



CALL TO ACTION:
ERADICATING **GENERATIONAL**
CHILD POVERTY ACROSS EUROPE

BREAKING THE CYCLE



CONTENT
BREAKING THE CYCLE

CONTENT

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A.

CONCORDIA

FOREWORD

In certain European countries children and young people endure extreme poverty and marginalisation. They are often isolated from mainstream society with limited opportunities for independent living. In some communities the weight of poverty has been passed down through generations, leaving children to bear the burdens of their great-great-grandparents. Breaking free from this cycle is impossible without external change.

Our paper investigates the root causes of generational child poverty in four countries: The Republic of Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria and the Republic of Kosovo. Despite their distinct challenges, they are united in their common struggle against generational poverty among children.

CONCORDIA has concentrated its efforts in these regions. Still, despite some positive impact, Eastern Europe and the West Balkans, continue to have significant numbers of children and young people who are growing up

poverty-stricken, with Romania and Bulgaria on top of the list among the EU member states. The Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Moldova stand out as among the least developed countries in Europe, with a considerable portion of their young population bearing the burden of these challenges.

We strongly believe there is still a significant deficit in policymakers' understanding of the root causes of generational child poverty. This coupled with a lack of interest in what can be done to diminish these harsh realities and a lack of financing to support relevant projects creates a complex problem. Nonetheless, we believe it is imperative to increase their understanding because every child deserves the chance to thrive within society and have access to opportunities that empower them to make choices and shape their futures.

To achieve this goal, we need to address fundamental needs first. Many children do not grow up in supportive

families and face the horror of domestic violence. We establish a foundation of trust because it is crucial. When there is trust between us and the children it encourages them to pursue their education which is an essential component to better prospects.

It must be ensured that these children have regular access to schooling, a minimum of one warm meal every day and receive additional support through psychological, social and community care programmes. Equally vital is equipping the ones who do not grow up with a supportive family with life skills essential for independent living.

When the pillars of care, education, and life skills align, the prospects for these children and young people significantly improve, as pointed out in the European Child Guarantee.¹ In the second last chapter, CONCORDIA's impact model is proven as an effective methodology that offers them the support and care they need.



On an individual level, this report introduces you to inspiring young individuals from each of these countries who have defied the odds and have broken free from this cycle with the support of CONCORDIA. Their stories exemplify the transformative power of targeted assistance and offer a glimpse into lives once marred by adversity but now filled with dignity and self-determination.

For over 30 years, CONCORDIA has tirelessly worked to increase opportunities for thousands of children and young people to escape the trauma of family separation and poverty. Drawing from our wealth of experience – marked by both successes and setbacks – we present effective intervention models tailored to each country's context alongside key policy recommendations.

"Generational poverty robs children of their dignity and right to shape their destinies. It is imperative that political leaders at both the EU and national levels, closely collaborate with civil society and commit to eradicating generational poverty among children in need across Europe within the next decade."

Bernhard Drumel
International Executive Director CONCORDIA



B.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE **ROOT CAUSES** OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE WEST BALKANS

UNRAVELLING THE COMPLEXITIES

Child poverty is not inevitable, it is the result of political choices

When a significant life event like sickness, unemployment, divorce, or the loss of a family member leads to a decrease in financial resources and assistance, individuals or families may suddenly face situational poverty. Situational poverty can have a ripple effect, but families generally remain optimistic with the understanding that it is likely temporary.

Conversely, generational poverty is permanent.

Families entrenched in generational poverty struggle from generation to generation. Children born into this vicious cycle have little chance of escape. They remain in a state of perpetual poverty and lack access to education. As they grow into young adults, they have fewer employment opportunities, remain marginalised, and are deprived of their right to participate in society as active citizens. Essentially, they are stripped of their dignity as human beings.

Generational poverty prevention is a collective societal responsibility. In this report, we showcase the considerable evidence of systemic issues and factors that contribute to generational poverty among families. We also present the potential solutions and active initiatives by civil society organisations such as CONCORDIA that help break the cycle.

What we need now is political will at both the European and country levels to address these issues and a clear strategy

for reducing generational poverty among children in Europe to zero. Many children and young people are facing multiple deprivations, and decision-makers must invest in their futures, ensure child protection, and prioritise meaningful participation and perspectives for children and youth.

Child poverty is a children's rights issue

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child² (UNCRC) is a treaty consisting of 42 articles setting out the fundamental human rights that every child deserves. The UNCRC adopts a comprehensive framework perspective to guarantee freedom from poverty. Various articles within it are relevant: Article 12 asserts the government's responsibility to enable children capable of forming their own opinions to express them freely in all matters concerning



The multidimensional nature of poverty

At CONCORDIA, we apply a child-centred and multidimensional understanding of child poverty. The traditional approach of measuring the relationship between parents' and children's income and earnings tends to systematically underestimate what poverty means. From the experience and perspective of the social workers at CONCORDIA poverty does not only mean

them. Article 23 focuses on ensuring disabled children enjoy a fulfilling life. Article 24 emphasises their right to optimal health standards. Article 26 underscores access to social security. Article 27 affirms children's entitlement to a standard of living conducive to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social growth. Article 28 highlights the right to education. This framework illustrates how important it is to include the voices of all children, especially those experiencing poverty, in shaping strategies to combat generational child poverty.

material deprivation. It also includes the deprivation experienced in the child's life situations such as education, social relationships, health and participation in cultural life.

In the countries in which CONCORDIA is active, it is obvious how child poverty and generational poverty are intricately connected. When children grow up in impoverished households in countries such as the Republic of Kosovo and Bulgaria, Romania or the Republic of Moldova, the impact of growing up poor has long-term consequences.

They are very likely to experience limited access to quality education, and healthcare, and face an increased risk of malnutrition and health problems. This lack of access can hinder their opportunities for socio-economic mobility, trapping them in a vicious cycle of poverty. Additionally, children raised in poverty often face psychological and emotional challenges and adverse experiences such as social exclusion and stigmatisation that can impact their long-term well-being and economic prospects. As a result, they cannot break free from the cycle of poverty and it repeats itself from generation to generation.

We believe that addressing generational child poverty is crucial not only for the immediate well-being of children but also for breaking this cycle to promote social and economic equity.



Historical legacies, political transitions, socio-economic disparities and social exclusion and discrimination

Eastern Europe and the West Balkans, including countries like the Republic of Kosovo, Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Bulgaria, have experienced various economic and social challenges that have contributed to persistent poverty in the region. They have a history of either being part of communist regimes or suffering from significant political upheavals. The transition from centrally planned economies to market economies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was often accompanied by economic turmoil and social dislocation. **This transition period led to significant disparities in wealth distribution and the emergence of poverty, particularly among vulnerable populations.**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of Yugoslavia led to the formation of new states and the reconfiguration of political and economic systems. **Political instability, corruption, and weak governance have been persistent challenges in these regions, preventing effective policymaking and the implementation of poverty reduction strategies. Weak institutions and a lack of transparency hinder effective resource allocation and perpetuate inequalities.** Most recently, the war in Ukraine and the influx of many refugees have put some of the countries under even more pressure.

Income inequality and disparities in access to education, healthcare, and basic services have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty. Rural areas and marginalised communities, including ethnic minorities, often face greater challenges in accessing opportunities for economic advancement. Economic factors such as low productivity, limited investment, and dependence on remittances have also contributed to poverty in the region. The Republic of Moldova and the Republic of Kosovo, for example, rely heavily on remittances being sent from migrants working abroad to their families, which means the elderly and children are being left behind while depending on a whole generation that has moved abroad for work.

Social exclusion and discrimination based on factors such as ethnicity, gender, and disability further exacerbate poverty in the region. Roma communities, in particular, face systemic discrimination and marginalisation, limiting their access to education, employment, and healthcare.

Efforts to address generational child poverty in Eastern Europe and the West Balkans require comprehensive strategies that address underlying structural factors and promote inclusive economic growth, good governance, and social cohesion. This includes investing in education and skills training, promoting job creation and entrepreneurship, strengthening social safety nets, strengthening institutions,



