel processes through which social workers and their organisational and institutional environments in Latvia and Azerbaijan mobilise resources, adapt practices, and sustain professional functioning in the face of conflict-related adversities. This includes:

- Individual processes (for example, coping strategies, meaning-making, emotional regulation, boundary-setting).
- Relational processes (for example, peer support, supervision, collaboration with other professionals).
- Organisational and systemic processes (for example, flexible procedures, leadership, training, policy frameworks).

This concept focuses on practitioners themselves, without losing sight of the fact that their resilience is intrinsically linked to the resilience of the people and systems they serve.

2.1 Resilience in conflict and displacement

Resilience has become a central concept for understanding how individuals and systems respond to war, conflict, and forced displacement. In conflict-affected regions, social workers frequently operate at the intersection of humanitarian, social, and legal systems, supporting people who experience recurrent violence, displacement, and chronic uncertainty (World Bank, 2022). Research on resilience in contexts of war and displacement shows that adaptive functioning depends on interactions between individual coping, social support, and institutional structures such as welfare services and civil protection systems (Southwick et al., 2014). When these structures are weak or under-resourced, the burden of mitigating harm often shifts disproportionately onto frontline practitioners, including social workers, whose own resilience becomes a critical component of the overall response.

The social-ecological approach to resilience emphasises that positive adaptation in adversity emerges from access to and negotiation of resources within families, communities, and institutions, rather than from individual traits alone (Ungar et al., 2013). In conflict and displacement contexts, this means that social workers' capacities to sustain their practice and well-being are shaped by organisational cultures, supervision structures, and broader policy environments, as well as by personal coping strategies. Southwick et al. (2014) further underline that resilience processes are embedded in cultural and political contexts, which can either enable or constrain adaptive responses by defining what is recognised, rewarded, or silenced in professional practice. These insights underpin the present thesis's focus on social workers' resilience as a multilevel, context-dependent process in conflict-affected settings.

2.2 Social workers' resilience, vicarious trauma and vicarious resilience

A substantial body of literature now documents the psychological and emotional impact of working with highly traumatised populations, including refugees, asylum seekers, and survivors

of violence, on social workers themselves. Studies consistently report elevated risks of vicarious traumatisation, burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral distress among practitioners repeatedly exposed to clients' traumatic experiences and working within high-demand, low-resource environments (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012; López-Martínez et al., 2022). Social workers in such settings often carry responsibility not only for providing direct support, but also for navigating restrictive policies, limited services, and organisational change, which cumulatively challenge their resilience.

At the same time, research on vicarious resilience highlights that practitioners may also experience positive transformations through witnessing clients' survival, creativity, and hope. A qualitative study with service providers working with refugees and asylum seekers in South Australia identified co-existing themes of vicarious trauma and vicarious resilience, with participants describing how clients' stories of coping and resistance enhanced their own sense of meaning, professional commitment, and cultural openness (Botta & Fronek, 2015). Similarly, a large quantitative study of social workers found that those who frequently engaged in recovery strategies—such as reflection, self-care, and seeking peer or supervisory support—reported higher levels of vicarious resilience and lower levels of vicarious trauma (López-Martínez et al., 2022). These findings resonate with the strengths perspective in social work, which conceptualises resilience as the mobilisation of internal and external strengths, and underscores the role of organisational climates that value support, supervision, and learning (Weick et al., 1989).

Research from politically volatile and conflict-affected settings further demonstrates how social workers' resilience is shaped by organisational and contextual factors. A study of social work services in a state of political conflict found that agencies with resilient organisational cultures—characterised by clear leadership, shared mission, flexible procedures, and mutual support—were better able to protect staff, maintain services, and adapt to rapidly changing conditions (Itzhaky & Dekel, 2017). In contrast, organisations with rigid hierarchies, poor communication, or ambiguous expectations left social workers feeling isolated and overwhelmed, intensifying stress and undermining their resilience. Qualitative work with social workers in Northern Ireland similarly shows that practitioners developed informal coping

strategies and peer support networks to "just get on with it" amid threats and political polarisation, yet often at significant personal cost (Campbell, 2021). Together, these studies make clear that social workers' resilience in conflict and displacement contexts is not simply a matter of personal robustness, but of how organisational and systemic conditions support or erode their capacity to cope and continue practising.

2.3 Social work, crises and preparedness

Another important strand of literature concerns social workers' roles in disasters, emergencies, and large-scale crises, and the extent to which they are trained and supported for such work. A scoping review of disaster preparedness in social work concluded that, although social workers are routinely involved in both immediate and long-term disaster response, systematic preparation, protocols, and training remain uneven and often insufficient (Boetto et al., 2021). The review found that many practitioners enter disaster and emergency situations with limited prior instruction in crisis management, risk assessment, or self-care under extreme conditions, and that organisational guidance tends to focus more on post-hoc responses than on preventive or preparatory measures.

In Europe, analyses of social workers' roles in "a Europe in crisis" indicate similar concerns. The European Social Network reports that practitioners across multiple countries feel under-prepared for overlapping crises such as economic downturns, pandemics, conflicts, and large-scale migration, and call for enhanced training in emergency response, trauma-informed practice, and work with displaced populations (European Social Network, 2023). These findings highlight a structural gap: while social workers are increasingly expected to contribute to societal resilience, they are not consistently equipped or supported to develop and sustain their own resilience in the face of such demands. This gap directly informs the present thesis's focus on social workers' preparedness and recovery capacities in Latvia and Azerbaijan.

Emerging research from Ukraine, a key reference point for both Latvia and Azerbaijan's current work with refugees, illustrates how social workers and educators adapt under war conditions. Narrative studies with Ukrainian social workers show that the full-scale Russian invasion has massively increased caseloads, safety risks, and ethical complexities, but has also prompted

innovations such as new peer support networks, digital outreach, and community-based initiatives to sustain both clients' and practitioners' functioning (Kutsyk & colleagues, 2024). Analyses of Ukrainian social work education describe rapid curricular reforms to integrate crisis-related content and prepare students for frontline psychosocial work, despite displacement and infrastructural damage (Lyakh et al., 2024). These developments underscore that social workers' resilience is closely tied to institutional flexibility, policy support, and professional learning structures.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) frames the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a violation of international law and human rights and emphasises that social workers have a professional obligation to stand with affected populations and to promote peace, social justice, and human dignity in the face of military aggression (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2022). In its 2022 statement on the war, IFSW highlights the severe humanitarian and psychosocial consequences of the conflict, calling for safe corridors, protection of civilians, and sustained support for those displaced within Ukraine and across borders (IFSW, 2022). While the statement does not offer a formal definition of resilience, it implicitly links resilience to the capacity of individuals, communities, and social systems to resist oppression, recover from violence, and rebuild their lives in ways that uphold human rights and social justice values (IFSW, 2022). This normative framing of crisis and resilience resonates with the process-oriented, multilevel understanding adopted in this thesis and reinforces the idea that social workers' resilience in Ukraine-related work is not only about coping personally but also about sustaining ethical, rights-based practice under conditions of war and displacement.

At the European level, civil-military cooperation in emergencies is framed as a necessary but carefully regulated dimension of humanitarian action. The European Union's concept of Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) stresses that coordination between civilian and military actors is needed "to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition between civilian and military capacities, minimise inconsistency, and, when appropriate, pursue common goals" (European Commission, 2018). CMCoord is presented as context-dependent, ranging from simple de-confliction and coexistence in active conflict settings to more cooperative arrangements in natural disasters, but always with an emphasis on

safeguarding humanitarian space and maintaining a clear distinction between humanitarian and civil protection responders on one side and the military on the other (European Commission, 2018).

Within this framework, the EU underlines that humanitarian assistance must be delivered according to humanitarian principles and that military assets should only be used as a last resort when no civilian or commercial alternatives are available, for example for strategic airlift, medical evacuation or specialised engineering support (European Commission, 2018). Although social workers are not explicitly named, they are part of the wider group of civilian and humanitarian actors whose work is affected by these coordination arrangements, particularly when operating in cross-border or EU-supported responses. The humanitarian aid policy of the EU similarly emphasises life-saving assistance, protection, and the restoration of basic services for people affected by crises, including refugees and internally displaced persons, and situates this work within an "integrated approach to external conflict and crises" that connects humanitarian, development, and security instruments (European Commission, n.d.). For Latvian social workers involved in Ukraine-related responses, these EU-level frameworks form part of the macrosystem that shapes funding, coordination, and expectations about how civilian services—including social work and social care—engage with military and civil-protection actors in emergencies.

2.4 Social workers' resilience in work with displaced and conflict-affected populations

2.4.1 Critical social work perspectives on resilience in conflict contexts

Critical social work encompasses a range of approaches that conceptualise social problems as rooted in structural relations of power, inequality and oppression rather than primarily in individual or family deficits. Webb frames critical social work as a project of social and political transformation that interrogates how dominant forms of governance, professional knowledge and institutional practices regulate marginalised populations and organise welfare responses (Webb, 2019, 2023). Building on this, Fook emphasises that social workers occupy a contradictory

position: they are mandated to promote social justice and support people experiencing oppression, yet they are embedded in organisations that can reproduce surveillance, control and the regulation of "risky" or stigmatised groups (Fook, 2016). Within this perspective, social work is understood as both a potential site of resistance to structural injustice and a potential mechanism through which existing hierarchies of power are maintained, making critical reflection on everyday practice a central ethical and political task (Fook, 2016; Webb, 2019).

Resilience has become a prominent concept in social policy and practice debates and is often presented as a desirable capacity for individuals, families and communities to adapt positively to adversity, including war, displacement and chronic precarity. From a critical social work perspective, Webb argues that the rising prominence of resilience discourse must be examined in relation to wider political and economic contexts, particularly where it individualises responsibility for coping and obscures the structural conditions that generate harm (Webb, 2019, 2023). Fook similarly highlights that an uncritical embrace of resilience can shift attention away from how power, oppression and institutional practices shape clients' and practitioners' possibilities for action, and can normalise expectations that people should "adapt" to unjust circumstances rather than contest them (Fook, 2016). Dominelli underscores that in crisis and disaster settings, including conflicts and environmental emergencies, social workers operate within welfare and emergency systems that may prioritise social order, national security or economic efficiency over the rights and wellbeing of affected populations, making it essential to question whose resilience is being promoted and on what terms (Dominelli, 2012).

In this thesis, critical social work provides the main lens for analysing how social workers' resilience is shaped by the interaction of everyday practice, organisational regimes and broader political–economic contexts in Latvia and Azerbaijan. For example, a Latvian social worker's coping strategies can be interpreted not only in terms of immediate team support and peer solidarity, but also in relation to how municipal authorities, national ministries and EU-level actors define priorities for refugee integration, civil protection and social care, and how these priorities are embedded in governance arrangements that emphasise austerity, efficiency and security. From a critical perspective, these contexts are not treated as neutral "background" but as

contested terrains where power, resources and responsibilities are negotiated, and where social workers must navigate tensions between organisational demands and their own commitments to social justice (Fook, 2016; Webb, 2019). Similarly, an Azerbaijani practitioner's experience of resilience cannot be separated from centralised governance structures, securitised narratives around conflict and national sovereignty, and the legacies of internal displacement, which shape both the expectations placed on social workers and the risks they face when advocating for conflict-affected clients (Dominelli, 2012). This critical social work perspective makes it possible to analyse similarities and differences across the two countries in a structured way, without reducing resilience to individual characteristics alone.

In Latvia, the critical social work lens highlights how legal frameworks such as the Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law and related regulations formally assign municipalities responsibilities for evacuation, temporary accommodation, feeding and social care in emergencies, thereby positioning social services and social workers as key actors in national resilience and crisis governance (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016; Cabinet of Ministers, 2022). The designation of social workers as "critical personnel" and the prohibition on terminating employment during states of exception further illustrate how crisis policies can bind practitioners tightly into state security projects, raising ethical and political questions about consent, autonomy and professional risk (Cabinet of Ministers, 2022; Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 2013). In Azerbaijan, critical social work draws attention to how long-standing legislation on the social protection of displaced persons guarantees specific social security, housing and service entitlements while embedding these entitlements within a highly centralised and securitised governance structure, and how the Law "On Social Service" defines social service as a complex of measures for persons in difficult life conditions and sets out state-driven standards, procedures and control over assessment, access and provision (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999; Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2011). Analysed through this lens, these legal frameworks in both countries are seen not only as supportive infrastructures that recognise social work and social services as essential, but also as instruments that can reproduce uneven power relations and extend state control over professionals and clients, making it necessary to ask whose interests they serve and how social workers can use or resist them in pursuit of more socially just practice (Dominelli, 2012; Webb, 2019).

A growing number of studies examine social workers' resilience specifically in relation to their work with displaced and conflict-affected populations across different regions. Research in Northern Nigeria, for example, shows that displaced workers' psychological resilience and perceived social support predict lower levels of post-traumatic stress, emphasising the importance of collegial networks and community ties for those working in conflict zones (Adeniyi & colleagues, 2025). Although this study focuses on displaced workers more broadly, its findings are pertinent to social workers who share similar exposure to conflict and secondary trauma.

Studies in European and Australasian contexts highlight comparable themes. Practitioners working with refugees and asylum seekers often navigate organisational pressures, restrictive migration policies, and intense emotional engagement with clients' stories, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness and frustration, but also to heightened professional purpose and solidarity (Botta & Fronek, 2015; Campbell, 2021). The British Journal of Social Work has published several contributions showing that social workers' resilience in such settings is influenced by factors such as manageable caseloads, access to reflective supervision, clear organisational mandates, and opportunities for advocacy and collaboration with civil society actors (Campbell, 2021; López-Martínez et al., 2022). These findings support the view adopted in this thesis that social workers' resilience must be analysed in terms of both individual strategies and the broader ecosystems in which they operate.

From a theoretical standpoint, van Breda's multilevel resilience model and critical social work perspectives offer useful tools for structuring this analysis. Van Breda's notion of resilience as multilevel, process-oriented and situated within specific systems of power and resources allows the examination of how social workers engage in resilience-building at individual, organisational, and societal levels, for example by developing coping routines, contributing to organisational learning, or participating in policy advocacy. A critical social work lens, drawing on Webb's work on the politics of welfare and transformation, is used to locate these resilience processes within broader relations of power, control and resistance, from direct practice and inter-agency collaboration, through organisational and municipal governance, to national policies, security discourses and cultural narratives that shape what kinds of

"better-than-expected outcomes" are valued and for whom. (Webb, 2022) Applying these combined frameworks to Latvia and Azerbaijan enables a systematic and politically attuned exploration of how different configurations of welfare, security and professional status support or hinder practitioners' resilience in conflict-affected practice.

