INTRODUCTION

The appearance of the social work profession and social work studies in Lithuania coincides with the period of political independence of the nation state, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This period was marked by extraordinary and revolutionary changes, after which it was necessary to create a new socio-economic system, state, politics and culture. The social security system, which had been completely centralized and dependent on the Soviet funds, took the path of decentralization, and the ruined economic and social system revealed, developed and created new social problems that had been previously unknown, unseen, often incomprehensible and culturally unacceptable. According to Winkler (2012), “The first three years after the declaration of independence of Lithuania marked the period of indecision... that manifested itself in the form of spiritual uncertainty. Uncertainty about the state’s place in the world ...., as the unifying and reference function of the national myth began to weaken after the restoration of independence...” That period created

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a favourable environment for various innovations. The social work profession has been one of those innovations (Jurkuvienė 2003), which occurred in the environment of very rapid changes: charity and support organizations, as well as social work studies, including social work and social workers association were being founded. The development of the social work profession and studies in those 20 years had been quite difficult, but very rapid; there emerged study programs of different levels and new services with new service users groups.

The beginning of social work studies is closely related not only to the social development of Lithuania, but also with certain individual initiatives of the people, in their choice of identity and civic participation, which can be understood not only within the framework of one state, and the manifestations of religious activity. Social work can be seen as a form of art in which the main working tool is the social worker creating different relationships between people and resources, based on the attitudes and actions other than stereotypical ones. The developers, students and teachers of the first social work studies program at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) were referred to as “individualistic reformists” by Payne (quote from Zavir ek 1999). But is it really the correct description of this group of people who helped to lay the foundations in social work practice and theory in Lithuania? The question arises then: under what grounds and how did these people become the creators, teachers and students of the program? How did their identity as professionals form in that context, and how were the social work services developed? To what extend were the civic, professional and identity aspirations, intertwined in those activities, a part of the process? How do these developers and initiators of the studies, profession and services see the social work profession today?

The aim of this paper. This study was conducted in order to find out how the first social work studies and first social work professional services were developed. The aim of the presentation is to introduce the main findings of the research, which goal is to reveal how the creators of social work profession and the first graduates see the
evolution of their profession and how this reveals they associate with the rebirth of citizenship elevation of a particular time and place of perspective.

**Research methodology:** Constructionism framework grounds the research by linking macro-sociological factors with micro-interactional ones and highlights all those contextual societal factors that play a crucial role in identity formation, like culture, history, ideologies and politics, common beliefs etc. (Berger, Luckmann 1999). This approach suggests that the focus of analysis is maintained on how first graduates of VMU social workers explain their motivations to become a social worker and to develop new social services, how the teachers of the program explain their choices to come and teach, and develop a new study program, how that fits to the new context of organizational and broader social, ideological and political settings.

**Research methods:** a qualitative research was carried out by employing a method of structural and semi-structural interviews of 21 research participants. Thematic analysis was a method for data analysis. This paper represents the preliminary findings of interviews.

**Sampling:** the participants of the research are graduates of social work program at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in 1995 and 1996, professors from the schools of social work in the USA and UK, those who worked at the VMU program from the beginning and the founders of the study program at VMU – members of the board of Master in Social Work study program at VMU.

**KEY FINDINGS**

Since the study involved three separate groups of participants (study program initiators and directors, teachers and the first students and graduates of that program), intertwined with each other in their roles and aspirations, the topics that could be distinguished very often overlap between these groups of survey participants.

The primary theme can be called – the theme of conception and emergence of the idea of social work as a profession – “meeting”.

It is more characteristic of the program initiators, which, on the one hand, came from the knowledge of content of Catholic Church’s social teaching about solving social problems in capitalism, from personal experience in already running newly established or re-established non-governmental social organizations, and which manifested itself as a need for the know-how, for there was an obvious need for ways to solve problems differently than it had been done before. On the other hand, this theme came from the interest of foreign social workers and teachers, who were very active in doing international social work, and some fellow-countrypersons in the recovering independent state and its social issues. Thus, these ideas, according to Winkler (2012), met in the period of “confusion”, which could also be described as a period of active search. This period of search had overwhelmed not only the citizens of Lithuania, but also a large part of the Western world, thinking how to act in a new situation, to what extend it should forge and reveal its identity and how much of a citizen, concerned with common human destiny in nations of the collapsed empire, one should be.

Another theme is revealed in students coming to study social work. Their motives and themes of choice can be divided into several smaller subthemes. “Curiosity”, upon having learned and heard of new things that had been previously unknown, is often associated with job loss and job search, and what to do now. At that time, unemployment was quite a new experience for more than half of Lithuanian residents, and the courses offered was one of the options not only to find a job, but to rediscover oneself in a different field than that one had worked in before. Others (the first Bachelor’s degree graduates) were led by curiosity to find to do something more practical than theoretical studies. Another subtheme of the theme can be called “invitation”, when people who were somehow related to the Caritas gathering activities of women and were invited to take part in social work courses because they had been looking not only for future students, but future teachers of the program, creators of new social services and the entire social support system, even though the majority of the first graduates did not think about it as a future career.
As a special feature of the first cycle of studies the study participants mention teachers’ practically expressed respect for their students, the feeling of which allowed the students to become stronger, develop and grow through both formal and informal interaction. Some study participants point out to the role models of social work teachers and practitioners. All were nourished and nurtured by genuine relationship, openness and freedom of speech and opinion – that what was unusual, inexperienced and new.

A large part of the study participants, both Lithuanians and foreigners, took part not only in the studies but also in creation of new services and social projects, and the development of a new social work professional that has never been seen nor heard of before. Here comes into forefront the theme “That what no one knew what it was”. A new program is being created, the students of which become teachers, guides of educational practice (mentors) and social work practitioners (called everything possible, but social work) after one and a half years of study. This could evoke Winkler’s (2012) insights, when, overviewing the period of public policy formation, he refers to the 1994 – 2004 period as “activity upstaging thinking”. Part of the first social work graduates denies that by providing examples of the dominant requirement of studies to reflect and think through action and creation. This may reveal the onset and increasingly prevailing gap between the activities of political authorities and everyday life, especially of the graduates of this program through experience of reflected action. The social service innovations of that period and their continuity, registration and recognition of the social work profession, the process of which is difficult and ongoing, are referred to as “the greatest achievements in social work”. Tunney and Kulyš (2004) call the appearance and development of the social work profession in Lithuania as a very important part of the country’s social development.

Study participants note that “the social worker’s identity is an ongoing process”, which is constantly evolving, changing, that which is newly discovered, related to the changes of both personal identity and social context. The wishes of all participants reflect the theme of
“self-growth and growing others”, referring to the life-long learning, show of respect for a human being in practice and care for their own solidarity in the implementation of human rights and social justice.

The study allowed the participants to re-examine their practices. In addition, the survey results are valuable for understanding the historicity of their social work profession, for the social workers’ professional development and knowledge of social development in Lithuania, which may be differently understood and documented.

The author would like to thank the Science Council of Lithuania for its support in conducting this study.

REFERENCES