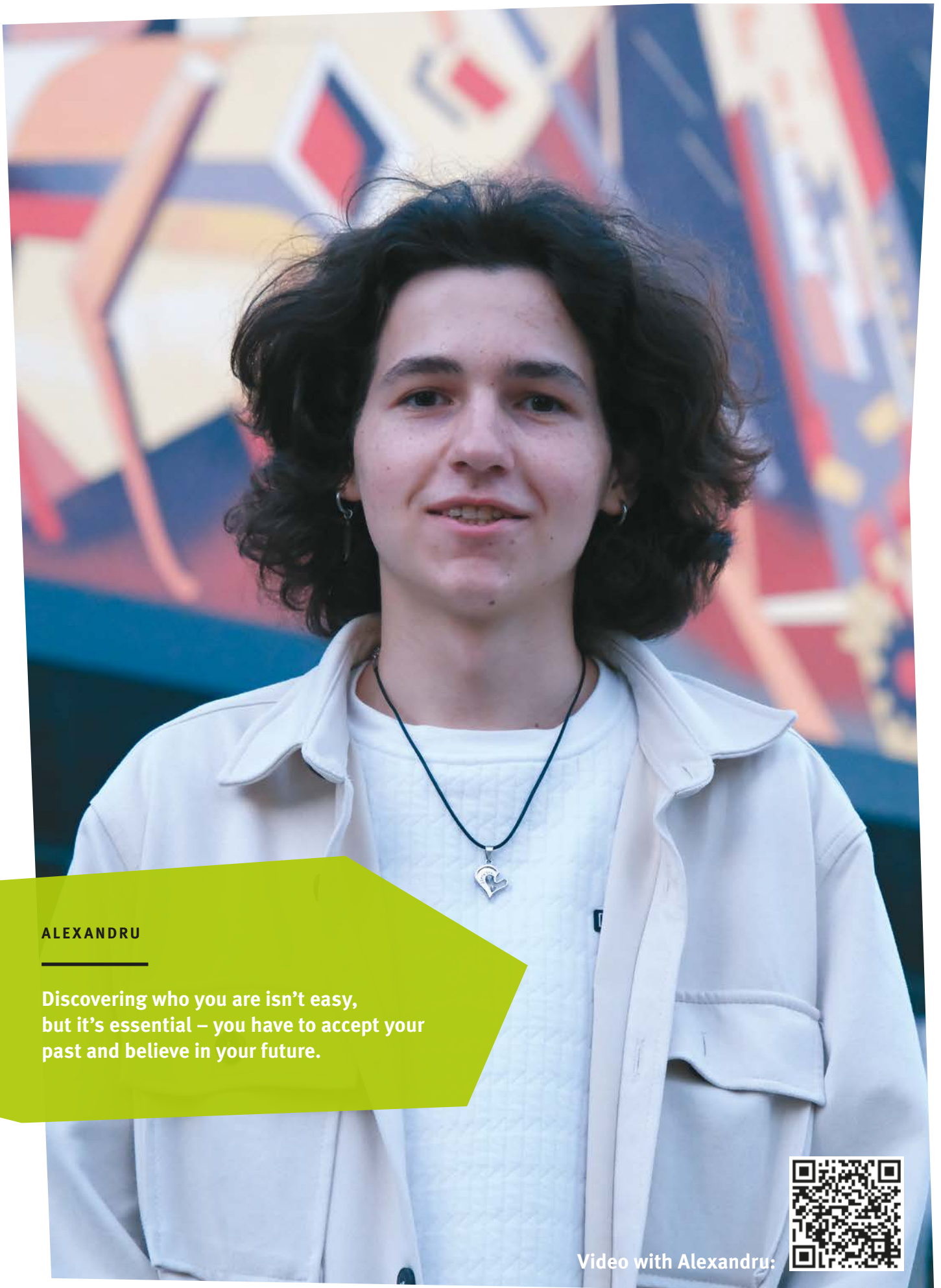
and addressing the root causes of social exclusion and discrimination. International cooperation is also crucial in supporting poverty reduction efforts in the region.

The following chapters will provide statistics on the most significant reasons why generational child poverty exists in the Republic of Kosovo, the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania.

For the past thirty years, CONCORDIA helped thousands of children and young people to find their way out of this vicious cycle. Each one required an individualised approach through multi-disciplinary case management. We also admit that, despite our support, many are still struggling.

"We asked four young people to share their stories about growing up with CONCORDIA's support and how they managed to escape the cycle of poverty, despite facing significant challenges. These inspiring individuals serve as role models and are living examples of how effective support and enduring belief in themselves has led to a better future."





ALEXANDRU

Discovering who you are isn't easy,
but it's essential – you have to accept your
past and believe in your future.



Video with Alexandru:

C.

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

WHAT IS YOUR SUPERPOWER?



Alexandru is sitting on a cosy armchair in Casa CONCORDIA, the upholstery a medium-dark shade of cyan, lost in the book he's reading. *"Tonight, was about living, about... not being up all night, unable to sleep, alone and feeling like... like I had no control, no... no idea of who I was other than what I was."*

The 16-year-old is engrossed in the fantasy romance "Din Sânge și Cenusa" ("From Blood and Ash") by Jennifer L. Armentrout, a novel about empowerment, the exploration of moral complexities, and choice – themes that resonate with young adults. Alexandru has prepared a cup of green tea, which he prefers without sugar. The fantasy book he's reading strikes a chord with Alexandru. *"The protagonist, a girl around my age, has lost her parents. But she possesses a superpower,"* Alexandru says. Alexandru, in a way, also lost his parents, and he too possesses a superpower.

Alexandru grew up in institutional care, with his aunt caring for him and his now 19-year-old sister Katya, who grew up in another placement centre. His estranged mother lives in a village far from the capital Chișinău – they are in touch now and then. Alexandru doesn't dwell on his past; he is self-aware and reflective. Support from Casa CONCORDIA's psychologist and staff has been pivotal to his emotional well-being. They've helped him foster new friendships and find comfort in his environment.

Still, Alexandru craves stability. *"I think children and young people should live together with other people for a longer time because then they get attached to them. Emotionally that's easier, and that also makes it easier to concentrate, to focus on your studies. Forging friendships and finding someone ready to help you when you are in need is also much more likely. To be living three years here and then move to another place and start anew – that's not great. If you know*

someone for a longer time, you can trust them more than someone that you met two months ago."

When asked about his superpowers, Alexandru says, *"My superpower is having abundant energy for volunteering, which allows me to support people even when I'm tired or busy with other tasks. Being organised is another superpower. I'm a list person; I make daily and weekly lists. This organisational skill proves beneficial in business school and in managing tasks efficiently."*

Alexandru volunteers at the office of CONCORDIA and was very busy, especially after the full-scale invasion of Russia in 2022 when hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees sought shelter in the Republic of Moldova. Alexandru credits his volunteer work with helping him discover his capabilities and build self-confidence. With the money he earns from volunteering, he buys books.

Reflecting on the stark difference in psychological support between CONCORDIA and previous centres, Alexandru highlights the positive impact of having accessible psychological support, which helped him to understand himself and navigate challenges more effectively. *"In a previous centre, I had only one appointment with the psychologist twice in six years. I felt better when I started talking to the psychologist at Casa CONCORDIA. It was easier emotionally, knowing that there would be a person who would listen to me, no matter if it was a problem or just something interesting or something that made me happy. My heart was full of good emotions."*

"It's really interesting to discover who you are, even if sometimes it's really hard that you have to accept your past and you have to believe in your future. You have to believe in yourself."

ROOT CAUSE

EXTREME POVERTY

The Republic of Moldova is one of the poorest countries in Europe. In 2023, the absolute poverty rate (SDG 1.2.1 indicator) of the population was 31.6%, an increase of 0.5 percentage points compared to 2022, while 30.2% of children are poor (+1.8% compared to the previous year in child poverty).³

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, children in rural areas are at a much higher risk of poverty than children in urban areas⁴: The absolute poverty rate for rural children was 44.6% in 2023, compared to 14.4% for urban children. The disposable income per person in households with one child in 2023 was 4952.2 MDL (~256 €), decreasing to 3211.4 MDL (~166 €) per person for families with 3+ children per month.

Average monthly consumption expenditures per person in households with children were 2562.6 MDL (~ 133 EUR) in 2020. Households with children prioritised spending on necessities: food (42.5%), home maintenance (13.4%), and clothing and footwear (10.3%).⁵

In Moldova, the poverty rate is notably higher in certain types of households. These include those with three or more children, those with members who have disabilities, and those where the head of the household is over 65 years old. Poverty is also more prevalent in households where the head's main activity is agriculture, where there is a low level of education, and in remote locations. Extreme poverty rates have been decreasing but remain particularly high in rural areas.

"Together with the authorities and other local NGOs, we need to help these children and their families now to avoid worse problems in five or ten years. We need to identify solutions and convince families to return to Moldova by providing support and job opportunities."

Tatiana Balta, National Director CONCORDIA Moldova

ROOT CAUSE

MIGRATION AND FAMILY SEPARATION

A distinctive factor affecting Moldova is the high rate of labour migration: One-third of the Republic of Moldova's workforce lives abroad.⁶ Many parents, particularly from rural areas, leave the country to escape a precarious life situation and to find work abroad, either in the European Union or Russia. This has led to many "social orphans" – children whose parents are alive but work abroad, leaving them in the care of relatives or, in many cases, state institutions. In the Republic of Moldova, **about 21% of children – 150,000 – face the reality of having at least one parent working abroad.**

According to Ministry of Labour and Social Protection data⁷ in 2023 **29,465 children, navigate their daily lives with both parents living abroad.**

Dealing with the absence of one or both parents due to (temporary) migration is hard, and children and young people express feelings of loss and uncertainty. Despite technological advances facilitating communication, children and their migrant parents face challenges in maintaining emotional closeness and intimacy.⁸ Caregivers who step in for absent parents play a critical role. While some children benefit from improved relationships with caregivers, others struggle with the absence of parental guidance and support.



ROOT CAUSE

INSTITUTIONALISATION

The Republic of Moldova, like many post-Soviet states, inherited the Soviet model of child welfare, which relied heavily on institutional care for children. This system emphasised state-run orphanages and boarding schools for children with disabilities or those from vulnerable families, rather than community-based or family-centred care solutions.

The number of children in institutional care has historically been quite high. With the joint efforts of the Republic of Moldovan Government, civil society and international organisations, the number of children living in institutions in the Republic of Moldova has decreased from 11,500 in 2006 to 617 in 2023.⁹ The number of children in family-based care doubled between 2006 and 2017; the number of professional foster care families increased nine times; and the number of children placed in a protective family environment increased 15 times (from 47 children in 2006 to 1,017 in 2017).