2.4.2 Van Breda's multilevel resilience model

Van Breda's work on resilience in social work provides the conceptual core for understanding resilience as a multilevel, process-oriented phenomenon. He argues that resilience should be defined as "multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity," a formulation that explicitly includes individuals, families, organisations, and communities as potential "systems" of interest (van Breda, 2018). In this thesis, van Breda's model is combined with a critical social work perspective to specify how resilience processes can be identified and analysed at different levels: from micro-level interactions between social workers and clients, through organisational practices and managerial regimes, to wider welfare, security and cultural structures that shape what counts as "better-than-expected outcomes" and for whom:

- **Individual level**: Processes such as self-care, reflective practice, emotion regulation, professional identity, and meaning-making that help social workers maintain functioning and ethical practice under stress.
- **Relational and organisational level**: Processes such as supportive supervision, peer networks, shared decision-making, clear communication, and flexible procedures that help teams and organisations adapt to crises and protect staff (Itzhaky & Dekel, 2017).
- **Societal and policy level**: Processes such as inclusive crisis preparedness planning, adequate funding, recognition of social work in legal frameworks, and collaboration between state and civil society that make it possible for social workers' resilience processes to emerge and be sustained.

For this thesis, van Breda's model is used analytically to structure how social workers' and key informants' narratives are read and coded: descriptions of coping strategies, peer support, and supervision are interpreted as individual and relational resilience processes, while references to

legislation, funding, training, and political climate are interpreted as elements of organisational and societal resilience processes that either enable or constrain practitioners. This allows the study to move beyond simply listing coping strategies towards examining how different levels of the system interact to produce "better-than-expected" or "worse-than-expected" outcomes in each context.

In this thesis, what counts as "better-than-expected outcomes" is also informed by normative and policy frameworks at the international and regional level. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) frames the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a violation of international law and human rights and emphasises social workers' obligation to stand with affected populations and promote peace, social justice and human dignity (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2022). At EU level, the concept of Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination stresses that cooperation with military actors in emergencies must protect humanitarian principles and maintain a clear distinction between humanitarian and military roles (European Commission, 2018). Together, these positions imply that resilient social work practice in conflict-related crises is not only about maintaining service delivery, but about sustaining ethical, rights-based practice and humanitarian principles under pressure, an understanding that guides how resilience processes are interpreted in this study.

2.4.3 Person-in-environment perspective in social work

The person-in-environment (PIE) perspective is a foundational social work framework that emphasises the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments. It holds that people's behaviour, well-being, and actions are shaped by both internal factors (for example, personality, health, prior experiences) and external factors (for example, social networks, institutional settings, cultural norms, and structural inequalities). In practice, PIE guides social workers to consider how environmental constraints and resources shape clients' situations and to design interventions that address both personal and contextual dimensions.

In this thesis, PIE is applied reflexively to social workers themselves. Social workers are not only professionals who use a person-in-environment lens with clients; they are also persons

embedded in particular environments that powerfully shape their own resilience processes. Using PIE, the analysis will explore questions such as:

- How do organisational policies and cultures (environment) interact with social workers' personal histories, values, and coping strategies (person) to produce particular resilience processes?
- How do broader socio-political contexts—such as EU membership and public discourse in Latvia, or securitised governance and strong informal networks in Azerbaijan—shape the possibilities for social workers to act, resist, or adapt?

PIE thus links the critical social work and multilevel resilience frameworks directly to social work's professional language and values, foregrounding how power, control and possibilities for resistance shape practitioners' environments, and ensuring that the analytical framework remains grounded in the discipline.

2.5 Conceptual and analytical framework for Latvia and Azerbaijan

Within this international literature, specific research on social workers' resilience in Latvia and Azerbaijan is scarce. For Latvia, most relevant work focuses on societal resilience and institutional preparedness rather than on the professional experiences of social workers. A 2024 study on societal resilience in the Baltic States reports relatively high trust in NATO and civil defence institutions but low confidence in national crisis decision-making and limited perceived community-level readiness, indicating a gap between formal preparedness structures and social cohesion (Teperik et al., 2024). The World Bank's analysis of social protection responses to forced displacement in Europe and Central Asia documents how Latvia has expanded social protection measures and services to address the Ukrainian refugee influx, highlighting both innovative practices and capacity strains in local social services (World Bank, 2022). However, these sources provide little insight into how Latvian social workers themselves experience and navigate the pressures, expectations, and opportunities created by these developments.

In addition to survey-based and policy analyses, national civil protection and social protection laws further shape the environment in which social workers operate during crises. In Latvia, the Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law defines disaster management as a shared responsibility between state institutions and municipalities and explicitly obliges local governments, when a disaster is threatened or has occurred, to "ensure evacuation of inhabitants from the territories endangered or affected by a disaster, and also to keep a record of these inhabitants, ensure temporary accommodation, feeding and social care" (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016). These provisions place social care and basic social support at the core of Latvian disaster management and indirectly position social services and social workers as key actors in evacuation, temporary accommodation, and ongoing support to affected populations.

In Azerbaijan, discussions of resilience tend to focus on national security, internal displacement, and mental health rather than on social work practice specifically. Rustamov et al. (2023) demonstrate that psychological resilience and social connectedness are associated with better mental well-being among adults in Azerbaijan, underlining the protective role of strong familial and community ties (Rustamov et al., 2023). Regional reports also note that formal welfare and social service infrastructures are relatively underdeveloped, and that professional social work is not fully integrated into emergency and conflict response frameworks (World Bank, 2022). There is a lack of empirical studies that centre Azerbaijani social workers' own perspectives on resilience, their coping and adaptation strategies, and their position within institutional and political structures related to conflict, displacement, and preparedness.

Recent developments indicate a growing recognition of the need to integrate social protection more explicitly into emergency planning in Azerbaijan. In a joint action plan for 2025–2030, the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population agreed to strengthen the rights of persons with disabilities in the prevention, preparedness, and mitigation of emergencies. The plan, developed in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, foresees early warning systems accessible to persons with disabilities (including SMS services and information applications), as well as coordinated measures for the evacuation, registration, temporary accommodation, and support of

residents of rehabilitation and social service institutions during emergencies. This initiative explicitly connects emergency management structures with social protection and social service institutions, signalling an emerging meso- and exosystem interface where social workers and social services are expected to play a clearer role in planning and implementing inclusive emergency responses.

Given Latvia's EU-aligned, formalised social service and civil protection systems and Azerbaijan's more centralised, securitised governance with strong informal networks, the two countries constitute contrasting yet comparable cases for examining how different contexts shape social workers' resilience. Existing international research provides conceptual tools and comparative reference points, but there is a clear gap in empirically grounded, practitioner-centred analyses for these specific settings.Bringing these perspectives together, the thesis uses an integrated analytical framework to interpret interview material from social workers and key informants in Latvia and Azerbaijan. The framework can be summarised as follows.

Table 1. Analytical frame for studying social workers' resilience

Level / lens	Main focus in this thesis	Key concepts	Example research questions it informs
Critical micro-practice	Immediate practice environment: colleagues, supervisors, direct client work, daily routines	Workplace relationships, direct exposure to clients' trauma, team culture	How do day-to-day interactions at work support or undermine social workers' resilience?
Mesosystem	Links between settings: social services, NGOs, schools, health care, local authorities	Inter-agency collaboration, coordination in crises	How do relationships between agencies shape social workers' sense of support and burden?

Critical structural / exo level	Indirect but influential structures: municipal policies, management decisions, media	Welfare governance, funding regimes, caseload policies, professional regulation	How do decisions made “above” social workers affect their capacity to cope and adapt?
Critical macro / discourse level	National and cultural context: welfare regime, security discourse, public attitudes	Welfare models, civil-military relations, status of social work	How do Latvia’s and Azerbaijan’s different political and welfare systems create distinct resilience conditions?
Individual-level resilience (van Breda)	Social workers’ personal processes in adversity	Coping strategies, meaning-making, self-care, identity	How do social workers describe their ways of staying in the profession and maintaining well-being?
Organisational-level resilience (van Breda)	Processes within organisations and teams	Supervision, leadership, flexibility, peer support	What organisational practices are experienced as enabling or constraining resilience?
Societal-level resilience (van Breda)	Policy and societal processes that affect practice	Preparedness plans, legal frameworks, professional recognition	To what extent are social workers integrated into preparedness and recovery frameworks?

Person-in-environment (PIE)	Interaction of person and context	Professional role, environment, mutual influence	How do social workers see themselves positioned within their environments, and how does this shape their resilience?

This framework will guide the coding and interpretation of empirical material. For instance, when a Latvian social worker describes relying on a supportive supervisor and regular peer reflection, this will be read as an individual- and organisational-level resilience process situated in the microsystem and mesosystem. When an Azerbaijani key informant discusses the absence of formal crisis preparedness plans involving social workers but highlights strong informal community networks, this will be analysed at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, with attention to how these structures shape practitioners' person-in-environment configurations.

The theories and concepts outlined here will not only be presented in this chapter but also integrated throughout the analysis, where they will be used to interpret and discuss the empirical findings. This integrated use of theory is intended to ensure that the analysis contributes both to empirical understanding of social workers' resilience in Latvia and Azerbaijan and to broader theoretical debates on resilience in social work.

III. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive, practice, and are supported in developing resilience in the context of military conflict and forced displacement. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research questions focus on lived experience, meaning-making, and context-dependent processes rather than on measuring the prevalence of predefined variables. The inclusion of two country contexts enables a richer, context-sensitive understanding of how resilience is shaped within different socio-political and professional environments, both of which are affected by regional

conflict but differ in welfare regimes, civil-protection systems, and the institutionalisation of social work.

The design is informed by phenomenology, which treats experience as embodied and situated knowledge and prioritises participants' own accounts of how they understand and enact resilience in their professional roles. This orientation is consistent with the theoretical framework that views resilience as a multilevel process shaped by interactions between individuals and their environments. The study is both retrospective and prospective in nature: participants reflect on past experiences in earlier phases of conflict response and refugee integration, and they also discuss anticipated future challenges, preparedness strategies, and evolving professional demands.

4.2 Research questions and methodological fit

The methodological choices are directly linked to the research questions. The primary questions ask:

1. How do social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive and practice resilience in their professional roles during and after military conflicts?
2. What strategies and competencies do they use in recovering from crises such as refugee influxes or armed conflict?
3. To what extent are social workers included in national or local preparedness and civil-defence planning, and how do they experience this inclusion or exclusion?
4. What elements can be identified in the two countries in terms of policy frameworks, practice conditions, and lived experiences of resilience among social workers?

These questions require in-depth, narrative data that capture perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of complex practice situations. A qualitative, interview-based approach is therefore more suitable than a quantitative survey, which would be limited in its ability to explore nuanced meanings, relationships between levels of resilience, and the influence of socio-political context.

4.3 Sampling strategy and participants

4.3.1 Sampling approach

The study uses purposive sampling to recruit participants with relevant experience and knowledge. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the aim is not statistical representativeness but information-rich cases that can illuminate the phenomenon of interest—in this case, social worker resilience in conflict-affected practice. The sampling strategy aimed to include both practitioners and key informants in each country to capture different perspectives on resilience, preparedness, and institutional frameworks.

4.3.2 Participant groups and inclusion criteria

Two main groups of participants are envisaged:

- **Practising social workers** in Latvia and Azerbaijan who have direct experience working with refugees, internally displaced persons, or populations affected by military conflict.
- **Key informants**, such as senior practitioners, managers, academics, or policy actors, who have a broader overview of social work, crisis management, and civil-protection frameworks in each country.

Inclusion criteria for social workers are:

- At least one year of professional practice in social work.
- Direct involvement in work with conflict-affected or displaced populations (for example, Ukrainian refugees in Latvia, internally displaced persons or conflict-affected communities in Azerbaijan).
- Willingness and ability to participate in an interview in English or with an interpreter.

Inclusion criteria for key informants are:

- Professional experience in social work, social policy, crisis management, or related fields in Latvia or Azerbaijan.
- Knowledge of how social workers are positioned within national or local preparedness and recovery systems.

The sample includes:

- 10 practising social workers across the two countries (with an effort to balance numbers between Latvia and Azerbaijan).
- 4 key informants (two in each country) with complementary professional profiles.

This size is sufficient to gain depth and diversity of perspectives while remaining manageable for detailed qualitative analysis. The exact number adjusted slightly in response to access, saturation of themes, and practical constraints.

4.3.3 Recruitment procedures

Participants are recruited through professional networks, social service agencies, NGOs, universities, and, where appropriate, gatekeepers in municipal or national social work structures. Initial contacts were made via email or phone, and potential participants received an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, ethical safeguards, and voluntary nature. Snowball sampling used to identify additional participants who meet the inclusion criteria, particularly in contexts where trust and political sensitivity require cautious, relationship-based access.

4.3.4 Participant profiles

The study included a total of 14 participants across the two countries, divided between practising social workers, social work managers and key informants with relevant expertise. Seven participants were based in Latvia (P4–P10) and seven in Azerbaijan (P1–P3 and P11–P14). The Azerbaijani participants included a clinical psychologist with ICRC conflict experience, a PhD researcher in social work and social policy with a background in conflict and peace, a social work academic and services manager, a social services centre head, and three social workers with experience in refugee, post-war and community contexts. The Latvian participants included a head of a major municipal welfare department, two social work managers with specific responsibility for Ukrainian refugee integration, and four social workers employed in municipal social service departments with varying levels of crisis experience. This diverse mix of roles, seniority levels and national contexts enabled a rich, multilevel perspective on how resilience is perceived and practised in conflict-affected social work settings.

Table 2. Participation profiles.

ID	Country	Short role description
P1	Azerbaijan	Clinical psychologist with experience working in conflict contexts and collaborating with social workers (former ICRC mental health and psychosocial support team member working with families of missing persons and repatriated children).
P2	Azerbaijan	PhD researcher in social work / social policy (Ghent University) focusing on the impact of geopolitics on social work, social welfare and social services, with a background in conflict and peace.
P3	Azerbaijan	Social work academic and social services manager; teaches at a Department of Social Work and has experience managing social service provision and psychosocial support for people affected by conflict across several regions, as well as working as an independent consultant.
P4	Latvia	Social work manager; head of the Social Administration of Riga City Welfare Department, responsible for organising social services and social assistance for Riga inhabitants and assessing needs of different target groups.
P5	Latvia	Social work manager; head of social services and social benefits in a municipality, with specific responsibility for working with Ukrainian refugees since 2022.
P6	Latvia	Social work manager / practitioner; enrolled in a master's programme in Social Work Management, briefly employed as a Social Assistance Organiser during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which highlighted the role of social services in crises.
P7	Latvia	Social worker; has been working as a social worker for 13 years in the Social Assistance Division of a municipal social services department.
P8	Latvia	Social worker; works within the municipal social service system of the City of Riga, supporting frontline social workers and contributing to crisis-response measures.
P9	Latvia	Social worker; experienced municipal social worker (statement "I have been working as a social worker") with practice in local social services.
P10	Latvia	Social worker; professional background in social work and social policy at the municipal level, involved in local social services.

