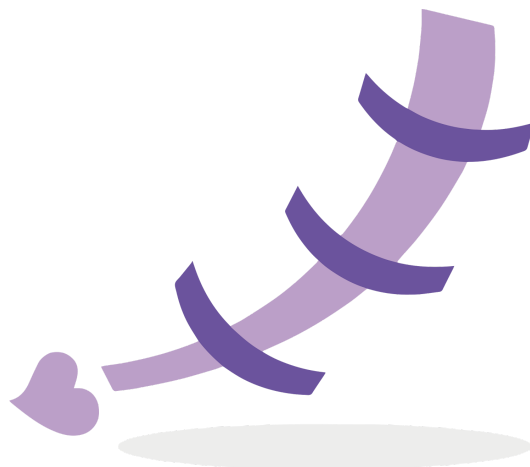




WHEN SCARS BECOME ART

**Joint EU-level Policy Recommendations for
Enhancing Inclusion and Protecting Mental
Health for Vulnerable Youth in Europe**



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Joint EU-level Policy Recommendations for Enhancing Inclusion and Protecting Mental Health for Vulnerable Youth in Europe

When Scars (!) Become Art project

Project: Erasmus+ KA220-YOU (2023-1-DE04-KA220-YOU-000166967)

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Signatory organisations (project partners):

- Amaro Foro e.V. (Germany)
- West University of Timisoara (Romania)
- Asociatia Nevo Parudimos (Romania)
- Kargenc Environment Sport Club (Turkey)
- United Societies of Balkans (Greece)
- Regional Roma Educational Youth Association - RROMA (North Macedonia)
- EDIT Centar (Serbia)

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Executive Summary

Across Europe, young people from Roma communities, migrant and refugee backgrounds, and other vulnerable groups report high levels of discrimination, social exclusion, and barriers in accessing appropriate mental health and psychosocial support. Evidence from the „When Scars (!) Become Art” project (implemented in Germany, Greece, Romania, Turkey, North Macedonia and Serbia) shows that discrimination is experienced not as an isolated event, but as a chronic stressor that shapes daily life, undermines belonging, and contributes to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and trauma-related distress.

The European Union has already established a strong policy basis that links mental health, non-discrimination, inclusion, and youth participation (e.g., the EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020–2030, the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027, the European Child Guarantee, and the European Commission’s Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health). However, implementation remains uneven, and vulnerable youth continue to fall through gaps in access, cultural and linguistic appropriateness, and continuity of care, particularly in segregated communities, remote areas, and reception contexts.

This paper proposes a coherent EU-level package of recommendations that can be implemented through existing competences and instruments, including EU4Health, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The recommendations emphasise:

- (1) stronger anti-discrimination enforcement and inclusive education;
- (2) school- and community-based prevention, safe spaces and arts-based psychosocial approaches;
- (3) rights-based and low-threshold access to mental health support; and
- (4) improved governance, financing, data, and participation mechanisms that ensure accountability and sustainability.

The recommendations are designed to be actionable within current EU frameworks and to support Member States and partner countries in aligning policies with the project’s objectives: turning experiences of discrimination (‘scars’) into empowerment and social connection through inclusive, culturally safe, and youth-led approaches.



1. Theme and purpose

Young Roma, migrants and refugees face intersecting determinants of poor mental health: poverty, housing insecurity, segregation, uncertainty around legal status, and repeated exposure to racism and discrimination. In the project's cross-country research, young people linked mental well-being to everyday experiences of being treated as outsiders, fear of reporting discrimination, and limited trust in institutions. Youth workers highlighted that fragmented services, underfunding, and lack of trauma-informed and culturally competent practice reduce the effectiveness of support systems and contribute to burnout among frontline staff.

The EU-level context is characterised by shared and supporting competences across relevant domains (employment and social affairs, justice and fundamental rights, migration and home affairs, and public health; as well as education, youth and culture). Within this context, EU action is most effective when it (a) sets minimum standards and guidance, (b) incentivises implementation through funding conditionalities, mutual learning and technical support, and (c) strengthens monitoring, rights protection and participation to ensure policies respond to lived experience.

The overall purpose of this joint recommendation is to inform and influence EU-level policy agendas and funding priorities in order to improve social inclusion and mental health outcomes for Roma, migrant and refugee youth. The document synthesises evidence and proposals generated through the project's research, national expert panels, and partner policy papers, and translates them into a focused set of EU-level recommendations that can be endorsed by all project partners.