Alexandru contributes his administrative expertise as a volunteer at the peak of CONCORDIA's refugee relief efforts in Moldova.



ROOT CAUSE

STATE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL CARE



The average social grant payment in the Republic of Moldova is insufficient to alleviate extreme poverty: As of December 2021, only 26% of extremely poor families were included in the programme, and only 7% of families in the poorest two consumption quintiles received social assistance. Among the 120,000 extremely poor families, 109,000 remain in this category even after 31,330 of them receive social assistance (2021). This shows how vital poverty reduction is as a key instrument to strengthen families and prevent family separation.

The Republic of Moldova has made efforts to reform its child protection system in recent years, aiming to reduce the reliance on institutional care and promote family-based alternatives. These reforms include developing foster care systems, providing support services to vulnerable families to prevent the separation of children, and closing or transforming institutions into community service centres. The systems are in place, including social workers and psychologists. However, the skills of community social workers are in many cases at a very poor level. There are districts where only around 10% of social workers have higher qualifications in social work. Hence the low quality of the services offered to families, and the ineffectiveness of the social aid provision.

On the positive side, there is the "Support for Families with Children" service, intended for the development and strengthening of the family, education, and preventing the separation of children from their parents. A once-off monthly financial grant of 4,000 lei (210 Euro) per child is given following the identification of the family's needs by the social worker.

The current reform of the social assistance system "RESTART" aims at a more qualitative social assistance system, with greater and uniform coverage of people's needs.¹⁰

POLICY BRIEF **REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

CALL TO ACTION

PIVOTAL:

The RESTART social assistance system reform in Moldova for 2023-2026 should ensure the social protection and assistance rights of Moldova's vulnerable population, aligning with international human rights standards. Increased access to social services and benefits for the vulnerable population, adherence to social services to minimum quality standards to meet population needs, and ensuring sufficient motivated and skilled human resources within the social assistance system are crucial.



IMPLEMENT KEY INTERVENTIONS FROM THE CONCORDIA IMPACT MODEL:

1. CONCORDIA strongly advocates for children to be able to **grow up in their own families** and has been one of the drivers in the country to offer family-like care options, such as foster families and family-type houses. In cases where this is not possible, the next best solution is a foster family.
2. **Day Centres** set an example for other social service providers, with strong after-school programmes (academic support, extracurricular activities, independent life skills development, vocational counselling etc.), community intervention component (developing parental skills; social inclusion; comprehensive support for families etc.) and generational component (as part of the community intervention programme or within the Day Centre's facilities).
3. Children and young people are empowered to **defend their rights** at the national level.
4. CONCORDIA supports young people to find their way into **employment**.
5. CONCORDIA currently builds up **kinship care** through its model of day centres and the national prevention programme.

ESSENTIAL POLICY DECISIONS:

1. The provision of a **fundamental package of social services**, guaranteed and funded by the national budget, with particular emphasis on young children, children left behind and children with disabilities (foster care; support for families with children, services for children with disabilities; after-school services etc.) has to be ensured.
2. As an investment in the children's future, **subsidise social programmes and day centres** that focus on education and the prevention of family separation.
3. **Social apartments for young care leavers** who are starting their adult life should be available.



MIRABELA

I've faced many challenges, but each step brought me closer to where I am today.

Video with Mirabela:



D.

ROMANIA

MY HOPE AND TRUST IN PEOPLE DID NOT DIE.

"My name is Mirabela, I am 23 years old. I currently live in Bucharest. After finishing my studies in Social Work I'm doing my Master's in Social Service Management. How did I get here? There's a story behind it, of course."

Mirabela is working at the reception at the "Bread & Breakfast Hostel", in the old town part of Bucharest on Petru Cercel Street. The Hostel belongs to CONCORDIA and is a social business. *"When I was little, my parents left me, so I ended up in CONCORDIA, an NGO that gave me wings to fly"*, Mirabela says. Her journey with CONCORDIA started at an early age when she resided in CONCORDIA institutions and continues until this day – she is now working for CONCORDIA.

Mirabela had a challenging childhood, but she learned to overcome obstacles by focusing on what lies ahead: *"I grew up with 80 other kids in CONCORDIA's City of Children. It's hard enough growing up with so many children, but I had ambition"*, Mirabela asserts, *"there was an immense desire in me to do more. I knew that it doesn't matter where you grew up, it matters what you want to do in the future."*

Mirabela felt at home in CONCORDIA's 'City of Children*'. *"We went to school in the same neighbourhood, it was quite a small school, but at the same time, it was also great. There were many projects, I was very passionate about painting back then – in fact, I still am."* Mirabela then pursued vocational education at CONCORDIA Edu Campus in Ploiești, 50 km north of Bucharest, where she studied cooking. Mirabela planned to pursue a career in the hospitality industry.

The transition to higher education brought Mirabela to Bucharest to continue her studies. The financial burden of her tuition, which amounted to 3,800 lei (ca. 760 €) per year, was the next challenge. *"I am very proud of myself for being able to pay for it with my own money"*.

Standing behind the receptionist's counter, Mirabela shows a photo album of photos taken after the graduation ceremony, with her and her friends wearing the graduation gown and smiling under her Mortarboard. She sounds like she's giving a commencement speech when she says *"Well, first, I would like to thank Mirabela from the past for everything she did to get here, even if she failed sometimes. The important thing is that she did not give up. What happened in the past, stays in the past. What is important is the present and what my future will look like. I realized, that the more you dwell on the past, the more you lose the opportunity to see the present and build the future."*



*CONCORDIA started the deinstitutionalisation process of large placement centres in 2014 on the same arguments that the environment for children was hard on their emotional and social wellbeing.



Mirabela together with her roommate and our trainer during a cooking session on the CONCORDIA Edu-Campus.

Still, there are things, Mirabela doesn't want to talk about. **"I don't share my past,"** she admits, highlighting the societal challenges and prejudices faced by those who grow up in the welfare system. She still feels a certain stigma attached to her origins.

Yet, her stance on overcoming obstacles is clear, she has a lesson for others in the same situation: **"No matter how many failures they have in life, they should not give up because perseverance is the most important thing."**

It is no surprise that Mirabela wants to be a social worker: A social worker who worked with CONCORDIA is her inspiration. She liked his way of working, and she always has been attracted to people who work in the social field. Since she was 12 years old she has wanted to become one. **"I feel like I have to help, I have to give back somehow. It has become my passion."**

Mirabela is thinking about how to approach care for children – especially for those from tough backgrounds. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, she says.

As Mirabela has a background in the hospitality industry, she uses a restaurant metaphor. Just like in a Burger joint, where each restaurant might prepare a hamburger differently, strategies for helping children need to be customised. She says, **"You can't use the same recipe for everyone. It's like in restaurants, even if you have a hamburger recipe, the burger tastes differently in each restaurant"**, she says, highlighting the need for individualised approaches.

Mirabela now lives together with a friend in Casa Paul, a CONCORDIA house with transitional social flats for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They watch Youtube videos together and when the weather is great they gather with other youngsters on the terrace with a wonderful view of Bucharest's massive parliament building. It is here, where she can reflect on her life and plan her next moves. **"I no longer have to look at the fact that my colleague has a family and I don't. But: It was and still is a bit difficult to see when friends or college colleagues call their parents and say 'Mom, come on now, you made me a package, thank you so much!', and things like that. I was prepared in life to do things on my own. It's hard sometimes because there are**



times when you want to call someone, talk, tell them what you did that day at college, tell them proudly about your successes or hope for consolation when you fail", Mirabela says.

But it is what it is. *"My hope and trust in people did not die. I have people I talk to, I go to a psychologist and this helps me a lot", Mirabela says: "I've also met college colleagues who tell me that 'you know, my parents were terrible, they beat me'. When I hear such stories, I think that rather than staying in an abusive family and having them do more harm to you, it's better to grow up like I did."*

When asked, what one can learn from her, Mirabela pauses to think. After a while, she says: *"Regardless of the situation you are in or the place you are, it's best to take what happens as an – what is it called? – opportunity. If you succeed or fail: Take it as an experience. Life is an experience."*

ROOT CAUSE

LACK OF QUALITY EDUCATION, ESPECIALLY FOR DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Romania continues to grapple with significant challenges in providing quality education to many of its young people. The consequences of neglect in the educational sector are alarming. School dropouts are at 15,6%¹¹ and 44% of children are functionally illiterate.¹² These figures highlight a broader systemic failure that poses serious future risks for Romania's labour force and economy.

Enrollment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Romania remains considerably below the EU average. According to EUROSTAT 2021 data,¹³ only 75.6% of children attend compared to the EU average of 92.5%. This disparity is particularly pronounced among children in rural areas and Roma communities. Additionally, the rate of early school leavers in Romania stands at 15.6%, significantly higher than the EU average of 9.6%.

Educational challenges in rural Romania have a profound impact on the broader social structure. High teacher turnover is common due to long commutes, poor transportation, and inadequate infrastructure. Schools in these areas often experience a transient teaching workforce, with educators frequently staying for less than a year or moving schools due to travel difficulties. This instability and lack of continuity in education are further compounded by the fact that many teachers are inadequately trained and lack access to essential educational resources.