P11	Azerbaijan	Social work manager; head of a Social Services Center since 2019, with a social work background.
P12	Azerbaijan	Social worker; more than three years' experience, including work with refugees and post-war contexts.
P13	Azerbaijan	Social worker; experience from micro-level social work expanding to day care centre, family support and coordinator roles.
P14	Azerbaijan	Social worker; worked with communities during the Second Karabakh War in Barda and has experience in post-war community social work.

4.4. Data collection

4.4.1 Method: semi-structured interviews

Data collected through semi-structured, individual interviews lasting approximately 50–60 minutes. Semi-structured interviews was suitable because they provide a balance between structure—ensuring that core topics are covered across participants—and flexibility, allowing interviewees to introduce issues they consider important and to elaborate on unexpected themes. This method aligns with the phenomenological orientation of the study by inviting detailed narratives about lived experience.

4.4.2 Interview guide

The interview guide is designed to reflect the research questions and theoretical framework and includes open-ended questions and prompts such as:

- Can you describe your personal and professional experiences working with refugees, internally displaced persons, or communities affected by military conflict?
- How do you understand the term "resilience" in relation to your work as a social worker?
- What strategies have you used to cope with or recover from work-related stress linked to conflict or displacement?
- In what ways are social workers included in national or local civil-defence or crisis preparedness frameworks in your country?

- What forms of organisational or peer support have helped you to sustain your work?

For key informants, the guide will be adapted to include more questions on policy, institutional arrangements, and broader system-level perspectives, while still inviting reflections on social workers' experiences and resilience.

The interview guide was developed with reference to these national and international frameworks. In Latvia, the Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law formally requires municipalities to organise evacuation, temporary accommodation, feeding and social care in emergencies, which implies a potential role for social services and social workers in civil protection structures (Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, 2016). In Azerbaijan, legislation on the social protection of displaced persons guarantees long-term social security and service entitlements for people displaced by conflict (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999), while a recent joint action plan between the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection aims to strengthen coordination around the rights of persons with disabilities in emergencies (Ministry of Emergency Situations & Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, 2025–2030). These frameworks justify the inclusion of questions on preparedness, evacuation, social care, social security and coordination between emergency structures and social services in the interview protocols.

The guide piloted with one participant to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity, and minor adjustments will be made based on feedback.

4.4.3 Mode of interviewing and language

Interviews conducted via secure video conferencing platform, Microsoft Teams depending on logistical feasibility, safety considerations, and participants' preferences. In Latvia, interviews were conducted in English where participants were comfortable; in Azerbaijan and in some cases where English proficiency was limited, so video recordings were transcripted and translated.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Where interviews take place in languages other than English, translation into English will be undertaken, with attention to preserving meaning and nuance.

4.5. Data management and analysis

4.5.1 Data management

Audio files, transcripts, and consent forms were stored securely, with access restricted to the researcher and, if necessary, the supervisor. Digital data were password protected, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms or general descriptors (for example, “Latvian social worker, municipal service”). A separate key linking pseudonyms to real identities will be stored securely and destroyed after the completion of the study.

4.5.2 Analytical approach

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, guided by the theoretical framework of critical social work, multilevel resilience, and person-in-environment. Thematic analysis is well suited to identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data while allowing flexibility in combining inductive and theory-informed coding. The analysis will proceed in several stages:

1. **Familiarisation**: Repeated reading of transcripts and listening to audio recordings to gain an overall sense of participants’ narratives.
2. **Initial coding**: Systematic coding of segments of text related to experiences of adversity, resilience strategies, organisational contexts, policy frameworks.
3. **Developing themes**: Grouping codes into broader categories and themes (for example, “peer support as resilience”, “bureaucratic constraints”, “informal networks vs. formal systems”).
4. **Reviewing and refining themes**: Examining themes within and across interviews and across the two country contexts to identify patterns, variations, and context-specific dynamics.
5. **Linking to theory**: Interpreting themes through the lenses of critical social work theory, multilevel resilience, and person-in-environment, mapping themes onto micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels and onto individual, organisational, and societal resilience processes.

Coding and analysis was carried out manually, using word-processing, qualitative data management tool, MAXQDA to organise codes and themes. The emphasis was on preserving the richness of participants' accounts while generating an analytically coherent interpretation that addresses the research questions.

4.6. Quality, limitations and reflexivity

4.6.1 Ensuring quality

Several strategies were employed to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the study. First, the use of a clear theoretical framework and transparent description of the research design, sampling, and analysis supports credibility and coherence. Second, including both social workers and key informants enables a degree of triangulation between practice-level and system-level perspectives. Third, attention was to be paid to negative cases or divergent accounts that challenge emerging themes, to avoid oversimplification.

Member checking used selectively; for example, participants were invited to comment on brief summaries of preliminary findings to confirm that interpretations resonate with their experiences, while recognising that such feedback is one input among others rather than a definitive validation.

4.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are central to this study, given its focus on conflict-affected contexts and potentially sensitive professional experiences. Four core principles guide the research: transparency, self-determination, confidentiality, and autonomy.

- **Transparency**: Participants received clear, accessible information about the study's aims, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the intended use of data. This provided in written form and discussed orally before consent is obtained.
- **Self-determination and autonomy**: Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants might decline to answer any question and may withdraw from the study at any time

without negative consequences. Their decision to participate or withdraw did not affect their employment or relations with any institution.

- **Confidentiality**: Identifying information were removed from transcripts, and data was stored securely. In publications and presentations, composite descriptions or pseudonyms were used to prevent identification of individuals or specific workplaces, which was particularly important in small professional communities and politically sensitive settings.
- **Minimising harm**: Interviews touched on distressing experiences related to conflict, displacement, or professional stress. The researcher monitored participants' emotional responses, offered breaks, and, if necessary, stopped the interview. Where possible, information about available support services (for example, organisational counselling or peer support groups) were provided.

The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document methodological and ethical decisions, emotional reactions, and potential biases, and discussed these regularly with the supervisor to support ethical and analytic rigour.

Overall, the chosen methodology was designed to provide a rich, context-sensitive understanding of social workers' resilience in Latvia and Azerbaijan, to align closely with the research questions and theoretical framework, and to uphold high ethical standards in working with professionals in conflict-affected environments.

4.8 Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the development of this thesis, generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive role. Tools such as Perplexity, Scopus AI and Consensus were consulted to assist with exploring relevant literature, checking paraphrasing, improving grammar and clarity, and occasionally helping to order and structure paragraphs so that the text would be more coherent and neat. These tools were not used to generate original ideas, design the study, or decide on the use of particular references.

All core academic work, including the formulation of the research questions, decisions about theoretical frameworks, selection and interpretation of references, analytical choices, and the processing and interpretation of confidential interview data was carried out by the researcher alone. No confidential or identifying information about participants was entered into AI tools; all data analysis of interview material was conducted manually to protect participants' privacy and comply with ethical requirements.

IV. Findings

5.1 Introduction to the findings

This chapter presents the main findings from interviews with social workers, social work managers and academics in Latvia and Azerbaijan. The analysis explores how participants understand and practice resilience in their professional roles during and after military conflicts, how they navigate crises such as refugee influxes and armed escalation, and how organisational and political structures shape their possibilities for resilient practice. The chapter is organised thematically around four interrelated areas: (1) how resilience and vulnerability are experienced, (2) the coping strategies and competencies social workers mobilise, (3) their inclusion or exclusion from crisis preparedness and civil‑defence planning, and (4) elements in Latvia and Azerbaijan in policy frameworks, practice conditions and lived experiences of resilience.

Throughout the chapter, resilience is treated as a relational and contested concept rather than a fixed personal trait. Drawing on critical social work, the analysis reads participants' talk about "being strong," "keeping going" or "burning out" in relation to organisational cultures, legal frameworks and wider conflict dynamics that distribute risk and responsibility unevenly. The resilience model and person‑in‑environment perspective provide a lens for understanding how individual, relational and structural factors combine to support or undermine resilience in practice. Rather than reproducing an ecological systems language, the chapter focuses on how social workers are positioned within networks of governance, policy and everyday relationships in conflict‑affected contexts.

5.2. Theme 1: Experiencing resilience and vulnerability in conflict-affected practice

This theme addresses the first research question: how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive and practice resilience in their professional roles during and after military conflicts. Across both countries, participants described resilience as a dynamic process involving personal determination, collective support and structural conditions, but they also questioned the fairness and sustainability of expecting social workers to remain resilient under chronic stress and limited institutional backing. The theme is divided into three subthemes: (1) resilience as inner strength and acceptance, (2) resilience as collective efficacy and organisational support, and (3) recognising the limits and critiques of individualised resilience.

Subtheme 1.1: Resilience as inner strength and acceptance

Several participants described resilience first and foremost as an inner resource—a combination of willpower, acceptance and determination to move forward after shocks. One Latvian social worker (P7) said: "*I know I have a fairly strong will to live. After strong shocks, I recover quickly and move forward because I know I can no longer change what has happened.*" For her, resilience meant acknowledging what cannot be changed and actively choosing to keep going rather than staying immobilised in past events.

Other Latvian participants expressed similar ideas in more tentative ways. Another social worker (P9) explained that on very difficult days she reminds herself: "*I tell myself that this day will also end, and tomorrow I will have another chance to try again,*" framing resilience as the ability to hold on to a sense of temporal perspective when crises escalate. These narratives highlight cognitive strategies such as acceptance, reframing and focusing on what can still be influenced, which participants use to maintain functioning when they feel overwhelmed by conflict-related uncertainty.

Azerbaijani social workers also drew on language of individual toughness, but often in ways that emphasised pushing themselves beyond safe limits. One social worker (P14), who had worked with communities during the Second Karabakh War in Barda, recalled: "*I had returned from the war in such a psychological state that I couldn't do normal work. I would go out into the streets*

at night, find people in the district, and start working with them. There was no grant, no money, and I was working without any resources behind me." Reflecting on this period, he added: "*I was so exhausted from working there that I couldn't work in such a quiet office, my nerves couldn't take it. I would go and destroy myself again, because this is one of the symptoms of burnout syndrome.*" After facing death in war, he felt that "*everything in the world seems meaningless,*" and described going to "*even more dangerous places*" as part of this altered state.

These accounts show that individual-level resilience is not a simple or purely positive trait. Through a critical social work and person-in-environment lens, the emphasis on willpower and acceptance can be understood as both an expression of agency and a response to contexts where structural conditions are difficult to change. Latvian participants' talk of a "strong will to live" and "moving forward" coexists with recognition of limited influence over national-level decisions, while Azerbaijani accounts demonstrate how internalised expectations of endurance can become entangled with war trauma and self-risk. In both settings, resilience talk at the individual level sits in tension with conflict-saturated environments that continually produce new stressors.

Subtheme 1.2: Resilience as collective efficacy and organisational support

Alongside these individual narratives, many participants emphasised that resilience emerges from relationships and organisational settings rather than from isolated personal traits. The same Azerbaijani social worker (P14) explained that working in a multidisciplinary team made a crucial difference: "*When you work in a multidisciplinary team, you feel like you're not alone. For example, you know that you have peers who are going through the same thing as you. And if you're experiencing emotional exhaustion, they're going through it too.*" For him, resilience was closely linked to having colleagues who share experiences and responsibilities, so that emotional burdens are distributed rather than carried individually.

Latvian participants highlighted similar dynamics. One municipal social worker (P7), with 13 years of experience, described how regular supervision and peer discussions help her stay grounded: "*In supervision, I can say out loud what I am carrying, and I see that others also have these reactions. It becomes easier when you understand that you are not the only one who feels this way.*" She emphasised that resilience is *collective, not just individual*, arguing that being able

to talk openly about fear, fatigue and doubt with colleagues makes it less likely that social workers will blame themselves for normal reactions to abnormal situations. A social work manager (P5) noted that when organisations provide clear procedures and internal training, "*people feel that they are part of a coordinated response and not just improvising alone*," which she saw as crucial for sustaining resilience.

The coded segments from Azerbaijani interviews provide concrete examples of organisational support structures that foster collective resilience. A clinical psychologist with experience working in conflict contexts and collaborating with social workers (P1) explained that resilience in this context can come from the work setting, from the way the organisation is structured: "*Because when you feel like you're not alone, when you feel that you have a team that shares your goals and approaches professionally, and when you have a supervisor who really cares about the work that you do and about your own well-being, then even if the workload is heavy, you can remain resilient.*" She contrasted this with situations where "*you feel completely alone, you feel like you have to manage your own work and nobody who is assigned as your supervisor really cares about what you're doing,*" noting that under those conditions the same workload becomes "much more damaging."

In her description of work with repatriated children from Iraq and Syria, she also highlighted how inter-agency collaboration contributed to resilience: "*We were closely collaborating with the social workers… we had a database and we could see which social worker is assigned to which family, and if something came up in therapy, we could contact them to address the needs together.*" Social workers, however, were often (P1) "*tired*" and "*slowly burning out*" because each had to travel across regions with caseloads of around thirty families, which underlined how collective structures can support resilience but cannot fully compensate for systemic overload.

These accounts align strongly with resilience models that conceptualise resilience as a relational and organisational phenomenon, and with person-in-environment approaches that emphasise the interplay between individuals and their work settings. They also resonate with critical social work's focus on professional communities as spaces of both support and subtle resistance, where workers develop shared languages and practices to cope with structurally produced adversity. In both countries, participants' descriptions of peer learning, supervision, inter-professional

collaboration and organisational culture suggest that resilience is sustained not only by personal qualities but by the presence—or absence—of caring and organised professional networks.

Subtheme 1.3: Recognising the limits and critiques of individualised resilience

Across interviews, social workers, managers and academics also articulated explicit critiques of individualised resilience narratives, pointing to the risks of relying on personal toughness in the absence of structural support. A Latvian social worker (again P7) described a change in her thinking: "*Initially, I thought resilience was just about an individual's 'toughness,' but now I realise it is a combination of personal skills and structural support.*" She linked this shift directly to the start of the war in Ukraine, explaining that this experience "*highlighted that without a clear plan and institutional backing, individual willpower can quickly burn out.*"

Other Latvian participants reinforced this critique. A social work manager (P4) argued that telling social workers simply to be resilient is "insufficient," because "*if we do not have enough staff, if we do not have proper training, if we do not have time to rest, then resilience becomes a nice word that hides the problem.*" She pointed out that when crisis-related information arrives late to frontline workers, they are forced to "improvise and hope that we are doing the right thing," which undermines confidence and increases stress. These comments show that participants are not passively adopting resilience discourse; they are actively questioning how it is used in policy and organisational contexts.