2. Evidence base: project findings and consultations

The recommendations are grounded in four complementary actions developed within the project:

- Cross-country quantitative research on discrimination and well-being among approximately 700 young people from vulnerable groups across six partner countries (Germany, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey);
- Qualitative interviews with 126 vulnerable youth and youth workers about barriers to support and needed measures to strengthen inclusion and mental health;



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- Six national expert panels (organized in each partner country - Germany, Greece, Romania, Turkey, North Macedonia, and Serbia), which translated findings into actionable national-level recommendations;
- One international expert panel organized in Timișoara, Romania, in which the policy recommendations developed by each partner were discussed and harmonized, in order to result a joint policy recommendation to be addressed to the EU-level institutions and authorities.

Key cross-country findings consistently highlighted:

- Discrimination contributes to anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related distress, social withdrawal, and internalised stigma, which causes an overall decreased wellbeing among youth in vulnerable groups;
- Discrimination is faced by the participants at the study in everyday settings and interactions, and its effects are felt in multiple domains of life: education, employment, integration in the community;
- Barriers to support include language and administrative obstacles, insufficient culturally competent services, mistrust of institutions, and lack of clear information about available services;
- Young people prioritise safe spaces, accessible psychosocial support, mentoring and peer networks, and empowerment programmes that strengthen belonging and coping skills;
- Youth workers emphasise the need for stable funding, inter-institutional cooperation, training in trauma-informed and culturally competent practice, and supervision/self-care mechanisms to prevent burnout.

3. EU-level policy recommendations

The following recommendations are organised into four thematic sections. Each recommendation identifies a realistic action and indicates the main EU instruments or implementation levers that can be mobilised.

3.1 Social inclusion and non-discrimination: make rights enforceable and reduce segregation

1. Strengthen enforcement of EU anti-discrimination law and improve access to justice for young people.

Support stronger equality bodies and local reporting mechanisms, including youth-friendly complaint pathways and legal counselling. Encourage Member States to introduce or scale ‘one-stop’ local reporting units (in cooperation with municipalities and civil society) that combine complaint support with psychological first aid and referral when discrimination involves trauma.



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2. Prevent school segregation and institutional discrimination through conditionalities and minimum standards.

Build anti-segregation benchmarks and annual reporting requirements into ESF+/cohesion programming, aligned with the EU Roma Strategic Framework's education objectives. Require ministries and local authorities to implement anti-bullying and anti-discrimination protocols in schools and youth institutions, including clear procedures for registration, mediation and sanctions, and participation of youth from minority groups in monitoring school climate.

3. Promote community dialogue and mixed participation in safe shared spaces, including arts-based activities.

Use ESF+ and Erasmus+ youth actions to scale intercultural dialogue platforms, inclusion hubs and joint civic initiatives that bring together Roma, migrants, refugee and majority youth. Prioritise projects that combine creative/art-based approaches, mentoring and peer mediation to build empathy, belonging and social cohesion, and that produce inclusive narratives in local and youth media.

3.2 Education, youth and work transitions: link inclusion, participation and mental health

4. Integrate mental health and anti-discrimination measures into Youth Guarantee implementation for ages 16–24.

Require national Youth Guarantee schemes to include routine mental health screening, fast-track referrals, and workplace/school accommodations for vulnerable youth entering traineeships or employment. Finance mentoring networks, resilience coaching, and psychosocial support modules through ESF+ youth employment allocations.

5. Invest in teacher and youth worker capacity: trauma-informed, culturally competent practice and supervision.

Develop an EU-level competency framework and continuing professional development modules on trauma-informed, anti-racist and culturally responsive support for teachers, youth workers, social workers, and clinicians. Fund training and supervision models (including anti-burnout and secondary trauma prevention) via EU4Health and the Technical Support Instrument (TSI); encourage Member States to embed these modules into national accreditation and professional standards.



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6. Scale arts-based psychosocial and therapeutic activities in schools, youth centres and universities.

Support integration of arts-based and creative methods (visual arts, theatre, storytelling, digital media) as evidence-informed approaches for emotional expression, resilience and intercultural understanding. Encourage small-grant schemes for schools and youth centres, recognition of participation as extracurricular achievement, and partnerships with cultural institutions and NGOs. Mobilise Erasmus+ and ESF+ for implementation, and EU4Health for evaluation and standards.