The role of social workers in bridging gaps should be highlighted, particularly in disadvantaged areas or schools with significant numbers of minority students, such as the Roma. However, the effectiveness of the limited number of mediators and social workers is often undermined by inadequate collaboration between schools and local government entities.

One of the major dropout factors is the lack of material resources in the family that prevents the children from being able to attend school regularly. In addition, the low level of education of the parents means they cannot help their children with homework or offer any form of home-schooling.

Another factor is the non-participation of children in preschool education (nurseries, kindergartens). The first years, from birth to compulsory education, are crucial for a child's development. These are the years when capacities and abilities, that will last a lifetime, begin to form. Currently, only 12.3% of children under the age of 3 have access to formal education or care services. This is far below the European average of 35.9% and below that of neighbouring states, including former communist countries.¹⁴

"Education is key. We've seen progress when we stayed with a family for 3 to 5 years and invested in its social and educational evolvement. Each child is kind of dragging the other child after them."

Diana Certan, National Director CONCORDIA Romania



ROOT CAUSE

CHILD POVERTY

Eurostat defines poverty as material deprivation that reflects economic pressure and the lack of durable goods. People experiencing severe material deprivation have extremely limited living conditions due to a lack of resources, with at least four out of nine elements of deprivation being met. These elements include the inability to pay rent or utility bills, ensure adequate home heating, meet unforeseen expenses, consume meat, fish, or a protein equivalent every day, afford a week's vacation away from home, own a car, a washing machine, a colour TV, or a telephone.¹⁵

In Romania, one in ten children goes to bed hungry,¹⁶ particularly those from underprivileged families and communities who struggle to meet their basic needs. This situation has been exacerbated by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult or even impossible for many families to cover essential expenses. As a result, there is an increased risk of school dropout, especially as parents opt to reduce expenses in rural areas where children often contribute to household income through agricultural or other work.

The Romanian government has taken some steps to address these issues, primarily through the creation of community and day centres aimed at preventing family and school abandonment. However, the low capacity of local government structures to provide such services remains a significant challenge. Many cities, towns, and villages lack a social worker. This is indicative of a systemic issue where social benefits are insufficient as they do not address the root causes of poverty and only offer temporary relief.

Currently, there are 800 day centres in Romania, but 3,000 are needed to effectively address child poverty. This gap is mainly due to the historical lack of social services development, especially in rural areas, and severe underfunding of preventive work for family abandonment and school dropout. To bridge this gap, it is crucial that funding comes from the state budget. Although legislation since 2023 mandated that 50% of the costs should be covered by the national budget, there is no secondary legislation to implement this. Romania has the highest rates of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion within the EU. The recent adoption of a national action plan marks an important step forward. The commitment is to reduce the 2,000,000 children that live in poverty by at least 500,000 by 2030.¹⁷

ROOT CAUSE

SEGREGATION

In Romania, the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is at 41.5% (2021).¹⁸ These barriers perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion, hindering the potential of young individuals and depriving society of their talents and contributions.

Vulnerable youth from marginalised communities such as Roma, those leaving institutional care and those from other disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers to accessing quality education and successfully entering the labour market. Despite notable progress in human development indicators, significant challenges persist as growth has not been equitable, resulting in increasing inequalities. Romania is implementing the European Child Guarantee to improve access to basic services, particularly for the most vulnerable children.

Both Roma men and women are more likely to be unemployed than their non-Roma counterparts. However, the unemployment rate among women is higher than among men.¹⁹ According to the National Roma Integration Strategy (2019), 68% of Roma children tend to drop out of school early. In 2021, only 27% of Roma children were enrolled in early education.²⁰ Overall, over 80% of out-of-school children are Roma and at least 18% of Roma children are uneducated. Only 0.1% of Roma children graduate to the next level of education.²¹

ROOT CAUSE

INSTITUTIONALISATION

Young people leaving the care of institutions encounter significant challenges as they lack meaningful pathways to independent living. According to the Sociometrics Association, 3,000 youth leave the system every year.²² However adequate accommodation, particularly state-provided options with affordable rent, remains scarce. Additionally, employment opportunities are limited, as prevailing prejudices and stereotypes in some communities hinder their integration. This is not aided by their lack of education and skills that the jobs they want require. Although there is limited comparable and current data available regarding the long-term trajectories of individuals who experienced care during their childhood and teenage years, the existing data generally indicate poorer life outcomes for this demographic.

They often depart from the education system earlier than their peers, have lower employment rates, and earn less compared to their counterparts. Former youth-in-care are disproportionately represented among the homeless population and teenage mothers. However, it is challenging to discern the extent to which the care system itself (and the transition out of it) versus the adverse events leading to placement contribute to these negative outcomes.



CALL TO ACTION

PIVOTAL:

Establish a cohesive plan aimed at reducing child poverty and preventing family separation through the implementation of public prevention strategies and gatekeeping policies. This plan should be supported by dedicated funding sources, involving better financing and collaboration across government, community groups, and organisations to create effective support systems for children.

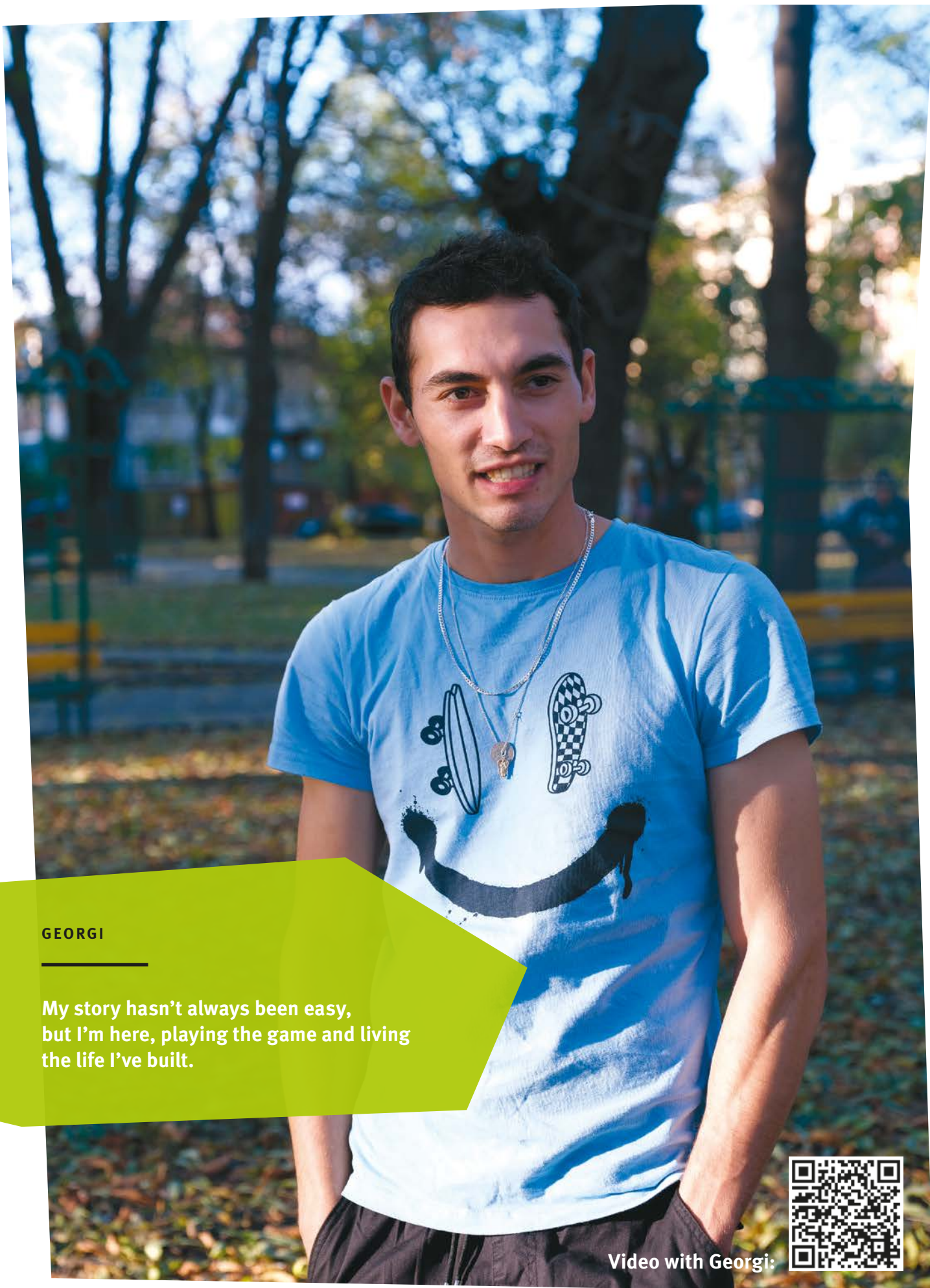


IMPLEMENT KEY INTERVENTIONS FROM THE CONCORDIA IMPACT MODEL:

1. **After-school programmes** offer supplementary academic support, mentorship, material support for the child and family and extracurricular activities tailored to enhance learning outcomes for vulnerable youth.
2. Additionally, targeted **remedial education** programmes are as important to support children to advance from one cycle of education to another.
3. Beyond academics, **developing life skills is** essential for empowering at-risk youth.
4. **Vocational training** programmes play a pivotal role in equipping programme participants with practical skills and certifications relevant to the labour market. Highlighting successful vocational training initiatives tailored to the needs of care leavers, and other disadvantaged youth in Romania underscores the importance of this work.
5. **Personalised job coaching and career guidance** are instrumental in facilitating the integration of vulnerable youth into the labour market as well as supporting programme participants in maintaining a job in the long term. These services aid in navigating job market complexities, fostering employability skills, and securing meaningful employment opportunities. Sharing stories of youth who have thrived through job coaching programmes further emphasises their positive impact on achieving sustainable employment outcomes.
6. Build on the **National Network of Day Care Centers** for Children at Risk of Poverty #CentreZiRO, currently consisting of 150 day centres from 25 Romanian counties.