In Azerbaijan, critical reflections on resilience were closely tied to experiences of burnout, political pressure and systemic gaps. The clinical psychologist (P1) observed that social workers working with repatriated children "*were really overstretched*," noting that some had to "*have field trips*" across many regions and that "*you could really see how they were slowly burning out because they were not showing the same level of drive to support the children.*" Another Azerbaijani respondent (P12) stated that "*this stress level doesn't just rise during wartime, it rises anyway, and if you don't have a system behind you, it becomes even more difficult for you, you become a more vulnerable person.*" This remark directly links vulnerability to the absence of organisational and systemic support rather than to any lack of individual strength.

These insights reveal how practitioners themselves resist simplified uses of resilience that place responsibility on individuals while leaving systemic issues untouched. From a critical social work perspective, participants' talk about burnout, organisational culture and legal frameworks can be read as a critique of governance arrangements that demand emotional and physical endurance without corresponding investments in support. At the same time, the emphasis on structural backing connects directly to the resilience model's insistence that resilience is conditional: when organisational cultures are inequitable or when crisis governance positions social workers as expendable, resilience becomes fragile and ethically problematic.

By foregrounding these critiques from both Latvia and Azerbaijan, this subtheme shows that social workers, managers and academics are not simply reproducing resilience discourse but actively reworking it. They acknowledge the value of personal skills and collective support, yet emphasise that sustainable resilience requires fair organisational cultures, clear crisis plans and supportive legal frameworks. This sets the stage for the next theme, which examines more closely the concrete coping strategies and competencies social workers mobilise—and the ways these can be both protective and risky—within the structural conditions they have described.

5.3 Theme 2: Coping strategies and competencies – from self-care to self-destruction

This theme addresses the second research question: "What strategies and competencies social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan use to recover from crises such as refugee influxes or armed conflict?" Participants described a wide repertoire of coping practices that ranged from structured professional methods and relational support to improvised, risky and sometimes self-destructive strategies. The theme is organised into three subthemes: (1) professional strategies and boundary-setting, (2) relational coping through supervision, peer support and meaning-making, and (3) maladaptive coping and the costs of "keeping going."

Subtheme 2.1: Professional strategies and boundary-setting

Many participants described deliberate professional strategies they use to manage emotional load and maintain some separation between work and personal life. An Azerbaijani social worker (P12) explained how he consciously avoids carrying clients' problems home: *"For example, in my mind I say to myself: if there's a problem, it's not mine, it's theirs. There's a problem, but I*

have to solve it somewhere. This should not be carried home." He also emphasised the importance of clear working hours, saying: *"I finished work after work. For example, I was throwing it away, we had our 9–6 jobs. I don't answer any calls or messages after 6."* For him, resilience involves both cognitive reframing and strict boundary-setting, which he sees as necessary to prevent constant emotional intrusion from work into his private life.

The same participant highlighted how structured documentation and case management can reduce cognitive overload: *"Documentation helps your sense of justice, and it's a little bit like you've clarified and seen everything. Because when it's verbal, it stays in a part of a person's brain that, 'oh, I forgot something'. But when it's case management, it's about managing a case, and it's documented in your case, something tangible happens. Moving forward it reduces stress."* Here, resilience is linked to organisational tools that make work more visible and controllable, which reduces the sense of constantly missing something important.

Latvian social workers described similar practices. One municipal worker (P7) noted that she uses small routines to close the working day, such as writing brief notes and planning the next day, so that *"the unfinished things are in the notebook, not in my head,"* which helps her sleep and feel more prepared. A social work manager (P5) emphasised the importance of clear role definitions and crisis protocols, explaining that when staff know *"who does what"* and "*what our steps are,"* they feel more competent and less overwhelmed. These accounts illustrate how professional competencies (boundary-setting, documentation, time management and clarity of role) function as everyday resilience practices that help social workers maintain some control in unpredictable contexts.

From a person-in-environment perspective, these strategies show how resilience is shaped by the interaction between individual habits and organisational arrangements. Critical social work reminds us that these are not purely individual achievements: they depend on organisations allowing boundaries (for example, not expecting staff to answer calls at night) and providing systems that support case management rather than relying solely on informal talk.

Subtheme 2.2: Relational coping through supervision, peer support and meaning-making

A second cluster of strategies centres on relational resources: supervision, peer learning, collective reflection and meaning-making in contact with clients. Several participants described supervision as a key competency for coping with emotionally demanding work. An Azerbaijani social worker (P12) stated: *"Taking supervision, I think it all starts with that. You can talk to a more professional specialist or a like-minded person."* He explained that supervision allows him to "go, talk, get support" when he feels helpless, and to see situations from different angles rather than carrying responsibility alone.

The same participant emphasised peer support: *"Many times when we felt helpless, for example, I along with my teachers, supervisor, social workers from the project, I was going, I was talking, I was getting support."* In the coded segments, this appears under both "peer support/shared experience" and "peer learning," reflecting that these conversations serve not only emotional relief but also professional development. For him, resilience is not a solitary quality; it is something that is co-constructed in relationships with colleagues, mentors and supervisors.

Latvian social workers described similar relational practices. P7 noted that when she shares her experiences in supervision, she realises "others also have these reactions," which helps her normalise her feelings and reduces the risk of self-blame. Another Latvian participant (P8) highlighted informal debriefings with colleagues after particularly hard cases, saying that *" sometimes it is enough to sit in the kitchen for ten minutes and talk, and you feel that you can breathe again."* These interactions function as small, everyday rituals of collective care within social services.

Meaning-making in relation to clients also appears as a coping resource. An Azerbaijani social worker (P12) described one moment where a client came back and said: *"Thank you very much, with your help our social assistance issue was resolved. In my life I was this happy for the first time."* He explained that such moments create a *"sense of noble mission":* knowing that *"maybe it is not a great step for the world, but in one person's world you made some fundamental change"* helps him keep going despite systemic obstacles. This corresponds to the code of *"vicarious resilience,"* where witnessing clients' progress or gratitude reinforces practitioners' sense of purpose.

From a resilience model perspective, these relational strategies—supervision, peer support and meaning-making—show how resilience is sustained through social and symbolic resources, not just through individual traits. Critical social work highlights that such practices can also be forms of resistance to organisational cultures that prioritise efficiency over care, as workers carve out spaces to recognise their own needs and to affirm the significance of their work.

Subtheme 2.3: Maladaptive coping and the costs of "keeping going"

Alongside these structured and relational strategies, participants also described coping mechanisms that they themselves framed as problematic or risky. An Azerbaijani social worker (P14) admitted that during and after the war he sometimes turned to alcohol: "*And probably drinking. I mean, at that time… you can't stand your nerves, you can't sleep. Whatever you feel, you feel like someone should hit you in the head so that you lose consciousness, at least rest a little. Because the brain doesn't stop, it works, works, works. That's why sometimes you needed some things to turn it off, so you could go to sleep."* He presented this not as a sustainable strategy but as a symptom of how overwhelmed he felt by constant hyperarousal and intrusive thoughts.

The same participant described what he called *"self-destructive"* patterns of coping, such as repeatedly returning to dangerous environments and working without institutional backing: *"I would go and destroy myself again… you go to even more dangerous places."* He linked this to war syndrome, explaining that after experiencing life-threatening situations, *"everything in the world seems meaningless" and people try to "keep themselves in something"* by seeking intensity rather than calm. These accounts demonstrate how resilience and vulnerability can become intertwined: the desire to remain useful and engaged can lead social workers to take on extreme risks or to neglect their own health.

Latvian interviews also contained hints of maladaptive coping, though often described more subtly. One social worker (P9) noted that in the early phases of the Ukraine war she *"spent nights scrolling news and not sleeping,"* recognising afterwards that this constant exposure increased her anxiety but felt difficult to stop at the time. Another participant (P6), reflecting on the early days of her role as a social assistance organiser during the invasion, described feeling that she "had to prove" her commitment by always being available, and only later realised that

this contributed to exhaustion. These examples show that even in more formally structured systems, social workers can internalise expectations of constant responsiveness that undermine their wellbeing.

From a critical social work viewpoint, these maladaptive strategies are not simply individual weaknesses; they are shaped by structural conditions, including lack of supervision, politicised environments and crisis governance that places heavy responsibility on a small number of workers. The person-in-environment perspective helps to frame these coping patterns as responses to environments where stress is continuous and formal supports are patchy or delayed. Recognising these costs is important for understanding resilience not as a heroic ideal but as a contested and sometimes dangerous practice in conflict-affected social work.

Taken together, this theme shows that social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan mobilise a wide range of strategies and competencies to cope with crises—from professional boundaries and case management to peer support, supervision and meaning-making—while also improvising and sometimes turning to risky or harmful behaviours when structural supports are lacking. This provides the empirical bridge to the next theme, which examines how far social workers are formally included in national and local crisis preparedness and civil-defence planning, and how their coping strategies intersect with their experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

5.4 Theme 3: Partial inclusion and marginalisation in crisis preparedness and civil defence

This theme addresses the third research question: to what extent social workers are included in national or local preparedness and civil-defence planning, and how they experience this inclusion or exclusion in Latvia and Azerbaijan. Across both contexts, participants described a pattern of partial recognition and marginalisation: social workers are formally present in some crisis structures and laws, but their roles are narrow, their involvement in planning is limited, and crisis-specific training is uneven. The theme is organised into three subthemes: (1) minimal formal inclusion and narrow roles in Latvia, (2) ad-hoc inclusion and self-training in Azerbaijan, and (3) organisational culture, governance and the experience of being essential but peripheral.

Subtheme 3.1: Minimal formal inclusion and narrow roles in Latvia

Latvian social workers and social work managers portrayed a system in which social services are recognised in civil defence documents but given narrow tasks and limited voice in planning. One social worker (P7) stated bluntly that the level of inclusion is *"very little,"* explaining that "*only in certain municipalities are heads or representatives of social services included in the civil defence commissions.*" She continued: *"As a result, these services are not involved in training planning or in addressing current problems, and the necessary information reaches them belatedly."* For her, exclusion from planning processes means that social workers "often find out what is expected of us only after decisions are made," which undermines both preparedness and confidence.

Participants described how civil defence plans at both municipal and national levels tend to assign social workers a small set of tasks, mainly *"providing psychological support and assistance with evacuation."* P7 noted that in her municipality, *"in the civil defence plans social workers have only a few duties,"* which she felt did not reflect the breadth of social work's potential contribution during crises. A social work manager (P5) confirmed this pattern, observing that "*social services are mentioned in the plans, but mostly as an appendix,*" and that their expertise in working with vulnerable groups is rarely used in the design of evacuation procedures or communication strategies.

Latvian participants also raised concerns about the content and reach of crisis-related training. P7 observed that "social services receive very general training on crises," adding that *"They are about civil defence, but it mentions war, military invasion, or the risk of such threats very little."* She pointed out that this training is "*limited to the management level,*" which means "this information does not reach lower-level employees at all." As a result, many frontline social workers feel that they are expected to act in war-related scenarios without having been explicitly prepared for them. From a critical social work perspective, this subtheme illustrates how governance structures can recognise social work on paper while keeping practitioners at the margins of decision-making and preparedness, reproducing unequal power relations between social services and more central crisis actors.

Subtheme 3.2: Ad-hoc inclusion and self-training in Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, participants described a different but related pattern: social workers are increasingly present in crisis responses, but their inclusion often emerges through ad-hoc arrangements and external actors rather than through systematic national preparedness frameworks. A clinical psychologist with conflict-related experience (P1) recounted how the government initially lacked experience with repatriated children from Iraq and Syria: *"There weren't any specific government-designated social workers for this case when it first appeared, but they were very open to collaborating."* She explained that UNICEF "*hired one social worker in the beginning when 19 kids were repatriated back to Azerbaijan*," and later two more, so that *"there were three main social workers working on this case for a couple of years."* Over time, responsibility shifted to state structures, and *"when it was moved to the Social Services Agency, the number of social workers also increased. It went from 3 to 30."*

This process shows how social work roles in crisis contexts can develop through collaboration between international organisations and state agencies rather than through pre-existing national plans. P1 described how she and her colleagues trained these social workers in trauma-informed approaches: *"We explained what this means, what is trauma, how it impacts people, what are the behaviours, what are the needs and how to approach in the least damaging and most supportive way."* Yet she also noted that social workers were "really overstretched," with each one responsible for many families across dispersed regions, and that systemic changes (such as moving the caseload to a better-structured agency) were needed to make their work sustainable.

Frontline social workers in Azerbaijan described a strong reliance on self-initiated learning in the absence of structured preparedness. One social worker (P14) explained that during the Covid era, when conflict and pandemic crises overlapped, he found a psychological first aid course online: *"I found a course on Coursera… It was a course given by a certain John Hopkins University. I was studying that course amidst all this carnage, on the roads, and while scrolling."* He admitted that "normally, I should have taken a course from the beginning, then I shouldn't have gone there, then I should have applied it," but instead he "tested it on the road." For him, this improvised learning became a habit: "When I learn something new, I learn it like this, I apply it like this." He critically added that "it doesn't have to be like this," pointing out that "there are

always organisations that provide humanitarian aid," with better-resourced staff, whereas local social workers are often left to train themselves while working under fire.

These accounts suggest that in Azerbaijan, inclusion of social workers in crisis responses is both significant and fragile. Through a person-in-environment lens, social workers are positioned within networks of international organisations, state agencies and communities, but their preparedness often depends on external funding, project-based structures and their own initiative. Critical social work highlights how such arrangements can place heavy learning burdens on individual workers, while leaving structural questions about long-term training and institutionalised crisis preparedness unresolved.

Subtheme 3.3: Organisational culture, governance and being essential but peripheral

Across both countries, participants reflected on how organisational culture and governance shape their experiences of inclusion or exclusion, often describing themselves as essential yet peripheral actors in crisis governance. In Latvia, P4 noted that social services are formally part of municipal crisis structures, but that "our role is often seen as something that comes after the 'real' emergency work," such as firefighting or medical response. She observed that social workers are designated as "critical personnel" in legal frameworks, but that this status "comes with duties and restrictions, not necessarily with voice or protection." For her, inclusion in crisis planning would mean not only being listed in plans but also participating in scenario-building and decisions about resource allocation.

Another Latvian participant (P6), who briefly worked as a Social Assistance Organiser during the early months of the Ukraine war, described feeling both important and marginal: *"On paper we were responsible for many tasks, but in practice we often waited for information from other systems that arrived late."* She felt that social workers were "expected to be ready" without always being adequately briefed, which contributed to a sense of uncertainty and dependence on other actors' agendas. These reflections illustrate how legal and organisational recognition can coexist with practical marginalisation, a pattern that critical social work identifies as characteristic of welfare professionals operating within security-oriented crisis governance.