3.3 Mental health and well-being: guarantee low-threshold, culturally safe access

7. Guarantee access to mental health services for all children and minors, regardless of documentation or legal status.

Adopt EU guidance (e.g., Council conclusions and a Commission recommendation) urging Member States to remove administrative barriers (ID/insurance/address) for under-18s seeking mental health care, and to treat mental health care as an essential entitlement for asylum seekers and undocumented minors. Align implementation with the European Child Guarantee; support pathway redesign through EU4Health and ESF+ technical support; and scale peer-navigation models (trained Roma/migrants/refugee youth leaders guiding peers into services).

8. Embed school-based, trauma-informed support and prevention in disadvantaged and segregated settings.

Co-fund school mental health teams (counsellors, psychologists, social workers) through EU4Health/ESF+ to deliver anti-bullying and anti-stigma programmes, crisis protocols, and rapid referral pathways into child and adolescent mental health services. Link cohesion and ESF+ allocations to measurable progress on anti-segregation benchmarks in minority-concentrated localities and other high-need areas.

9. Scale culturally and linguistically appropriate services through mediators, interpreters, and paid peer-support roles.

Expand Roma health mediators/youth mediators and accredited interpreters in primary care, mental health services and crisis lines (AMIF and ESF+). Fund peer-support networks employing trained Roma, migrants and refugee youth as paid peer workers. Require workforce training in



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culturally grounded, strengths-based approaches and trauma-informed practice as a condition of EU-funded pilots.

10. Create youth mental health community hubs and mobile/digital outreach for hard-to-reach communities.

Support one-stop, low-threshold community hubs (after-school/evening hours) that offer counselling, social prescribing, housing/benefits advice and legal signposting under one roof. In parallel, invest in mobile clinics for remote settlements and reception centres and multilingual 24/7 chat/text helplines and evidence-based digital tools. Use EU4Health to fund service standards and evaluations; finance outreach and continuity of care for mobile youth through AMIF; and support infrastructure and digital access through ERDF.

3.4 Cross-sector governance, financing and data: build accountability and sustainability

11. Create a structured EU implementation architecture that aligns funds and supports national coordinators.

Use the European Commission's Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health as an umbrella to publish guidance focused on vulnerable youth, with a common indicator set and evaluation toolkit. Convene an annual 'Youth Mental Health and Inclusion' scorecard meeting linked to the Integration and Inclusion Action Plan tracker. Encourage Member States to appoint a national youth mental health coordinator and adopt locality-level plans for high-need areas (segregated settlements, large reception contexts, remote communities).

12. Adopt privacy-safe monitoring and dashboards to track access, wait-times and outcomes for vulnerable youth.

Require disaggregated monitoring (age, sex, disability, migration background, and voluntary self-identified Roma ethnicity) using GDPR-compliant methods. Track indicators such as wait time to first appointment, completion of brief treatment, school absenteeism/early school leaving, youth-reported cultural safety, experienced discrimination, and perceived belonging. Tie a portion of EU funding tranches to transparent reporting and improvement trajectories.

13. Ensure meaningful youth participation and co-design as a condition for EU-funded pilots.

Establish Youth Mental Health Advisory Panels in each Member State with reserved seats for Roma, migrants and refugee youth. Make co-design, participatory evaluation, and feedback loops



compulsory in EU-funded interventions (EU4Health, ESF+, AMIF), to prevent tokenism and ensure measures respond to lived experience.

14. Implement a ‘braided funding’ investment menu and mutual learning mechanism.

Provide practical mapping and guidance that supports Member States to braid EU4Health (training, helplines, digital tools, standards and evaluation), AMIF (reception-phase mental health, interpreters, continuity of care), ESF+/ERDF (workforce expansion, school teams, community hub infrastructure) into coherent national and local programmes. Launch an EU Joint Action (EU4Health) to codify minimum youth mental health service standards (access times, language support, peer roles, safeguarding) and run peer reviews across Member States.

4. Supporting evidence and sources

The recommendations are supported by:

- „When Scars (!) Become Art” cross-country field research and joint analyses (quantitative and qualitative evidence on discrimination, barriers to services, and recommended measures).
- National policy recommendation papers and expert panels in partner countries, which identified feasible actions and implementation actors (ministries, municipalities, schools, youth centres, equality bodies, NGOs).
- Existing EU legal and policy frameworks and funding instruments referenced throughout this document (EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020–2030; Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027; European Child Guarantee; EU4Health; ESF+; AMIF; ERDF; Youth Guarantee).