ESSENTIAL POLICY DECISIONS:

1. **Education is the primary mechanism for breaking the cycle of poverty.** There is the necessity of investing in integrated services at a very local, grassroots level. Significant investment in education and social services will also impact the wider European context, considering Romania's role as a labour provider for Europe.
2. **Increase the number of day centres from 800 to 3,000.** The day centres are a strong intervention that can be developed in rural Romania and the marginalised small and medium-sized urban areas. They can unite children from multiple schools and various villages in one place. This means we can work with them, feed them and assist with school work. Plus offers some fun activities. Day centres in rural areas can truly make a difference and offer holistic support to children where they can receive not only education but also essential care. They can address immediate needs while fostering educational and emotional engagement.
3. **Increase financing for the prevention of child separation.** We are working on developing the secondary legislation so that 50% of the financing for day centres comes from the state budget. This will relieve the financial burden of poor local authorities to develop these services. As important to the financing of day centres is that it happens according to the principle: "the financial resource follows the beneficiary", which means that resources will be allocated where the need is greatest.
4. On the economic front, the importance of **investment in social services** is not only a moral imperative; it is an economic strategy. Each Euro invested now saves 7 Euro in the future.



GEORGI

**My story hasn't always been easy,
but I'm here, playing the game and living
the life I've built.**



Video with Georgi:

E.

BULGARIA

BECAUSE I'M ROMA?



Georgi is dribbling the orange football, he looks like he is dancing with the ball. He wears black cargo pants, white sneakers and a blue T-shirt with a smiley on it. A quick kick, and then he's passing the ball to one of his friends, he passes it back and Georgi volleys it back again.

Football is coming home? Georgi's coming home.

Georgi plays the game he knows inside out with his closest friends in the yard of the building he probably knows best. He grew up here.

Both of his parents were repeatedly incarcerated. He arrived at CONCORDIA at the age of 7; it must have been winter, he recalls, because it was cold and he was bundled up in clothes – that's what he remembers, or at least what he's been told about that day. Georgi comes from a very large family: he has 8 brothers and 4 sisters. When the starting line for the race of life was drawn, his marker was far, far back, nowhere near the pole position.

"It's strange to say, but the fact that I grew up without a mother or a father, in the end, meant, that I grew up much better here at CONCORDIA than if I had been in that family or in that neighbourhood. I'm kind of glad that it happened that way", Georgi says. At first, his mother used to come to CONCORDIA to pick the kids up, they maintained a kind of relationship but after maybe a year and a half, she decided to go her own way.

At CONCORDIA, Georgi felt at home from the beginning. *"I quickly got used to the environment and the other children, it was easy for me."* To keep them occupied, they filled their days with school, learning, sports and other activities. *"I was a folk dancer, hip hop dancer, learned karate."*

But school was hard for Georgi – at the first school he hardly learned anything, he says. Then Georgi was transferred to another school: On the first day of school during the English lesson, Georgi was asked to stand up and to form a sentence. He couldn't. *"I say, madam! I don't know any of this, I can't tell you anything that you've asked me to repeat. Please, at the school that I attended, we didn't..."* She just ordered me to sit down. Today, he says, part of his motivation stems from the will to show that a person – a child, then a boy, and eventually a man – can make it on their own, even if they come out of an institution.

Georgi sensed, that he was not treated like other kids. *"Is it, because I don't have a mother, don't have a father to take care of me? Is it, because I'm from an institution? Because I'm Roma?"*

Georgi enjoying his favourite hobby, playing football, and together with his partner at the playground in the courtyard of their residential complex.

Football emerges as a significant theme in Georgi's narrative, reflecting his deep connection to the sport. It provided an escape from his troubles and a platform to excel, showcasing his talent and dedication. Despite the challenges and unfulfilled aspirations, football remains a cherished aspect of his life.

Georgi hasn't been kicking the ball much around the pitch lately. ***"There are things, that are even more important than football"***, Georgi says with a smile.

But from the beginning: Georgi met Sashka through a common friend. They were hanging out with a group of friends and got to know each other. At a certain point, Sashka returned to her hometown for a while. They continued to keep in touch via Whatsapp and TikTok, and at a certain point Georgi wrote to her: ***"I miss you."*** And from then on Georgi and Sashka were a couple.

When Sashka was pregnant, Georgi knew that he wanted to make a difference, that he wanted to be the father he wished he had. Georgi thinks a lot about the values and experiences he wishes to pass on to his child, all he wants is to provide a stable and supportive environment. Knowing his father was in prison is a part of his motivation to do better, he says. Sashka believes that Georgi will be a good father, she could observe his caring nature in his interactions with both adults and children in his extended family and friends, she says. Georgi's not like other Bulgarian men, he is supportive and has an egalitarian approach, Sashka says. He's making me happy. ***"If I have even the smallest request, he is here for me, he's trying to provide. And, yeah, he has a very beautiful smile."***





ROOT CAUSE

POVERTY, ESPECIALLY OF MINORITY GROUPS AND CHILDREN

According to a recent report from the National Statistical Institute,²³ the poverty line for 2023 is 637.92 leva (326.07 euros) per month. According to the report, 20.6% of the population lives below this line. Additionally, 11.7% of employed individuals, despite having an income, fall below the poverty line. Only 3.2% of those with a university degree are below the poverty line, compared to 66.5% of those with basic or no education and 32.9% of those with primary education. In the Bulgarian ethnic group, 14.3% are below the poverty line, while a staggering 65% of the Roma population falls into this category.

Child poverty is particularly concerning, with 24,2% of children aged 0-17 years at risk of poverty in 2021, a figure that decreases by 17,7% due to social transfers. Those unable to afford basic needs rank at 36% in 2021, and 90,3% of Roma children faced material deprivation, significantly higher than children from the Bulgarian ethnic group at 26,3%.²⁴



ROOT CAUSE

SPATIAL SEGREGATION AND THE ETHNICISATION OF POVERTY

Discrimination, segregation and isolation of the Roma are facts widely discussed in academic and NGO circles but less in Bulgaria's political arena and society in general.

The lack of tangible results in reversing Roma's socio-economic exclusion since the end of communism is widely criticised, as Roma still face widespread negative stereotypes, hostility, and social and economic marginalisation. The lack of political will and popular support for addressing the Roma issue, contribute to the persistence of negative attitudes and discrimination against the Roma community. It is the main cause of the lack of progress.²⁵

Since the socialist era, the tendency of Roma communities to be gathered in isolated, segregated neighbourhoods that have poor infrastructure, inadequate housing, and educational facilities has been accentuated. According to a European Parliament report, "the concentration of Roma in isolated neighbourhoods has increased from 2001 to 2011 in the urban as well as rural regions. In 2011 75% of Romani people lived in segregated communities compared to only 49% in 1980".²⁶

This segregation has led to a dramatic rise in poverty rates within these communities. The prevalence of poverty is ten times higher in the Roma community compared to the broader Bulgarian population. The Roma ethnic group remains structurally mired at the bottom on almost all indicators. There is a growing need for a comprehensive new policy towards the Roma minority with a focus on young people.²⁷

Historically, Roma neighbourhoods have typically been located on the outskirts of a town. One of the most significant issues in these neighbourhoods is the illegal construction of annexed buildings, which are often attached to other family homes and frequently lack essential amenities. The unplanned and maze-like construction, combined with the absence of proper sewerage and poor sanitation, creates conditions that facilitate the spread of infectious diseases and contribute to the deteriorating health of the Roma community. This issue is linked not only to physical exclusion

but also to the denial of access to social spaces and the infringement of citizenship rights, such as quality education, adequate housing and social services. This spatial segregation is connected to the social impacts of moving from communism to a more individualistic society and capitalist transformation processes, which have cemented the socio-economic disadvantages.²⁸

In segregated schools, Roma children do not have access to early childhood education, which is crucial because without it they cannot learn Bulgarian. When Roma children start school, they have never learned Bulgarian before, while the other children already have some basic knowledge. This creates an even larger gap between them. Additionally, there are no teachers trained to work with these children, so they are often passed to the next grade despite being illiterate. According to the law, children are not allowed to repeat a grade until the 5th class, which results in significant gaps in their knowledge. This is a major reason for school dropouts. There is an alarming trend of deterioration in the educational status of young Roma members, further reducing their chances of finding employment. This specifically leads to a cycle of generational poverty.²⁹

Despite their number, the Roma community in Bulgaria lacks significant political mobilisation and representation. This lack of representation also contributes to their marginalisation and inability to effectively advocate for their rights and needs.