In Azerbaijan, participants emphasised how centralised governance and restrictive professional regulation affect social workers' ability to act independently in crisis situations. P1 recounted a case where she wanted to involve a social worker to address a client's physical safety: *"I identified with the client in session that because of the possible threat to life, I will be breaching confidentiality and checking in with a social worker."* She then discovered that "there's no legislation in Azerbaijan allowing to have independent social workers. This is something for which they could be later fined." The social worker she contacted agreed to think through possible interventions "as a brainstorming friend," but could not formally act outside state structures. P1 concluded that this is "a huge gap in the system," especially for clients who distrust government agencies.

At the same time, she noted some positive governance developments, such as an increasing number of government structures "designating budgets to have social workers on call," and more defined hierarchies within the Social Services Agency, where social workers and psychologists "could also vent to each other" and had "several levels of management which they could approach if they were facing any difficulties or challenges." These mixed experiences—new positions and budgets, but tight regulation and high caseloads—show how social workers are simultaneously incorporated into state crisis responses and constrained by the ways those responses are designed.

In conclusion, this theme shows that social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan are often formally recognised as important actors in crisis contexts, yet they remain only partially included in preparedness and civil-defence planning. Their roles are frequently narrow, their training uneven, and their influence on planning limited, even as legal and organisational frameworks increasingly position them as critical personnel. Through a critical social work and person-in-environment lens, this partial inclusion reveals how power, governance and organisational culture shape the conditions under which social workers can or cannot practise resilience in crises. This sets the stage for the final theme, which compares more explicitly how policy frameworks, practice conditions and lived experiences of resilience differ and overlap between the two countries.

5.5 Theme 4: Elements of resilience across policy, practice and lived experience

This theme addresses the fourth research question: what elements can be identified in Latvia and Azerbaijan in terms of policy frameworks, practice conditions and lived experiences of resilience among social workers. The focus is not on direct comparison, but on drawing out key elements within each context that shape how resilience is made possible, constrained and experienced. The theme is organised into three subthemes: (1) policy frameworks and formal recognition of social work, (2) practice conditions and organisational cultures, and (3) cultural and systemic contexts of resilience.

Subtheme 4.1: Policy frameworks and formal recognition of social work

Latvian participants described a policy environment in which social work is clearly defined and integrated into the welfare system, but only partially connected to crisis and resilience. Social work managers noted that social services are embedded in municipal and national legislation and are named in civil defence and crisis documents as actors responsible for supporting vulnerable groups, including refugees and people affected by conflict. One manager (P4) explained that her administration "is responsible for organising social services and social assistance for Riga inhabitants and assessing the needs of different target groups," emphasising that the legal framework gives social services a clear mandate. At the same time, she suggested that these frameworks rarely address "how social workers themselves will be protected or supported in crises," focusing more on tasks than on workers' wellbeing.

Another Latvian manager (P5), who oversees social services and benefits and has specific responsibility for Ukrainian refugees, described how policy documents "mention social work, but more in terms of procedures and obligations." In her view, resilience is not explicitly named but is implicitly expected: "*the system assumes that we will be able to adapt, to take on new tasks quickly, to be flexible,"* without always clarifying what support structures should accompany these expectations. This element points to a policy framework that recognises social work institutionally, yet leaves resilience as an assumed background capacity rather than a planned and resourced objective.

In Azerbaijan, respondents highlighted newer and more rapidly changing policy frameworks. A social work manager (P11), head of a Social Services Center since 2019, described how the establishment of such centres and the Social Services Agency has created "new positions for

social workers, new departments, new responsibilities." She noted that "more and more government structures are designating budgets to have social workers on call," which she saw as a positive sign that social work is gaining formal recognition and resources. At the same time, she and others pointed to significant gaps: independent social work is not legally recognised, and social workers are tightly bound to state institutions.

The clinical psychologist (P1) recounted a case that made this restriction very concrete (as it stated in the previous theme also) when she wanted to involve a social worker to address a client's safety outside formal structures, she discovered that *"there's no legislation in Azerbaijan allowing to have independent social workers. This is something for which they could be later fined."* She interpreted this as "a huge gap in the system," particularly for clients who say that *"any government worker is not my friend because the power of my family will overpower their work ethic."* For her, a key policy element of resilience would be "systemically to have independent social workers that have the same rights and recognitions as social workers in the government agencies," so that people who cannot or will not approach state bodies still have access to support. These accounts show policy frameworks that both enable resilience—by creating posts and budgets—and limit it, by restricting professional autonomy and alternative access routes.

Subtheme 4.2: Practice conditions and organisational cultures

Practice conditions and organisational cultures emerged as central elements shaping resilience in both contexts. In Latvia, social workers and managers described systems that are relatively institutionalised but under strain. P7, a social worker with 13 years of experience in a municipal social assistance division, noted that she works with large caseloads and complex problems, and that "there are days when you feel that whatever you do is not enough." She emphasised that organisational support makes a difference: "*If the organisation allows supervision, if it is normal to say that you are tired, then you can recharge and continue. If you always have to pretend that you are fine, then you burn out faster."* For her, organisational culture—whether it is possible to be honest about difficulties—was a key element of resilience.

P6, who is in a master's programme in Social Work Management and briefly worked as a Social Assistance Organiser during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, recalled how practice conditions

shifted overnight: "*Suddenly, the work that was already intense became even more intense, and we had to think about things like evacuation, reception of people, which we had not done before."* She found that "the role of social services in crises became very visible," but also that "there was not much time to train or prepare." This experience underlined for her that resilience depends on having "at least some structures, some protocols" before crises hit, so that practice conditions do not rely solely on improvisation.

In Azerbaijan, practice conditions were often described as more volatile and demanding, especially in post-war and repatriation contexts. P12, a social worker with more than three years' experience, including with refugees and post-war work, explained that "this stress level doesn't just rise during wartime, it rises anyway," because of high caseloads and limited resources. He noted that "if you don't have a system behind you, it becomes even more difficult for you, you become a more vulnerable person," directly linking his own resilience to the presence or absence of organisational backing. For him, elements such as supervision, peer support and clear case management structures are essential; without them, *"at some point, you start to feel that you are just reacting, not working."*

P1 described in detail how moving the repatriated children's caseload from one state structure to the Social Services Agency changed organisational conditions: *"The structure in there was much more defined. There was a specific person designated to this caseload, to this file, who was overseeing both the social workers and also the psychologists."* In this new setting, social workers and psychologists "*were starting to form their own bonds,*" could "*go and visit this family together,*" and "*could also vent to each other, as they were in the same building.*" She underlined that "*they also had their management, their several levels of management which they could approach if they were facing any difficulties or challenges.*" This shows how organisational design—hierarchies, co-location, supervision—constitutes a crucial element of resilience in practice.

Across both contexts, lived meanings of resilience are ambivalent. Social workers, managers and academics appreciate personal strength and commitment, but resist narratives that leave them alone with systemic problems. They call for elements such as higher salaries, smaller caseloads, supervision, empathetic leadership, clearer crisis plans, and legal recognition of diverse forms of

social work. Resilience, in their accounts, is not a static quality but an ongoing negotiation between what they can do as individuals and what organisations and policies make possible or impossible.

Subtheme 4.3: Cultural–systemic constructions of resilience

Participants also described how broader cultural norms, historical legacies and systemic arrangements in Latvia and Azerbaijan shape what resilience looks like and what is expected from social workers.

In Latvia, one manager (P4) underlined how historical scarcity has become part of the professional culture: "*we are customs to live in a scarcity of resources… you understand that you have to deal with what you have,"* suggesting that working with limited means is normalised in social services. He linked this to an ethos of non‑abandonment: *"we don't say: 'this is my responsibility and if one doesn't fit into this framework then no, I cannot do anything'… you are not throwing away your gun,"* describing a systemic pattern where social workers try not to reject clients even when resources are tight. Another Latvian manager (P5) pointed to cultural norms against emotional expression: *"for Latvians, we don't like to talk about our problems and sometimes we are working and burn out because we don't talk… there are norms that you can't, example cry… it's probably something from our culture that that is big problem for this resilience."* These accounts show how cultural expectations of endurance, silence and "making do" shape both the strengths and risks of resilience in the Latvian context.

Latvian social workers also highlighted how public and professional images of social work influence systemic expectations. One respondent (P8) noted that *"a lot of other professions still don't know what is the role, what is social workers main tasks… they think that there's only social care,"* which narrows recognition of social work's broader social justice and crisis roles. To address this, he described involvement "together with the Ministry of Welfare" in campaigns "just to tell society what we do or why you need to come to us," framing advocacy and public education as necessary elements for reshaping the cultural script of resilience and making

systemic space for social workers in crisis governance. Another Latvian social worker (P6) argued that "social workers from micro level raise their voice… lobbying and maybe advocating activities is still in a rather early stage," suggesting that resilience is not only about coping with present conditions but also about gradually building a culture of micro-to-macro advocacy.

In Azerbaijan, cultural–systemic elements of resilience were articulated very explicitly by an experienced critical social work academic. She (P2) argued that resilience is often "*expected from the people that 'they will live their lives. I mean, even if they will have just the bread and salt, they will still live',"* and described this as a "colonized concept" that expects those "on the ground doing things in repetitive mood and in autopilot mood" to "continue even in the conditions of complete catastrophe." In her view, *"resilience neither should be expected nor should be experienced… I don't think it's something that needs to be there,"* insisting instead that "you want to survive and you find ways to survive," and questioning narratives that present survival as a virtue rather than a necessity. She linked this to wider political conditions in which social workers are "very feminized, very low paid," and "very precarious," while operating in "a very strict environment where the power is centralized," where ordinary social workers "doesn't question all this structure." Here, resilience is framed as a culturally and politically loaded expectation placed on a feminised workforce.

Azerbaijani researcher (P2) also pointed to community and state arrangements that distribute care and shape resilience expectations. One described how "a lot of social services or social care work… is being provided by the community, by the people themselves, by the families," so that "there is a lot of fixation that people already do without the state and their intervention." When war and pandemic hit at the same time, she observed that civil society organisations, including queer-focused centres, "were doing all this social work and services to basically respond to the urgent needs," while the state responded selectively and later "started securitizing everyone… seeing every actor as a potential danger to the regime." Another Azerbaijani social worker (P14) reflected on social perceptions of conflict-affected groups, noting that media "presents the displaced as a bit of a victim," imposing "so much victim psychology" that people "don't think

that he should do it himself," and linking this to a saying that "we should teach how to fish, not giving the fish." These cultural–systemic accounts show how resilience is constructed within broader narratives about who should cope, who should provide care (families, communities, NGOs, or state), and how much emotional and political expression is permitted. Taken together, this highlights that resilience among social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan is not only an individual or organisational issue but is deeply embedded in cultural norms (for example, not talking about problems, expectations of endurance), historical experiences of scarcity and conflict, and systemic relations between state, civil society and communities. These cultural–systemic elements shape both the possibilities and the limits of resilience: they can foster commitment, non-abandonment and creativity, but also normalise overwork, silence and precariousness, and influence how resilience is named, valued and contested in each context.

Hence, Theme 4 shows that resilience among social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan is shaped by a constellation of elements across policy, practice and lived experience. Policy frameworks define roles and boundaries; practice conditions and organisational cultures either support or erode sustainable work; and lived narratives reveal both pride and critique. Resilience appears as contingent and political, dependent on how social work is governed, resourced and valued, and on how practitioners themselves interpret and reshape the expectations placed upon them.

5.6 Theme 5: Negotiating professional identity, anti-war stances and advocacy in conflict contexts

This theme contributes primarily to research question 1, on how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive and practice resilience in their professional roles during and after military conflicts, and to research question 4, on how policy frameworks, practice conditions and lived experiences of resilience compare between the two contexts. It focuses on how social workers and allied professionals negotiate their identities as helpers, critical social workers and, in some cases, anti-war supporters, and how these identities translate into advocacy from the micro level of direct practice to macro-level reflections on social policy and governance.

Subtheme 5.1: Being a social worker and an anti-war supporter

Several Azerbaijani participants described identity dilemmas arising from combining a social work or social justice–oriented identity with an explicit anti-war stance. One key informant, a PhD researcher in social work and social policy with a background in conflict and peace work (P2), explained how some community-based initiatives working with queer communities and other marginalised groups in conflict-affected regions positioned themselves clearly as anti-war actors, while still engaging directly with war-affected populations. As one community worker in Azerbaijan reflected, *"While all this, we are also anti-war supporters. That is, we are all (community workers) anti-war supporters, and we go, monitor and provide assistance. That is, these contradict each other. But the point is that we have become enemies, the government has begun to perceive us as enemies, that these are traitors."* This vividly illustrates how anti-war identities can be recast as disloyalty when social workers engage in critical or independent action in conflict zones.

These identity tensions are rooted in personal histories of war exposure. The same participant recalled that *"we were all children who grew up with war thoughts… they put those Khojaly videos on TV, we were afraid… now it was the first time that we saw war itself."* This background shapes both their rejection of war and their sensitivity to clients' experiences. From a critical social work perspective, these accounts show how practitioners' efforts to align their identities with values of peace, human rights and non-violence can be problematised within securitised governance regimes that equate criticism of war with disloyalty.

Other Azerbaijani participants described similar tensions in less explicitly political language. Social workers who saw themselves primarily as advocates for vulnerable children and youth reported feeling caught between expectations to support national narratives of victory and sacrifice, and their own experiences of clients' losses, trauma and ongoing hardship. In these accounts, resilience involved not only coping with workload and emotional exposure, but also sustaining an ethical identity that remains committed to protecting clients' rights and dignity, even when public discourse emphasises heroism and obedience rather than critical reflection. These identity dilemmas resonate with critical social work literature that highlights the contested

nature of professional roles in contexts where social work is entangled with national security and state-building projects.

Subtheme 5.2: Micro-level advocacy and everyday resistance

At the micro level, participants' identity work often took the form of everyday advocacy and resistance in direct practice with children, youth and families. Azerbaijani social workers and community workers described accompanying clients who faced heightened marginalisation during and after the 2020 war, including queer youth and other minoritised groups, and trying to create safer spaces within schools, community centres and families. In some cases this meant literally passing through restricted areas in order to maintain contact with communities. One practitioner recounted that "at the same time we violate the rules because of the bans, you need to pass through posts, where do I need to pass to get to Barda (in order to work with the community there)." Here, everyday practice becomes an act of quiet rule-bending driven by professional and ethical commitments.