5. Country snapshots: main national-level proposals

National recommendations developed by partners converge around common priorities, while reflecting local institutional contexts. The following summary highlights the main national-level proposals that complement the EU-level package.

Germany

- Explicitly recognise antigypsyism in legislation and policy frameworks (including the General Equal Treatment Act), and strengthen enforcement and public awareness.
- Establish local inclusion hubs as shared youth centres for Roma, Sinti, refugee, migrant and majority youth; embed youth participation councils and advisory boards.



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- Ensure accessible, multilingual and culturally adapted mental health support, including community-based and school-based prevention and referral systems.
- Develop cross-ministerial coordination and monitoring frameworks with measurable indicators and participatory evaluation; move from short-term projects to multi-year structural funding for Roma- and refugee-led youth organisations.

Greece

- Reduce bureaucratic barriers and improve cultural and linguistic accessibility of mental health services, including strengthening the institutional role of Roma mediators.
- Ensure systematic community-based mental health support in community centres, with improved coordination between municipalities, NGOs and schools.
- Develop municipal-level intercultural competence frameworks and structured training for youth workers and practitioners, including supervision to reduce burnout.
- Implement anti-stigma initiatives co-created with communities (school-based interventions, community dialogues, awareness campaigns).

Romania

- Adopt a coordinated national action plan for youth mental health and inclusion (prevention, early intervention, and service coverage targets), with dedicated funding for Roma and refugee youth.
- Develop a network of local multidisciplinary support centres providing free counselling, mentoring/peer support, and referral pathways, financed through combined EU, national and local funds.
- Guarantee free and confidential psychological services for youth (including tele-counselling), with interpreters and mediators for non-Romanian speakers; train youth workers and psychologists in culturally competent, trauma-informed care.
- Strengthen anti-discrimination complaint and reporting mechanisms (including local units supporting the National Council for Combating Discrimination), and establish desegregation and anti-bullying standards in schools.
- Integrate art-based learning and participation structures (youth advisory councils; stronger school counselling; small grants for arts-based inclusion initiatives).

Turkey

- Provide free, culturally sensitive mental health services with multilingual professionals and interpreters; increase visibility through multilingual campaigns; develop trauma-informed education for teachers and youth workers.



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- Strengthen anti-discrimination mechanisms in educational institutions (monitoring/reporting committees), integrate diversity and global citizenship into curricula, and expand intercultural and arts-based events in universities and youth settings.
- Improve labour protections and pathways for refugee and migrant youth to access internships and long-term employment; enforce penalties for exploitation of migrant/underage workers.
- Support youth workers through multidisciplinary environments, psychological support and capacity-building to access EU and national funding; strengthen long-term NGO–public partnerships; improve monitoring and participation mechanisms (including inclusion quotas and independent reporting).

North Macedonia

- Strengthen anti-discrimination frameworks and enforcement, including mandatory training for public-sector staff (police, teachers, health professionals) and youth-friendly reporting mechanisms.
- Improve access to culturally sensitive mental health services through funding for trauma-informed and culturally competent professionals, outreach programmes, and awareness campaigns in Roma communities.
- Fund resilience and life-skills programmes tailored for Roma, migrant and refugee youth, including peer mentoring, youth centres, and community-based activities that build self-esteem and coping skills.
- Support research and evidence-based policy cycles, including longitudinal studies and systematic data collection to inform program design and evaluation.

Serbia

- Culturally sensitive counselling services are identified as a priority to ensure that mental-health support is accessible, relevant, and responsive to the lived realities of marginalized youth.
- Structured mentorship programmes and inclusive educational activities are essential to strengthen personal development, social participation, and long-term opportunities for young people.
- Stable funding and formal recognition within local policies are needed to sustain the work of youth organisations and enable long-term, impactful interventions.
- Regular psychological supervision and trauma-informed training for youth workers are crucial to ensure quality support, prevent burnout, and strengthen professional capacities in working with vulnerable groups.



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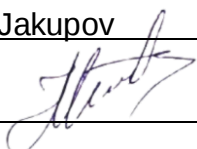


Signatures

By signing, the project partners endorse the joint recommendations and commit to disseminating them to relevant institutions and stakeholders at EU and national levels.

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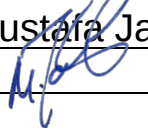
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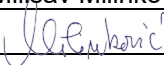
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