ROOT CAUSE

CHILD MARRIAGES AMONG ROMA

In the 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s the marriageable age for the Roma was 15-16 years of age for girls and 17-18 for boys. Now, a steady and gradual increase in the marriage age is observed among all Romani groups, although in certain regions child marriages are still an acceptable practice. Newer data is provided by the "Youth Study Bulgaria 2018-2019" that shows 9% of the respondents favour a woman's marrying age at 20 versus 7% in 2014.³⁰

Child marriage is identified as a major reason for school dropouts but it is not the only one. Other factors include socio-economic status, lack of parental interest, and expectations related to marriage. But progress has been made: Over the last 15 years, there has been an improvement in the educational status of Roma girls, including those who marry young. The practice of child marriages is more widespread among certain Roma groups, notably in Eastern Bulgaria.

The UNICEF report³¹ underscores the importance of addressing these practices in a nuanced, community-specific manner so that progress can continue. A significant portion of married girls who are still minors only have primary or lower education. However, there has been an increase in girls completing primary education.³²

ROOT CAUSE

DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

Bulgaria is one of the nations with the fastest-shrinking population in the world. Since the nation moved from a totalitarian system to a free-market economy three decades ago, its population has decreased by nearly a quarter, from almost 9 million to 6,5 million today. If these trends continue, Bulgaria will contract further to about 5,4 million people by 2050.³³

The broader societal and economic implications of failing to invest in every child's future are significant, especially given Bulgaria's demographic challenges. There is a need for a more inclusive approach to education and social services and a dire need for targeted social and economic policies to address the disparities and support the most vulnerable groups within Bulgarian society.



"Being the fastest disappearing nation in Europe might mean that we should invest in every single one of us to have a still brighter future. There are schools in Sofia, a city of 1.3 million people, where you cannot enrol one of our Roma children because the authorities there are openly discussing how one child of ours will lead to two Bulgarian children needing to be enrolled elsewhere. Since CONCORDIA Bulgaria was founded we have been fighting against this discrimination."

POLICY BRIEF **BULGARIA**

CALL TO ACTION

PIVOTAL:

Activate reforms within its child protection system, moving towards a holistic and systemic approach focused on the overall well-being of the child, rather than relying on fragmented sectoral policies with isolated measures targeting specific risk groups.



IMPLEMENT KEY INTERVENTIONS FROM THE CONCORDIA IMPACT MODEL:

- 1. Day Centres:** CONCORDIA's day centres offer comprehensive support to children, youth, and parents, focusing on education, social skills, and family cohesion. These centres create a safe, nurturing environment that fosters community, resilience, and long-term success.
- 2. Health Support Initiatives:** These initiatives focus on prevention, basic medical care, and mediation with health institutions, aiming to improve health outcomes and reduce disparities by providing essential services and educating communities on preventive care.
- 3. Basic Support Services:** Providing essentials like food, clothing, and materials addresses immediate needs, creating a stable foundation for further interventions and enabling individuals to fully engage in other programs.
- 4. Outreach Teams:** Our teams engage directly with communities and families, addressing challenges at their roots. This on-the-ground approach builds trust, meets unique local needs, and fosters collective empowerment, ensuring inclusion of the most marginalized groups.
- 5. Sports Programme:** This programme uses sports to attract and engage children and families, offering them access to our support network. Through sports, participants receive crucial educational, socio-psychological, and health support, promoting their overall development and long-term success.
- 6. Job-coaching programmes** for parents and young people, focusing on developing communication skills and emotional intelligence. These programmes activate and empower individuals by providing the necessary tools and support to secure stable employment and improve their socio-economic status.

7.

Education and vocational training programmes, addressing language barriers and ensuring children and young people receive the necessary skills to compete in the job market are offered through the day centre model.

8.

Integrate components into social services that **guarantee social integration,** such as diversity training for inclusive public services, and support for civic participation, ensuring a cohesive approach to tackling segregation and fostering an inclusive community.

ESSENTIAL POLICY DECISIONS:

1.

Access to quality education for all children, including those from marginalised communities, is vital for equal opportunities. This includes early education, language support, remedial education, and tailored teacher training. It is crucial that children from diverse backgrounds, including ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups, receive the support necessary to succeed academically and escape poverty.

2.

Develop **adequate housing, infrastructure, and essential amenities** for those in need, especially in Roma communities.

3.

Targeted interventions to **reduce child poverty and combat early marriages** among Roma, including social support programmes, educational initiatives, and community engagement efforts to promote awareness and change are needed.

4.

Anti-discrimination frameworks with robust anti-discrimination laws and the establishment of monitoring mechanisms should ensure that Roma individuals are protected from socio-economic exclusion and can fully participate in society.



BAJRA

**Education gives me opportunities, choices,
and the foundation to build a better future.**

Video with Bajra:



F.

REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO

WITHOUT EDUCATION YOU ARE NOBODY.



"For me, education is very important. Without education you are nobody. Education provides both employment opportunities and the freedom to choose the jobs you desire. Education is the basis to start a family", says the 16-year-old Bajra.

Bajra belongs to the minorities of Ashkali and she is one of over 150 children and youth attending the CONCORDIA Tranzit Day Centre in the Arbane District of Prizren, about 4,5 kilometres northwest of the centre of this regional hub of southern Kosovo. Bajra lives not far from the Tranzit day centre, in a small – not yet finished – house with her two older sisters and her 43-year-old father Rasim.

Life has not been easy for the family: Bajra's mother was severely ill for years and has recently passed away. *"Without CONCORDIA, I wouldn't have been able to continue school due to our financial conditions",* says Bajra.

The economic situation of the family is far from smooth, but at least Rasim has a small but steady income working in a stall at a market outside of the city. Jobs are hard to come by for the people living in this part of Prizren, especially for the people of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian minorities. *"My father is the one who encouraged and motivated me to continue my education",* says Bajra.

Her father Rasim is sitting at the kitchen table, he has placed a red tulip on the table, and behind him, there are the bare bricks of the family home. *"Our circumstances are less than*

ideal with my salary being the sole source of income in our family. Yet, I wish only the best things for my daughters, and that is why, I am pushing them to finish their education, ... to move forward – in one word – I want them to stand on their own feet. I want my daughters to succeed in their lives, especially Bajra the youngest one – but unfortunately, I don't have the means", says Rasim.

The cycle of poverty that Rasim's generation was trapped in would have continued. He missed out on his education opportunities and had to start working early to contribute to his parent's income. *"Despite my circumstances, I sincerely desired to continue my education, even pursuing higher studies, to study a specific field or, at the very least, pursue a craft. ... What can I say: everything was very different before. Today's youth exhibits significant differences compared to the older generation – to tell the truth, we didn't have these opportunities."* But with Bajra going to a fashion-design college and being able to get vocational training as a seamstress and getting additional schooling in the Tranzit day centre, Rasim's daughter will be equipped to break this cycle of poverty. She has big dreams: of creating clothes and opening her shop one day.

ROOT CAUSE

POVERTY, ESPECIALLY AMONG CHILDREN

One of Kosovo's major challenges remains the fight against poverty. Around 18% of the Republic of Kosovo's population lives below the poverty line (45 Euro per month as defined by the World Bank), with 5.1% per cent of the population below the extreme poverty line.³⁴ Children from poor households, socially vulnerable communities and those with special needs lack equal access to vital health and education services due to financial barriers. Nearly 23% of children in Kosovo live in poverty, and 7% live in extreme poverty. These children and their families were put under even more pressure in 2022 when they suffered from an inflation surge.³⁵ The Republic of Kosovo's GDP per capita is just one-quarter of the European Union average (26% of EU 27 in 2020).³⁶

Children hailing from rural or isolated areas, belonging to Roma, Ashkali or Egyptian communities, originating from impoverished households and who have parents with limited education, or are more susceptible to missing out on pivotal opportunities. The Republic of Kosovo's future generations, its children, continue to encounter significant barriers in realising their fundamental rights.



ROOT CAUSE

**YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT,
ESPECIALLY AMONG WOMEN**

Youth unemployment remained high in 2022, particularly among women (27%).³⁷ Demographic pressures, joblessness growth patterns, a propensity towards emigration and poor education are key factors in the precarious position of young people. The Republic of Kosovo has continued the preparations for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee,³⁸ in line with the implementation plan adopted in November 2022.

Women in the Republic of Kosovo face substantial barriers to accessing the labour market, often hindered by a patriarchal mentality and responsibilities like child and aged care. The unequal share of responsibilities present in the maternity, paternity and parental leave between women and men hinders women's employment. Women face discrimination also when they are pregnant or wish to have children; therefore, it is important to treat the termination of a probationary period due to pregnancy as direct discrimination. Limited access to childcare and flexible working arrangements, as well as regulations that discourage the recruitment of women, are important barriers. Other challenges faced by women, especially in rural areas, are lack of care for the elderly, discrimination in access to property, and gender-based violence.³⁹



Bajra enjoys taking advantage of the music lessons and the sewing machine at the CONCORDIA day centre. Centre picture: Her father in the small outdoor area of their little house.

ROOT CAUSE

**SEGREGATION OF
VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

In the Republic of Kosovo, members of the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities face continuous discrimination and entrenched poverty, which varies by location. These issues not only hinder the community's development but also perpetuate cycles of marginalisation, particularly impacting children and youth.

The situation of these groups cannot be fully understood without considering the impact of the Kosovo War in 1998/1999. According to some estimates, as many as 100,000 Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians were displaced during the period of the conflict, mostly in Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro.

Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo today are still mired in poverty and lack physical security and freedom of movement. In their makeshift settlements, they lack access to education and public services, including health care, justice, and employment.⁴⁰ Unemployment is also a crushing problem for these three communities, with some estimates suggesting levels of more than 90%. For Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in general, and women in particular, face barriers due to low basic education and high levels of illiteracy, that lead to their exclusion from participation in all areas of life.⁴¹ This cycle, worsened by the Republic of Kosovo's economic underdevelopment, hinders these communities' participation in the education system and perpetuates their marginalisation. Although there have been recent improvements in education enrolment for these groups, they still fall behind the national average.

The Republic of Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, with a median age of 34,8 years in 2024.⁴² This demographic situation, often referred to as the "demographic dividend," has the potential to be a significant driver of economic, social, and developmental progress. However, realising this potential is hindered by several challenges. The pervasive discrimination faced by the children and youth of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo leads not only to limited access to quality education, employment, and healthcare and a lack of future perspectives but also harms the mental and emotional well-being of community members, especially children and youth.

ROOT CAUSE

LACK OF QUALITY AND SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

In the Republic of Kosovo, the quality of education remains poor, as indicated by the last two OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)⁴³ evaluations, where Kosovo ranked near the bottom. Only 15% of children and 8% from Roma, Ashkali, or Egyptian communities aged 36-59 months participate in early learning programmes. Participation increases to 84% for the general population and 45% of children from these groups attend a pre-primary school.⁴⁴ Overall, preschool education participation is low at 6.7%, well below regional and OECD averages, with only 46.2% of preschool children being girls.

Despite these challenges, progress is being made, as seen with the adoption of a new preschool education law and the development of a primary curriculum for early childhood education in July 2023⁴⁵. The lack of quality learning materials and insufficient teacher training continues to affect education quality. Kosovo students scored significantly lower than the OECD average in the PISA 2022 test, revealing the education system's misalignment with labour market needs.

Poor socio-economic conditions contribute significantly to school absences and dropouts, as families struggle to cover essential educational expenses beyond subsidised textbooks. The "School Dropout Report – Behind the Numbers of Dropouts from Compulsory Education in the Kosovo System 2020-2023" by OSCE shows dropout ratios of 43% for Ashkali and Egyptian communities, 13% for Roma, and 1% for Kosovar Albanians. Factors contributing to dropouts include the physical distance from schools, lack of transport, security concerns, early marriage, and unaffordable education.⁴⁶

Children from Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities face specific disadvantages in education, with higher dropout rates and significant gender gaps. Compulsory education enrollment rates are 72% for girls and 74% for boys, with completion rates of 55% for girls and 67% for boys. Upper secondary completion rates are 15% for girls and 27% for boys. The literacy rate for males in these communities is below 90%, and significantly lower for females at 71%.⁴⁷

Despite these challenges, progress has been noted, with increasing numbers of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian girls attending schools, colleges, and universities. The dropout rate has been declining each year, with fewer female pupils leaving school compared to the period before 2016, indicating successful interventions. However, there is still a long way to go to achieve educational equity for these communities.



"There are a few social problems in Kosovo: we are confronted with a high percentage of unemployment, especially among youngsters, early marriages, child poverty, child labour and domestic violence."

Mirela Lavric, National Director CONCORDIA Kosovo

ROOT CAUSE**STATE SOCIAL SYSTEM**

It is estimated that almost a third of Kosovo's population has only limited access to health care services. The rate of routine immunisation of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children in the Republic of Kosovo is only half that of other children.

The Republic of Kosovo has postponed amendments to the legislation on labour and health and safety at work, which are necessary to further align with the EU acquis,⁴⁸ and with the EU directive on work-life balance. The 2014 law on health insurance, providing for the right and obligation to have mandatory basic package health insurance for all citizens, has not been implemented.

On social inclusion and protection, the Republic of Kosovo's spending on social assistance schemes amounts to 6% of GDP, but less than 0.5% of GDP is allocated to the most deprived as most of the amount is spent on war veterans' pensions. In April 2023, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo ratified an agreement with the World Bank to conduct thorough reforms in the social assistance system. Kosovo made no progress in providing funding allocation for social services. As a result, disparities in services crucial to children were exacerbated.

ROOT CAUSE**CHILDREN'S RIGHTS & EARLY MARRIAGE**

Child, early, and forced marriages are prevalent issues among the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in the Republic of Kosovo. This practice is driven by cultural norms, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities. Whatever the reason it is a violation of children's rights. Among the general population, 10% of women and 1% of men aged 20-49 were married before 18,⁴⁹ while in Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, these figures rise to 43% and 14%, respectively. For those under 15, the general population marriage rate is below 1%, but almost 12% of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women were married before they were fifteen. Many child marriages go unregistered, mostly involving girls, who face higher risks of violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Early marriages often result in child pregnancies, threatening the well-being of both mother and child. This correlates with higher school dropout rates, as married girls are less likely to attend school. Although Kosovo family law deems marriage under 18 illegal, many such unions are informal and unregistered. Ending child marriage requires addressing gender inequality, educational deficits, and poverty, as many women remain uneducated and in patriarchal systems where male voices predominate.

Economic hardship, lack of education, family traditions, and societal prejudices drive early marriages. Many families marry off children due to economic difficulties, aiming to "settle down" their children amid high unemployment and a lack of awareness about the consequences of early marriages. Additionally, societal discrimination against girls perpetuates these practices.

Violence against children remains a concern in Kosovo, with disciplinary violence embedded in socio-cultural norms. According to UNICEF, 72% of children aged 1-14 experienced psychological aggression and physical punishment, highlighting the need for more effective child protection laws and societal change to prevent this violence.⁵⁰



POLICY BRIEF **KOSOVO**

CALL TO ACTION

PIVOTAL:

The health and education system needs to be well financed and effectively governed to resolve disparities in services, particularly at the municipal level and work efficiently together with social support services.



IMPLEMENT KEY INTERVENTIONS FROM THE CONCORDIA IMPACT MODEL:

1. **Educational support** provides school supplies, uniforms, transportation and scholarships to children to ensure they have access to education and offers tutoring, homework assistance, and extracurricular activities, including music classes, to support children to succeed academically. Basic literacy courses are also offered to adults.
2. **Psycho-social support** for children and youth offers one-on-one sessions and group therapy sessions with psychologists. Here children and youth can address personal issues, trauma, and emotional challenges. Art, music and dance are used as therapeutic tools to help children express their feelings and cope with challenges.
3. **Vocational counselling** for youth and parents equips young people and adults with knowledge that increases their employability. Programme participants are registered as job seekers in the public platform, or with vocational training to facilitate employability.
4. **Healthcare services** provide free basic medical assistance, counselling and health education to children, youth and parents. Necessary medication for children and support for special medical needs for treatments is vital.
5. The basic needs support means the distribution of **food and material support** to families monthly to those families with newborns. Caregivers receive assistance in submitting applications for various social rights benefits and subsidies for families.

6. As part of the family support programmes, CONCORDIA offers **psycho-social counselling services** to address domestic violence, early marriages, school dropout and other social problems. Additionally, families are provided with counselling sessions to address and resolve family dynamics that may be affecting the children. Workshops on parenting skills, household management and financial responsibility are also offered.

7. **Women support groups** provide empowerment sessions to challenge and change societal norms and attitudes that perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality.

ESSENTIAL POLICY DECISIONS:

1. **Ensure access to quality education in Kosovo:** Early childhood education gives every child a strong start. Remedial education, free school transport and an overall inclusive education system for children with disabilities, children from minority groups, and those facing social or economic disadvantages have to be accessible to all children.
2. **Services for children need to be diversified and integrated to provide** a continuum of services for children without parental care or those who have been victims of abuse. Quality support and health services for children and youth with behavioural problems, mental health challenges and substance abuse are also needed.
3. **As part of Social Protection and Family Support,** child allowances and financial support for low-income families, social housing and the registration of all children to secure their legal identity and access to services must be prioritised.
4. All schools should have **functional child protection mechanisms.**

G.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF GENERATIONAL CHILD POVERTY

CONCORDIA IMPACT MODEL

Drawing on more than 30 years of experience, CONCORDIA plays a central role in strengthening resilience and developing the potential of children, young people, their families, the social workforce, and various community members who support them.

CONCORDIA is committed to empowering children and young individuals to lead self-determined lives outside of marginalisation. CONCORDIA's Impact Model provides direction on how to focus our interventions and resources effectively to fulfil this mission.

Grounded in a humanistic vision that values diversity across cultures and religions, CONCORDIA programmes are shaped by the principles outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the

Child (UNCRC)⁵¹ and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵²

Children and young people who must endure poverty and discrimination are disproportionately affected by ongoing crises throughout their lives. Merely addressing their material needs is insufficient; instead, high-quality, inclusive, accessible, and affordable social services and education are crucial to supporting the most vulnerable and breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion across generations.

CONCORDIA aims to ensure the safety and well-being of the **children and young individuals** under its care, fostering environments where they can thrive to their fullest potential. CONCORDIA is dedicated to facilitating their healthy

development and unrestricted growth. As such, CONCORDIA actively engages in initiatives within its project countries to enhance the lives of marginalised children, youth, and their families.

The outlined Impact Model⁵³ explains CONCORDIA's interventions through its Theory of Change. It focuses on **childcare, community-based intervention, education and professional training, employment and social business, and empowerment of children and young people.**

These **five long-term pathways of change** contribute to children and youth living a life free from the injustice of poverty and discrimination. The impact areas support SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 4, SDG 8, and SDG 10 and follow the overall understanding of the UNCRC.