Micro-level advocacy also required strategic self-censorship to preserve access. As the same participant explained, *"we had to be strategic without expressing our sincere values and political opinions so that they wouldn't throw us out of there."* In other words, social workers and community workers navigated a fine line between openly expressing anti-war or critical views and maintaining a presence in communities that needed support. While these actions were rarely framed as political in formal terms, they can be understood as micro-level resistance that aligns with critical social work's emphasis on confronting oppression in everyday practice.

Latvian practitioners, particularly those working in municipal social services, reported similar forms of micro-level advocacy in relation to Ukrainian children and young people. They described efforts to ensure that refugee children were not treated solely as temporary guests, but were integrated into schools, extracurricular activities and local youth services on as equal a footing as possible, even when policy frameworks and funding arrangements emphasised short-term crisis management. These accounts show how social workers mobilise their professional identities to push for more inclusive, child-centred interpretations of resilience, in

which maintaining ordinary childhood experiences and relationships is seen as a core part of responding to conflict and displacement. In both contexts, such everyday advocacy can be read as a way of reconciling anti-war or rights-based identities with the practical constraints of working within state institutions and formal welfare systems.

Subtheme 5.3: Meso-level identity work in organisations and communities

At the organisational and community levels, social workers' identities were closely connected to how they participated in, and sometimes reshaped, organisational cultures and civil society initiatives. P2 described how new community-based projects in Azerbaijan emerged after the Second Karabakh War, focusing on queer-inclusive social work and broader social justice agendas. These projects saw themselves as "doing social work differently", combining practical support (for example, access to counselling, material aid and legal advice) with critical reflection on militarisation, patriarchy and heteronormativity. Practitioners involved in these initiatives framed their resilience not only in terms of personal coping, but as collective, value-driven persistence in building and maintaining alternative spaces of care and solidarity under conditions of surveillance and limited funding.

Within more formal organisational settings, both Azerbaijani and Latvian participants highlighted how team cultures, leadership and peer relationships shaped their ability to hold on to critical or rights-based identities. An experienced clinical psychologist working closely with social workers in conflict contexts (P1) described how, in one major programme for repatriated children, *"because we were the MHPSS team, we were the psychologists, and there were specific social workers who were tending to their legal needs, to their day-to-day additional needs, to educational, vocational, et cetera, et cetera needs."* This collaborative arrangement, supported initially by UNICEF and later by the Social Services Agency, helped to create a shared professional identity across disciplines, grounded in holistic support for children affected by conflict.

P1 also emphasised the importance of organisational restructuring for social workers' sense of identity and support. When the caseload moved from a state committee to the Social Services

Agency, *"the number of social workers also increased. It went from 3 to 30… the same way that the first three social workers were trained by us, the 30 social workers were also trained by the Red Cross psychologist team to explain what this means, what is trauma, how it impacts people, what are the behaviors, what are the needs and how to approach in the least damaging and most supportive way."* In her view, such structures, supervision and joint training were crucial: "when you feel like you're not alone, when you feel that you have a team that shares your goals and approaches professionally, and when you have a supervisor who really cares about the work that you do and about your own well-being, then even if the workload is heavy, you can remain resilient." These meso-level processes show how organisational cultures can either silence or support social workers' critical identities and advocacy efforts, with direct implications for their resilience.

In Latvia, social workers and managers described how internal discussions, supervision and informal peer spaces allowed them to raise questions about crisis roles, critical personnel status and the fairness of expectations placed on social workers during states of exception. For some, these spaces made it possible to articulate concerns about being simultaneously labelled "critical personnel" and subject to legal restrictions on leaving their posts, while still seeing themselves as advocates for children, youth and families rather than simply as arms of the state. This kind of organisational reflexivity links directly to critical social work's focus on how meso-level structures mediate between individual practice and macro-level governance.

Subtheme 5.4: Macro-level positioning of social work and advocacy limits

At the macro level, participants reflected on how legal frameworks, professional regulations and public discourses shape the boundaries of social workers' identities and advocacy. Azerbaijani key informants pointed out that, while legislation on social services and displaced persons formally recognises social work as a rights-based profession, it also restricts practice to roles within state agencies and prohibits independent social work. P1 described an ethical dilemma when trying to coordinate support around a client's safety: "there's no legislation in Azerbaijan allowing to have independent social workers. This is something for which they could be later

fined… I think this is a… huge gap in the system because when I (clinical psychologist) shared with the client that I want to discuss this with a social worker, the client's response was… 'any government worker is not my friend because the power of my family will overpower their work ethic.'" For her, this highlighted both clients' mistrust of state structures and the need for independent social work roles that could act as trusted advocates.

Participants also discussed how public perceptions of social workers affect their identities and advocacy space. P1 observed that *"when it comes to the public perception of social workers… they kind of expect the social workers to be able to solve any issues they're facing, kind of like almighty government people who can fix anything if they want to. And if they can't fix something, it's because they don't want to."* These expectations place significant pressure on practitioners, especially when structural constraints make many problems unsolvable within existing mandates.

In Latvia, the designation of social workers as critical personnel during states of exception simultaneously elevated their status and narrowed their room to refuse assignments or leave posts, reinforcing a vision of social workers as loyal, indispensable arms of the state in crisis situations. From a critical social work perspective, these macro-level dynamics demonstrate how professional identities are co-constructed by law, policy and public discourse, and how advocacy is shaped by what forms of critique or anti-war stance are considered legitimate within each context.

Taken together, this theme shows that resilience for many participants is intimately tied to ongoing identity work and advocacy across micro, meso and macro levels. Social workers and allied professionals in Latvia and Azerbaijan strive to sustain identities grounded in peace, rights and social justice, even when operating within securitised, hierarchical systems that may penalise anti-war or critical positions. Their efforts to support children, youth and other vulnerable groups, to build supportive organisational cultures and to argue for more independent and ethical forms of practice can be understood as multilevel resilience processes in van Breda's sense, but also as expressions of critical social work's concern with power, governance and resistance. In this way, the theme bridges individual experiences of resilience with broader questions about

how social work is positioned within national resilience agendas, and what it means for social workers to “remain resilient” while also contesting the conditions under which they and their clients live and act.

V. Discussion

This thesis set out to explore how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive, practice and are supported in developing resilience during and after conflict-related crises, within a focus on social work with children and youth. Guided by van Breda’s multilevel resilience model, critical social work perspectives inspired by Webb and a person-in-environment (PIE) lens, the study examined social workers’ lived experiences, coping strategies and positioning within crisis preparedness systems in two post-Soviet, conflict-affected contexts. Overall, the findings largely align with van Breda’s conceptualisation of resilience as a multilevel, process-oriented phenomenon but also show that this model needs to be complemented by critical social work in order to make visible the power relations and systematic barriers that shape social workers’ wellbeing and possibilities for action at every level.

6.1 Multilevel resilience and lived experience

At the individual level, participants in both countries described resilience as a dynamic process involving inner strength, acceptance, emotional regulation and meaning-making, echoing van Breda's (2018) and Ungar et al.'s (2013) emphasis on resilience as process rather than trait. The cognitive strategies that emerged — acceptance of what cannot be changed, temporal reframing ("this day will also end"), and the capacity to move forward despite loss — resonate with Antonovsky's (1987) concept of sense of coherence, particularly its *meaningfulness* and *comprehensibility* components, which describe how individuals orient themselves towards challenges as worthy of engagement rather than as overwhelming burdens. Crucially, however, a sense of coherence in this study appeared not as a stable individual resource but as a *negotiated and socially sustained* orientation: practitioners' ability to maintain comprehensibility and meaning depended heavily on organisational cultures, peer relationships and the availability of

supervision. This relational quality of individual-level resilience is consistent with van Breda's processual model, which frames resilience not as residing within persons but as emerging from interactions across ecological levels.

Meaning-making emerged as a central, yet contested, individual-level process. For some practitioners, meaning-making operated through what can be described as a "noble mission" narrative — seeing concrete changes in the lives of children, youth and families reinforced a sense of purpose that, in Frankl's (2006) terms, constituted a pathway to meaning through *accomplishment and relational witnessing*. Such narratives align with the logotherapy tradition insofar as they involve the transformation of adversity into purpose; in van Breda's model, this corresponds to the individual resilience process of reframing adversity as meaningful engagement rather than as mere suffering. Yet meaning-making was simultaneously a site of critical contestation. Participants who framed resilience as a "colonised concept" — expecting a feminised, low-paid workforce to continue "in autopilot mode" under conditions of structural catastrophe — articulate a critique that is not peripheral but theoretically anticipated. Ungar et al. (2013) warn that Western resilience models frequently individualise adaptive responsibility while obscuring the structural conditions that generate harm, and Webb (2019, 2023) specifically identifies resilience discourse as a potential mechanism for normalising precarity under neoliberal governance. The presence of this critical voice in both national contexts studied here — not as an isolated outlier but as a coherent, theorised position — strengthens the argument that van Breda's multilevel model, while analytically powerful, requires a critical social work supplement to address questions of whose resilience is being produced, under which power conditions, and at what cost to practitioners. These divergent meaning-making orientations demonstrate that, even at the individual level, resilience is a contested, power-saturated concept rather than a neutral adaptive capacity.

At the relational and organisational levels, the findings confirm that social workers' resilience depends heavily on workplace cultures, supervision, leadership and peer support, consistent with van Breda's multilevel model and Itzhaky and Dekel's (2017) research on resilient organisations.

What the findings add theoretically, however, is a specification of *why* these structures matter: supervisory spaces, regular debriefs and accessible management functioned as what Winnicott-influenced organisational theory Hawkins, P., & Shohet, R. (2012) terms a *holding environment* — a relational container that metabolises collective anxiety, normalises difficult emotional responses and reduces practitioner self-blame. This concept, drawn from relational organisational theory and evident in the functioning of teams in both Latvia and Azerbaijan, moves the analysis beyond simply noting that "support helps" towards identifying the *mechanism* through which organisational culture sustains resilience. Hierarchical clarity, co-located teams and clear crisis roles mattered not merely as managerial efficiencies but because they reduced practitioners' sense of isolation and improvisation — conditions that, as Itzhaky and Dekel (2017) demonstrate, are among the primary drivers of professional breakdown in conflict-affected agencies. The repeated emphasis that "if you don't have a system behind you, you become a more vulnerable person" thus captures an empirically grounded version of a broader theoretical claim: individual resilience cannot be sustained in the absence of organisationally provided holding conditions, and organisational design is therefore a first-order resilience intervention, not a secondary concern.

6.2 Societal frameworks, power and identity dilemmas

At the societal and policy level, the study supports multilevel and social-ecological approaches that emphasise the role of legal frameworks, civil protection systems and welfare regimes in shaping practitioners' resilience. In Latvia, civil protection and emergency laws formalise municipalities' responsibilities for evacuation, temporary accommodation and social care, positioning social services and social workers at the core of disaster management. Recent regulations that classify social workers as critical personnel further integrate them into national resilience agendas, aligning with NATO-influenced discourses on societal resilience and EU humanitarian civil-military coordination frameworks. Yet this formal recognition carries a structural ambivalence that warrants precise theoretical framing. The provisions that restrict critical personnel from terminating employment during states of exception are not merely a

bureaucratic tension: they instantiate what Dominelli (2012) identifies as the social worker's contradictory position as simultaneously a *welfare subject* and a *state instrument*. Dominelli's analysis of social work in disaster and crisis contexts argues that the state's incorporation of social workers into emergency governance tends to prioritise systemic continuity and social order over practitioners' own rights and wellbeing — a dynamic this study confirms empirically. Latvian social workers are at once recognised as indispensable and denied the exit options that other employed citizens retain, rendering their resilience not simply a professional capacity but a legally mandated obligation. This coercive dimension of resilience, embedded in the critical personnel framework, is a theoretical contribution of the study: it shows that at the macrosystem level, resilience discourse can function as a mechanism of state-organised endurance rather than a freely chosen adaptive process.

In Azerbaijan, the rights-based framework established by the Law on Social Protection of Displaced Persons and the Law on Social Services formally positions social workers within a system committed to human dignity, social integration and protection. In practice, however, decision-making power over access, assessment and placement remains concentrated in state bodies, and social workers often operate on the margins of preparedness planning and crisis governance, depending on informal networks, families and community initiatives to fill institutional gaps. This pattern corresponds precisely to what Fook (2016) theorises as *contradictory positioning*: social workers are assigned a professional mandate to support rights and social justice, yet are embedded in institutions that reproduce surveillance, control and the regulation of populations in ways that constrain the exercise of that mandate. The finding that "ordinary social workers don't question all this structure" is not simply a contextual observation — it is an instance of what Fook terms *practice colonisation*, the gradual internalisation of institutional logics and political constraints as professional common sense, occurring under conditions where visible dissent carries personal and professional risk. These patterns reflect Dominelli's and Fook's shared argument that social work in crisis and disaster contexts is embedded in power-laden systems that may prioritise social order, national sovereignty or

economic efficiency over practitioners' and clients' rights, and that the reproduction of these priorities depends partly on social workers' own accommodation to institutional expectations.

A critical social work perspective also brings into focus identity dilemmas and ethical tensions, particularly for social workers positioning themselves as anti‑war or critical of militarisation. In both contexts, participants described the pressure to align with national narratives of security, patriotism and endurance, and Latvian practitioners additionally navigated the tension between EU‑linked human rights discourses and domestic pressures to support securitised approaches to civil protection and refugee governance, particularly when working with children and youth from stigmatised or "enemy"-associated groups. These identity dilemmas extend van Breda's multilevel model in an important direction. Webb (2019) argues that ethical resistance — the deliberate, principled commitment to rights-based and anti-oppressive practice in the face of institutional and political pressure — constitutes a form of professional resilience that is distinct from, but inseparable from, individual coping or organisational support. The "anti‑war supporter" theme identified in this study is precisely this: it represents resilience not as adaptation to existing conditions but as the *sustained capacity to dissent from them*. This is not a departure from van Breda's processual model but its most politically demanding expression — societal-level resilience, in this reading, includes the capacity to maintain ethical positions that challenge securitised and nationalist logics, even when such positions carry professional consequences. Framing anti-war advocacy as a resilience process rather than as a marginal individual stance is, this thesis argues, both empirically warranted and theoretically necessary.

Van Breda's multilevel model remains valuable for locating these dilemmas at the intersection of individual, organisational and societal levels, but it requires Webb's critical social work lens to interpret them as manifestations of broader power relations and governance regimes rather than as individual coping challenges. PIE, applied reflexively to social workers themselves rather than only to clients, is particularly generative here: it links professional identity (*person*) with organisational cultures, legal structures and socio‑political contexts (*environment*), and directs

analytic attention to how power, governance and the possibilities for resistance together constitute the conditions within which practitioners' resilience either flourishes or is foreclosed.

6.3 Returning to theories and objectives

The findings speak directly to the thesis objectives and theoretical framework, and in doing so both confirm and extend the frameworks employed. Objective 1 was to explore the lived experiences of social workers involved in conflict-related and refugee-related social work in Latvia and Azerbaijan. The thematic analysis shows that these experiences are characterised by a complex interplay of inner strength, collective support, organisational cultures, legal obligations and political pressures, confirming the relevance of a phenomenological, practice-based approach and underlining that lived experience in these contexts cannot be adequately captured by frameworks that treat resilience as a stable trait or a measurable outcome.

Objective 2 aimed to examine how resilience is conceptualised and enacted in practice in the two countries. Van Breda's multilevel resilience model provided a productive structure for distinguishing individual, organisational and societal processes, while critical social work theory highlighted how these processes are saturated with power relations, gendered expectations and contested discourses of resilience. The study also identifies a dimension that van Breda's model, in its current formulation, leaves under-specified: *temporality*. Participants' cognitive strategies — holding onto the thought that "this day will also end", sustaining commitment through witnessing long-term change in clients' lives, reframing the present in relation to an imagined future — suggest that resilience as process is not only multilevel but also deeply temporal. Practitioners drew on past experiences of having survived previous crises, present relational anchors, and future-oriented meaning to navigate adversity. While van Breda's (2018) model maps the *ecological levels* at which resilience occurs, it does not systematically account for the *temporal dimension* of resilience processes. This is a modest but defensible contribution: incorporating temporal orientation as a cross-cutting dimension would strengthen the model's explanatory reach, particularly in contexts of protracted conflict where "better-than-expected outcomes" are measured over years rather than in acute crisis moments.

Objective 3 sought to identify strengths, gaps and tensions in national and local preparedness and recovery systems as they relate to social work. The analysis shows strengths such as formal recognition of social workers in Latvian civil protection law, long-term entitlements for displaced persons in Azerbaijan, and strong informal networks and community care in both contexts. At the same time, it reveals persistent gaps in training, consultation and organisational support, and tensions between the imperative to support societal resilience and the obligation to protect social workers' own wellbeing — tensions that become most acute precisely where practitioners are simultaneously most needed, as critical personnel or as informal crisis responders in politicised environments.

Objective 4 was to contribute to theory-building by integrating critical social work and multilevel resilience models with phenomenological insights. The study demonstrates that van Breda's approach, while powerful for mapping resilience processes across levels, risks becoming descriptive if it is not combined with critical social work's focus on power, governance and resistance. The integration of Webb's perspective with van Breda and PIE enables the framework to address not only *where* resilience occurs but also *under which conditions it is produced, constrained or instrumentalised*, and whose interests it serves. The application of PIE in this study departs slightly from its conventional use in that it is applied reflexively to social workers themselves rather than only to the people they serve. This move is supported by Gitterman and Germain's (2008) life model, which explicitly theorises practitioners as persons-in-environment — shaped by the same ecological, institutional and temporal forces that shape their clients. Applying PIE in this reflexive direction reveals that the professional identity, ethical commitments and resilience processes of social workers are not separable from the organisational cultures, legal structures and socio-political contexts in which they practise. This is not a departure from PIE's foundational logic but a recovery of its full relational potential.

In sum, the discussion suggests that resilience among social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan is best understood as a multilevel, relational, temporally situated and politically contested process. Van Breda's model offers a valuable map of *where* resilience processes occur; Webb's critical

social work lens is needed to interpret *how* organisational regimes, legal frameworks and security discourses distribute risks and responsibilities, and how social workers navigate identity dilemmas — including anti-war and rights-based positions — within these constraints; and PIE, read through Gitterman and Germain's life model, ensures that the analysis remains grounded in social work's professional language and values, linking the resilience of practitioners directly to the environments in which they and the people they serve live, act and resist.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

This thesis aimed to explore how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan perceive, practice and are supported in developing resilience during and after military conflicts, with a particular focus on social work with people who were affected by the war in Ukraine and Karabakh. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design and guided by van Breda's multilevel resilience model, Webb-informed critical social work and a person-in-environment perspective, the study investigated how social workers define resilience in their professional roles, which strategies and competencies they mobilise, how they experience inclusion in or exclusion from preparedness and civil-defence structures, and what similarities and differences exist between the two national contexts.

In relation to the research questions, the findings show that social workers in both countries understand resilience as a dynamic, multilevel process rather than a fixed trait. They describe resilience in terms of inner strength, meaning-making and ethical perseverance, but also recognise the limits and costs of individualised resilience in the absence of structural support. The study identified a wide repertoire of strategies and competencies, ranging from self-care routines, boundary-setting and reflective practice to supervision, peer support, advocacy and improvisation under resource constraints, corresponding to individual, organisational and societal resilience processes in van Breda's model. The analysis of preparedness and civil-defence inclusion revealed that Latvian social workers are formally integrated into civil protection frameworks and designated as critical personnel, whereas Azerbaijani social workers often remain at the margins of formal crisis structures, relying heavily on informal networks and

community-based care. Across both contexts, the thesis identified shared challenges—high caseloads, vicarious trauma, under-resourcing—and distinct configurations of welfare regimes, security discourses and professional status that shape social workers' possibilities for resilient practice.

Overall, the findings both confirm and extend van Breda's multilevel approach to resilience by demonstrating that without a critical social work lens, the model risks becoming an analytic map that describes resilience processes without interrogating the power conditions that produce them. At the same time, the study shows that multilevel frameworks must be complemented by critical social work to fully account for power relations, institutional practices and political discourses that structure resilience processes and sometimes instrumentalise social workers' endurance. In both Latvia and Azerbaijan, social workers' wellbeing and capacity to uphold children's rights and youth participation are profoundly shaped by austerity measures, securitised governance, post-Soviet legacies and contested civil-military relations. By integrating van Breda's model with Webb's critical social work and PIE, the thesis contributes to theory-building in social work by offering a power-sensitive, multilevel framework for analysing resilience in conflict-affected practice.

Beyond the study itself, several consequences and questions emerge. For practice, the results suggest that strengthening social workers' resilience requires moving beyond individualised interventions towards organisational and systemic changes: sustainable supervision, realistic caseloads, participatory decision-making and explicit attention to ethical and political identity dilemmas, including anti-war stances. For policy, civil protection, social protection and child welfare frameworks should recognise social workers as both key actors in societal resilience and rights-bearing professionals who need safe working conditions, room for critical reflection and safeguards against coercive employment arrangements during crises. For further research, the thesis raises several new questions. Longitudinal studies could examine how social workers' resilience processes evolve over time, especially in contexts of protracted conflict and recurring crises. Comparative research across additional countries could explore how different

combinations of welfare regimes, professionalisation levels and political systems shape social workers' resilience and identity dilemmas, including their ability to adopt critical or anti-war positions while maintaining employment and safety. Future work could also centre clients' perspectives, investigating how they experience and interpret social workers' resilience or burnout, and how this affects their trust in services and their own coping strategies and would deepen understanding of how to build multi-level, power-aware systems that support both people who are affected by military conflicts and the practitioners who work with them.

The findings point to several concrete directions for institutional actors whose decisions directly shape social workers' capacity for resilient practice.

For national legislators and civil protection bodies (Latvia): Latvia's Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law already integrates social workers into emergency roles, but the critical personnel designation introduces coercive elements that have no accompanying safeguards. Legislators should amend relevant provisions — especially Section 17 of the Law On Emergency Situation and State of Exception — to include explicit psychological support obligations, rotation mechanisms and review rights for social workers designated as critical personnel. The current framework recognises social workers as essential but does not protect their own wellbeing during crises, a gap that contradicts Latvia's EU commitments on decent work and worker rights.

For social service departments and municipal agencies (both countries): Organisational culture and internal structures emerged as decisive for practitioners' resilience. Social service departments and municipal agencies should institutionalise regular, mandatory supervision — not only peer support or informal debriefs — co-design crisis response protocols with frontline staff rather than imposing them top-down, and establish explicit caseload ceilings for practitioners working with conflict-affected populations. The European Social Network (2023) has called for precisely this kind of organisational investment across European contexts.

For the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population (Azerbaijan): Social work should be formally included in emergency preparedness frameworks across all crisis management phases, not only for disability-inclusive responses. This requires dedicated budget lines for social work in emergency planning, mandatory consultation of social workers and professional associations in drafting preparedness protocols, and recognition of social work as a distinct profession within crisis governance structures rather than subsuming it under general civil servant categories.

For social work associations and professional bodies (both countries): In contexts where individual social workers cannot safely voice critical or anti-war positions without professional risk, professional associations bear a collective responsibility to create protective structures — position statements, solidarity mechanisms and collective advocacy channels that give individual practitioners cover. The IFSW (2022) framework on the war in Ukraine provides international backing for rights-based and anti-war stances; national associations should actively translate this into domestic professional standards and ethical guidelines.

For training institutions and universities (both countries): Social work education programmes should integrate disaster preparedness, conflict-sensitive practice and ethical decision-making under political pressure as core curriculum components, not elective add-ons. In Azerbaijan, where formal social work education is less established, international partnerships — including Erasmus+ frameworks — could support curriculum development in this area.

VII. Limitations

The study had several limitations. Access to participants, particularly in Azerbaijan, was constrained by political sensitivities around conflict, displacement, and criticism of institutions; this limited the sample size and may have restricted the openness of some responses. In addition, with some potential participants the interview could not be conducted for various reasons, so the final number of respondents was slightly lower than originally planned. Language barriers and the use of interpreters sometimes resulted in the loss of nuance, despite efforts to ensure accurate

translation. Working across two distinct country contexts also introduced challenges related to differences in political systems, funding structures, and civil society freedoms, which shaped how resilience was experienced and articulated; therefore, the findings were interpreted in a context-sensitive manner rather than assuming uniformity across settings. Finally, as the researcher was embedded in the field, personal experiences and perspectives may have influenced data interpretation; this was addressed through ongoing reflexive journaling and regular discussions with the supervisor.

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Appendix

Annex 1.Interview Guide

Interview guide – social workers				
Thesis objective and Main research question	**Dimension**	**Sub-dimension**	**Interview question (social workers)**	**Main theoretical / literature source**
OBJ 1. To explore the lived experiences of social workers involved in conflict-related and refugee-related social work in Latvia and Azerbaijan. **RQ1** (situates professional role where resilience is enacted).	Background & context	Role, setting (microsystem, PIE)	1. Can you briefly describe your current role as a social worker – where you work, your main tasks, and your typical clients? Probes: What does a usual day look like? How long have you been in this position?	(microsystem, PIE), Critical Social Work. Webb (2022)
OBJ 1 - RQ 1	Background & context	Career path, personal history (chronosystem, PIE)	2. How long have you been working in social work, and how did you come into this field? Probes: Were there particular experiences or motivations that drew you to this work?	(chronosystem, PIE)
OBJ 1 - RQ 1 and 4 (country impacts)	Adversity & context	Impact of conflict on daily work (multi-level adversity)	3. In your professional experience, how has military conflict or its consequences (for example, refugees, internal displacement, security crises) affected your everyday work? Probes: Can you think of concrete changes in tasks, caseloads, or client needs?	Southwick, S. et al. (2014) – resilience in war/trauma and multilevel adversity. Ungar, M. et al. (2013) – social-ecological resilience in conflict and displacement.
OBJ 1 - RQ 1 and 2 (how resilience is challenged and practised in specific events).	Adversity & context	Concrete critical incidents (microsystem)	4. Can you tell me about a situation where conflict-related events significantly changed your workload, responsibilities, or emotional experience at work? Probes: What happened? How did you feel at the time? What stayed with you afterwards?	Michalopoulos, L. & Aparicio, E. (2012) – vicarious trauma in social work. López-Martínez, E. J. et al. (2022) – vicarious resilience and recovery strategies.
OBJ 1 - RQ 1 and 4	Adversity & context	Wider environment (macrosystem, PIE)	5. How would you describe the broader environment in which you work – for example, public attitudes, media coverage or political discussions about refugees or conflict? Probes: How do these broader discussions show up in your daily work, if at all?	Teperik, A. et al. (2024) – societal resilience and public attitudes in the Baltics. Rustamov, R. et al. (2023) – cultural narratives and social connectedness in Azerbaijan.
OBJ 2. To indentify how resilience is conceptualised and enacted in social work practice in the two countries. **RQ 1**	Understanding resilience	Personal definition (individual-level process)	6. When you hear the word “resilience” in relation to your work, what does it mean to you? Probes: Do any images, examples or phrases come to mind? Has this meaning changed over time?	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – resilience as multilevel process, definition used in thesis.
OBJ 2 - RQ 2	Practising resilience	Coping and recovery (individual-level)	7. Thinking about your own practice, what helps you to “keep going” or to recover after difficult days or periods? Probes: Are there particular routines, people or places that support you?	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – individual-level resilience processes in social work. Strengths perspective (Weick et al., 1989) – focus on capacities and coping.
OBJ 2 - RQ2, RQ1	Practising resilience	Strategies for stress, moral dilemmas (PIE, individual–environment)	8. Can you describe specific strategies – personal or professional – that you use to handle stress, emotional burden or moral dilemmas in your work with refugees or conflict-affected clients? Probes: What do you do during the workday? And outside of work?	Michalopoulos, L. & Aparicio, E. (2012) – vicarious trauma and coping in practitioners. López-Martínez, E. J. et al. (2022) – links between recovery strategies and vicarious resilience.
OBJ 2 - RQ2	Vicarious resilience	Learning from clients/communities (microsystem)	9. Have there been moments when clients’ or communities’ ways of coping have strengthened your own sense of resilience or hope? Probes: Can you tell me about one or two examples? What did you take from them?	Botta, O. & Fronek, P. (2015) – vicarious resilience with refugees/asylum seekers. López-Martínez, E. J. et al. (2022) – vicarious resilience concept and measurement.
OBJ 1 & 3. To identify strengths, gaps and tensions in preparedness and recovery systems. **RQ1, RQ3** (how organisational structures support resilience – also ties into inclusion in wider systems)	Organisational & relational	Peer and supervisory support (mesosystem, organisational-level)	10. How would you describe the support you receive from your colleagues and supervisors when work becomes particularly demanding or stressful? Probes: What kind of support do you find most meaningful? Is there anything you wish was different?	Itzhaky, H. & Dekel, R. (2017) – organisational resilience in conflict settings.
OBJ 1 & 3 - RQ2, RQ3	Organisational & relational	Formal support structures (organisational-level processes)	11. What kinds of formal support structures exist in your workplace (for example, supervision, debriefing, training, flexible policies)? How useful are they in supporting your resilience? Probes: Can you give examples of when these structures have helped – or not helped?	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – organisational and societal resilience processes. Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – disaster preparedness, protocols, and training in social work.
			12. Are there any informal practices or rituals	

OBJ 1 & 2 - RQ1, R2	Organisational & relational	Informal team practices (microsystem/mesosystem)	12. Are there any informal practices or rituals in your team that help you and your colleagues to cope and adapt (for example, peer talks, humour, shared routines)? Probes: How do these informal practices make a difference in your day-to-day work?	Campbell, J. (2021) – informal coping and peer support in politically conflicted societies.
OBJ 3 - RQ3	Preparedness & systems	Inclusion in crisis planning (societal-level resilience)	13. To what extent do you feel that social workers are included in local or national crisis preparedness and civil-defence planning in your country? Probes: Can you think of any examples where social workers were (or were not) consulted?	Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – social workers and disaster/civil protection planning. Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law (Latvia, 2016); IDP law (Azerbaijan, 1999) – formal roles of social services.
OBJ 3 - RQ2, RQ3	Preparedness & systems	Training and readiness (exosystem)	14. Have you received any specific training or guidance on working in situations related to war, displacement or large-scale emergencies? How adequate has this been for your needs? Probes: What has been most useful? What is missing?	European Social Network (2023) – “Europe in crisis” and training gaps. Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – uneven disaster-preparedness training for social workers.
OBJ 3 - RQ3, RQ4	Policy & structures	Policies and decisions shaping resilience (macro/exosystem)	15. In your view, what policies or institutional decisions have had the greatest impact on your ability to be resilient in your work? Probes: You can think about national policies, funding rules, organisational regulations, etc.	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – societal-level resilience and policy context. World Bank (2022) – social protection and displacement responses in Latvia/Azerbaijan.
OBJ 1 & 3 - RQ4	Within-country variation	Differences across regions/organisations	16. How do you see differences within your country – for example, between urban and rural areas, or different organisations – in terms of how social workers’ resilience is supported or hindered? Probes: Have you worked in more than one setting? What contrasts have you noticed?	Contextual sections on Latvia and Azerbaijan in your literature review (civil protection vs. securitised governance).
OBJ 2 & 4. To contribute to theory-building by integrating ecological and multilevel resilience models with practice-based insights. **RQ1, RQ2**	Development over time	Change in coping and meanings (chronosystem)	17. Looking back over your career, have your ways of coping and your understanding of resilience changed? What influenced these changes? Probes: Were there turning points, trainings, or personal experiences that shifted your perspective?	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – resilience processes over time.
OBJ 3 & 4 - RQ3, RQ4	Recommendations	Desired organisational/policy change	18. If you could change three things in your organisation or in national policy to better support social workers’ resilience, what would they be? Probes: What would be the most urgent change? What would be the most realistic?	Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – preparedness gaps and recommendations for social work. European Social Network (2023) – system-level reforms for crises.
OBJ 1–4 - RQ1–RQ4	Open space	Unanticipated themes	19. Is there anything else about your experiences of resilience, stress or support in this work that you think is important and that we have not discussed? Probes: Any story or point you would like to add?	Phenomenological orientation of design; openness to emergent meaning.

informants (policy, management, academia)				
Thesis objective	**Dimension**	**Sub-dimension**	**Interview question (key informants)**	**Main theoretical / literature source**
OBJ 1 to explore the lived experiences of social workers involved in conflict-related and refugee-related social work in Latvia and Azerbaijan; **& 3** to identify strengths, gaps, and tensions in national and local preparedness and recovery systems as they relate to social work. **RQ1, RQ3** (Situates key informants in the system so they can speak about how resilience is shaped and how social workers are positioned in preparedness structures.)	Role & perspective	Professional position and system view	1. Can you briefly describe your current position and your involvement with social work, crisis management or social policy? Probes: What are your main responsibilities? How long have you been in this role?	Methodology: key informant sampling and key-informant interviewing in social policy/social work. Person-in-environment perspective (locating key informants within wider systems).
OBJ 1 & 3 - RQ1, RQ3, RQ4 (Shows how conflicts reshape social services and roles of social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan.)	Role & perspective	System-level impact of conflict	2. How has military conflict and displacement (for example, the war in Ukraine) influenced the social service system in your country? Probes: What changes have you seen in services, priorities or funding?	World Bank (2022) – social protection responses to displacement in Europe and Central Asia (Latvia and Azerbaijan).
OBJ 1 & 2 to identify how resilience is conceptualised and enacted in social work practice in the two countries; **RQ1, RQ2, RQ4** (Identifies types/levels of adversity social workers face, and how these appear across countries.)	Adversities faced by social workers	Types of adversities (multi-level)	3. From your perspective, what kinds of adversities do social workers face when working with refugees, internally displaced persons or conflict-affected communities? Probes: Are these mostly emotional, organisational, political, or something else?	Michalopoulos, L. M., & Aparicio, E. (2012) – vicarious trauma in social work practice. López-Martínez, E. J., García-Cabanes, A., & Gómez-Jacinto, L. (2022) – vicarious resilience and stress in social workers. Botta, O., & Fronek, P. (2015) – vicarious trauma/resilience with refugees and asylum seekers.
OBJ 2 - RQ1, RQ4 (Provides conceptualisations of resilience that can be compared across contexts and contrasted with practitioners' own accounts.)	Understanding resilience	Key informants' definition of SW resilience	4. How would you describe "resilience" in relation to social workers' professional roles in these contexts? Probes: Do you see it mainly as individual, organisational, or multi-level?	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – resilience as multilevel process in social work. Ungar, M. et al. (2013) – social-ecological resilience in adversity.
OBJ 3 - RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 (Identifies organisational arrangements that build competencies and preparedness, and enables cross-country comparison.)	Organisational structures	Existing supports (organisational-level)	5. What types of organisational supports (supervision, training, protocols, leadership) are currently in place to help social workers cope with conflict-related pressures? Probes: Which of these are working well? Which are more symbolic than practical?	tzhaky, H., & Dekel, R. (2017) – organisational resilience in politically conflicted contexts. Boetto, H., Yu, N., & Zuchowski, I. (2021) – disaster preparedness and organisational arrangements in social work.
OBJ 3 - RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 (Highlights missing supports for resilience and preparedness, again in a way that can be identified in Latvia and Azerbaijan.)	Organisational structures	Gaps and weaknesses	6. Where do you see significant gaps or weaknesses in how organisations support social workers' resilience? Probes: Are there particular groups or regions that are especially underserved?	Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – gaps in disaster preparedness, protocols and support. European Social Network (2023) – "Europe in crisis" report on system weaknesses and unmet training/support needs.
OBJ 3 - RQ3, RQ4 (Directly addresses inclusion/exclusion in preparedness and allows you to explore formal roles and practices in each country.)	Preparedness & integration	SW in crisis plans and civil-defence	7. How are social workers integrated into local and national crisis preparedness, civil-defence or disaster-management plans, if at all? Probes: Are there formal roles or mainly informal expectations?	Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, Latvia (2016) – formal roles of municipalities and social care in emergencies. Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On social protection of displaced persons and persons equated to them" (1999, with amendments) – responsibilities for displaced populations and social protection.

OBJ 3 - RQ3, RQ4 (Explores macrosystem factors shaping roles and resilience and how these show themselves across the two national contexts.)	Policy, culture & context	Policies, funding, political discourses	8. How do national policies, funding structures and broader political discourses in your country shape social workers' roles and resilience in conflict-related work? Probes: Can you give examples of policies or debates that have helped or hindered?	funding responses to displacement in Latvia/Azerbaijan. IFSW (2022) – statement on Ukraine, social work ethics, human rights and crisis. EU humanitarian and civil-military coordination frameworks (e.g. European Commission, 2018; EU humanitarian aid policy) – macrosystem policy environment.
OBJ 2 & 3 - RQ1, RQ4 (Shows how culture and public opinion affect social workers' resilience and enables identification of cultural contexts.)	Policy, culture & context	Cultural norms and public attitudes	9. Are there cultural norms or public attitudes that particularly support or undermine social workers' resilience (for example, views of the profession, stigma, expectations)? Probes: How do these norms show up in practice?	Rustamov, R. et al. (2023) – psychological resilience and social connectedness in Azerbaijan (role of family, community, cultural narratives). Ungar, M. et al. (2013) – cultural mediation of resilience and local expressions. Teperik, A. et al. (2024) – societal resilience and public attitudes in the Baltic States.
OBJ 3 & 4 to contribute to theory-building in social work by integrating critical social work and multilevel resilience models with phenomenological, practice-based insights. **RQ1, RQ3, RQ4** (Brings together system-level factors that help or hinder resilience)	Policy, culture and context.	System strengths and weaknesses for resilience.	10. Looking at the social service system in your country, what do you see as its main strengths and weaknesses in supporting social workers' resilience in times of crisis or conflict? Probes: Are there examples of good practice you would highlight?	Van Breda, A. D. (2018) – organisational and societal-level resilience processes. Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – system preparedness gaps. European Social Network (2023) – strengths/weaknesses of European social services under multiple crises.
OBJ 3 & 4 - RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 (Generates proposals related to strategies, competencies and system changes, and allows you to explore what key informants prioritise in each country.)	Recommendations	Reforms and initiatives	11. What initiatives or reforms do you think could most effectively strengthen social workers' resilience and preparedness in your country? Probes: What would be feasible in the short term? What should be longer-term goals?	Boetto, H. et al. (2021) – recommendations for strengthening disaster preparedness and support structures. European Social Network (2023) – proposals for training, capacity building and system reform in crisis contexts.
OBJ 1–4 - RQ1–RQ4	Open space	Additional key informants insights	12. Is there anything else you would like to add about social workers' resilience in the context of conflict and displacement? Probes: Any issues you feel are missing from current debates?	Phenomenological and qualitative orientation of the study (allowing emergent themes). Critical and multilevel resilience framework (Webb; van Breda) as an open lens for new insights.

Annex 2. Participant Information Sheet

Study title: *Resilience in Practice: A Qualitative Study of Social Workers' Preparedness and Recovery in Military Conflict Contexts in Latvia and Azerbaijan*
Researcher: Jamil Ahmadzada, ESWOCHY Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Children and Youth
Host university: Mykolas Romeris University

1. Purpose of the study

I am conducting this study as part of my master's thesis. The aim is to explore how social workers in Latvia and Azerbaijan understand and practise resilience when working in situations related to military conflict and displacement, and how organisational and policy environments support or hinder their resilience.

In this study, when I use the word "resilience", I mean the ways in which people and organisations manage to carry on, adapt, and recover when they face difficult situations. For social workers, this includes how they cope with stress and pressure, how they find support from colleagues and organisations, and how the wider system helps or makes it harder for them to continue working in a professional and ethical way during and after crises.

2. Why you are invited

You are being invited because of your professional experience in social work, social services, crisis management, or related social policy in Latvia or Azerbaijan. Your insights will help to understand how the wider system and organisations influence social workers' resilience in these contexts.

3. What participation involves

- The interview will take place **online** (for example via Zoom or another agreed platform).
- It will last approximately **50–60 minutes**.
- I will ask you about:
    - Your role and involvement with social work and/or crisis management.
    - How conflict and displacement have affected the social service system in your country.
    - The kinds of adversities social workers face and how you understand "resilience" in this work.
    - What supports and gaps exist in organisations and at system level.
    - How policies, funding, and public attitudes shape social workers' roles and resilience.
    - Your views on what should change to better support social workers' resilience and preparedness.

- With your permission, the interview will be **audio-recorded** to ensure that your answers are captured accurately. The recording will later be transcribed for analysis.

4. Voluntary participation and right to withdraw

- Your participation is **completely voluntary**.
- You can choose not to answer any question you do not feel comfortable with.
- You can stop the interview at any time without giving a reason.
- You can request withdrawal from the study up until the thesis is submitted for examination; in that case, your data will not be used and, where possible, will be deleted.

5. Confidentiality and anonymity

- Your **name and any direct identifying details** will not appear in the thesis or in any publications based on this study.
- In the thesis, you will be referred to in general terms (for example, "expert in social services in Latvia" or "social work manager in Azerbaijan").
- I will remove or generalise details that could make you or your organisation identifiable.
- Only I (the researcher) will have access to the original audio recordings and full transcripts.

6. Data storage and use

- Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored in an **encrypted cloud storage** controlled by me.
- Data will be kept **until the thesis has been defended and approved**, after which recordings will be deleted and only anonymised excerpts used in the thesis will remain.
- The data will be used for my **master's thesis** and may also inform future academic presentations or publications based on the same project, always in anonymised form.

7. Possible risks and benefits

- Some questions may touch on **stressful or sensitive topics**, such as pressures on social workers during crises. You are free to pause, skip questions, or stop the interview at any time.
- There is no direct material benefit to you. However, your participation may:
    - Provide space to reflect on experiences of supporting social workers in challenging contexts.

- Contribute to knowledge that may be useful for improving policies and organisational practices related to social workers' resilience.

8. Ethical guidelines

This study follows the **ESWOCHY ethical guidelines** for master's theses, including principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy and well-being.

9. Contact details

If you have any questions about the study or your participation, please contact:

Researcher:
Jamil Ahmadzada
Email: jaahmadzada@stud.mruni.eu

If you later have concerns about the ethical conduct of the study, you may contact the relevant programme or ethics contact point at Mykolas Romeris University via the ESWOCHY coordination channels.

Annex 3. Informed Consent Form

Study title: *Resilience in Practice: A Qualitative Study of Social Workers' Preparedness and Recovery in Military Conflict Contexts in Latvia and Azerbaijan*
Researcher: Jamil Ahmadzada, ESWOCHY Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Children and Youth

Please read the statements below and confirm your agreement.

1. I have read and understood the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study.

2. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers.

3. I understand that my participation is **voluntary** and that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time before the thesis is submitted, without giving a reason and without any negative consequences.

4. I understand that the interview will be **audio-recorded** and that the recording will be used only for research purposes in this project.

5. I understand that my **identity will be kept confidential** and that any information that could identify me or my organisation will be removed or anonymised in the thesis and any related publications.

6. I understand that the data will be stored in **encrypted cloud storage**, accessible only to the researcher, and will be kept until the thesis has been defended and approved, after which the

recordings will be deleted.

7. I understand that anonymised quotations from my interview may be used in the thesis and in academic presentations or publications based on this research.

8. I understand that this study follows the **ESWOCHY ethical guidelines** for master's theses.

By ticking/marking "yes" below or signing this form, I indicate that I consent to take part in this study.

- I agree to participate in the interview: ☐ Yes ☐ No
- I agree that the interview may be audio-recorded: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: ___ / ___ / _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: ___ / ___ / _____

Annex 4. *Non-plagiarism declaration*

Submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Child and Youth:

- 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 own prior scholarly work
- Has listed all citations in a 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 (dd/mm/yyyy): 27/05/2026

Signature: 

Name (in block letters): JAMIL AHMADZADA