PATHWAY 1

CHILDCARE

Alternative childcare services provide stability and safety for children, reducing the risk of abuse, neglect, and trauma. These services ensure access to adequate nutrition, health-care, and emotional support, promoting essential physical and mental development for educational and social success. High-quality childcare services also prepare children for formal education, increasing their chances of educational achievement.

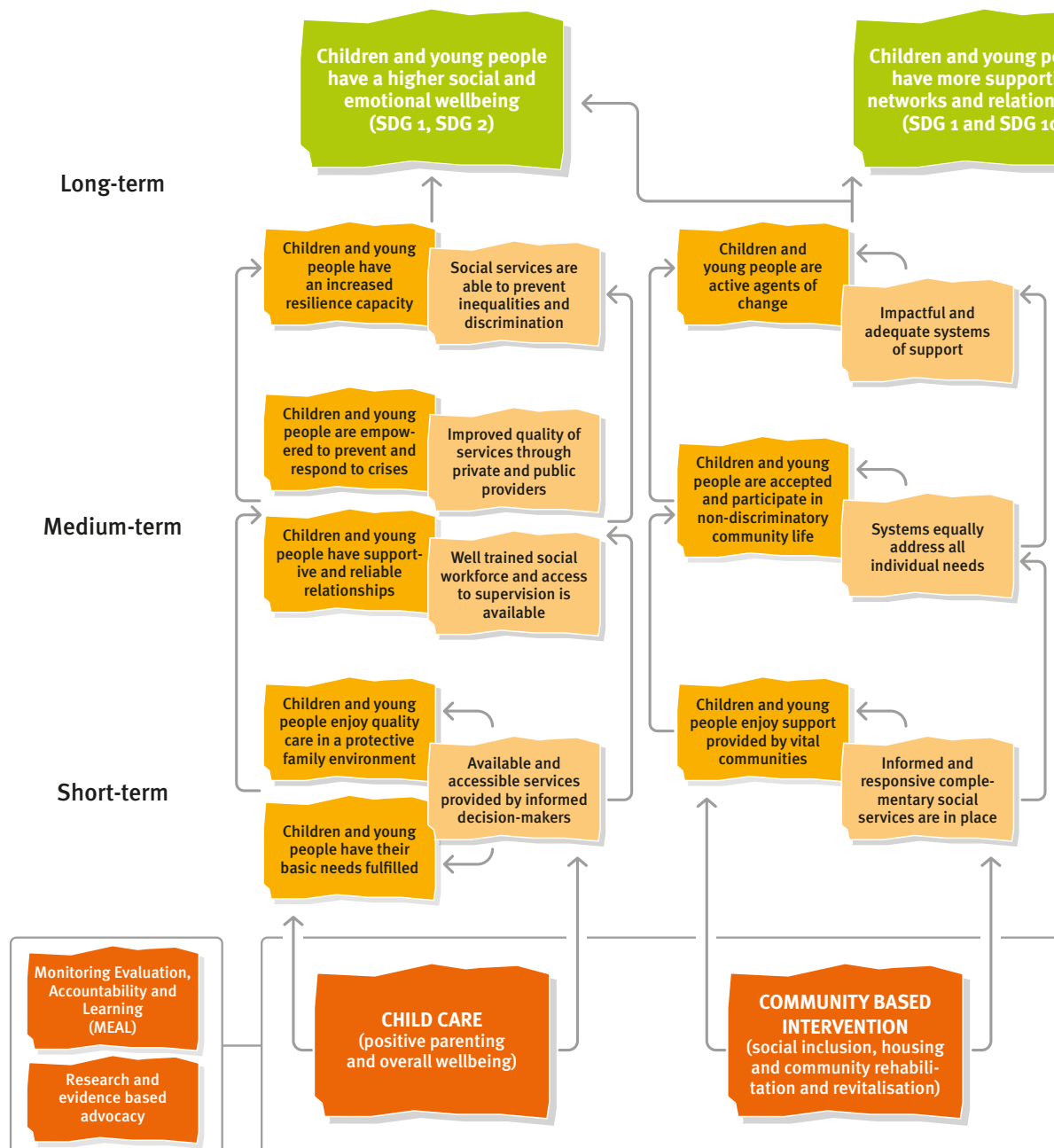
CONCORDIA's childcare programmes focus on fulfilling the basic needs of children and young people while providing quality care in a nurturing family environment. This approach fosters positive relationships, resilience, and emotional well-being. Systemically, CONCORDIA collaborates with biological and foster families, public and private childcare services, and local authorities to ensure quality care. Training and support programmes for caregivers and social workers enhance the quality of care and promote inclusivity and non-discrimination within social support services.

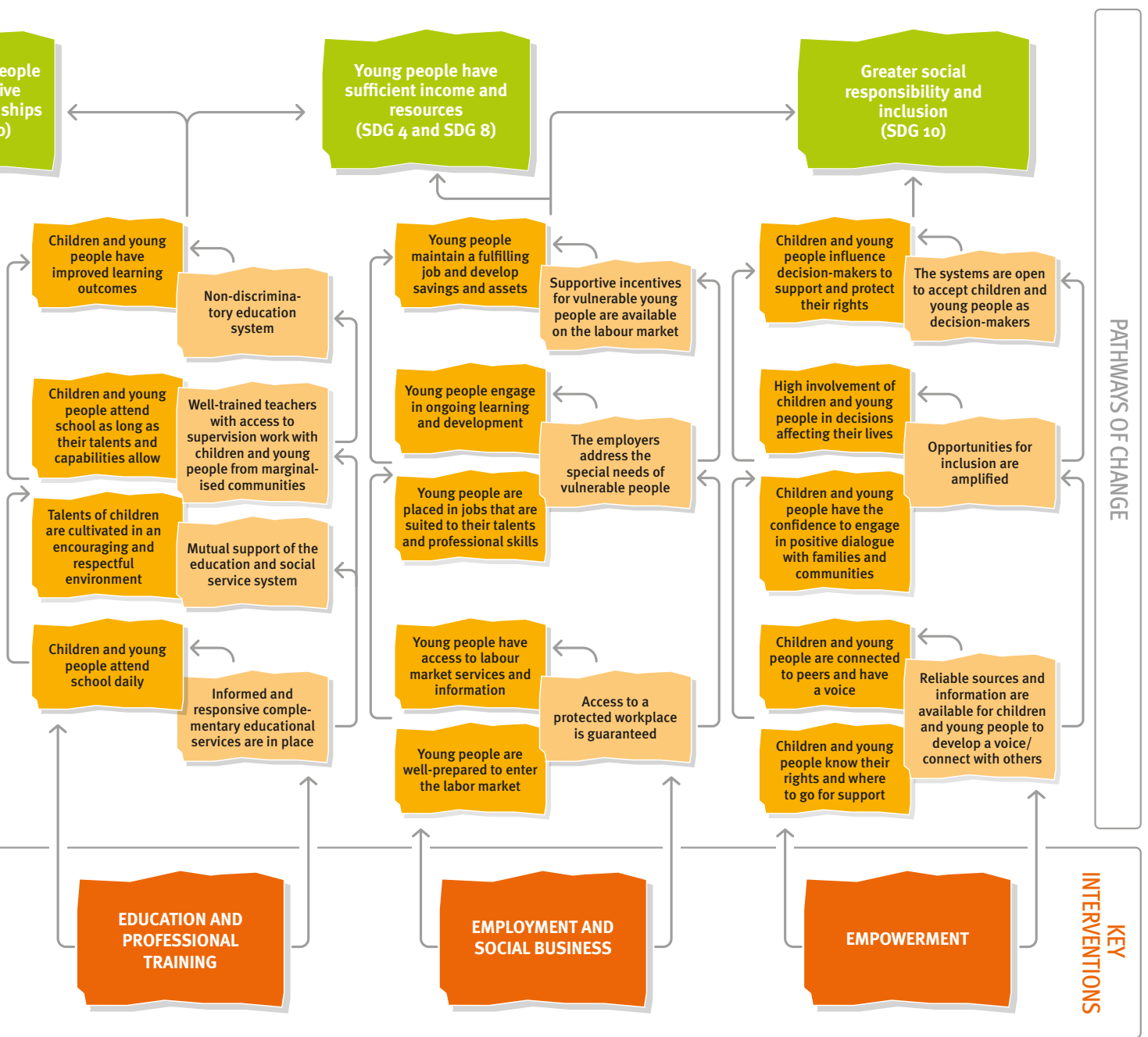


CONCORDIA SOCIAL PROJECTS' IMPACT MODEL

VISION

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GET TO LIVE A SELF-DETERMINED LIFE, OUT OF MARGINALISATION





Individual changes Systemic changes

PATHWAY 2

COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTION

Community-based support services, such as day centres and outreach work, help including meals, healthcare, and social interaction. They address immediate needs and foster community bonds. Outreach work identifies and supports vulnerable individuals, connecting them to necessary resources and services. This reduces their isolation and promotes social inclusion. These holistic interventions create a stable foundation for individuals to thrive.

CONCORDIA's community-based support is combined with the efforts of mobile teams who visit and support families at home with activities in day centres. They activate existing resources and support networks for vulnerable children and families. CONCORDIA focuses on family strengthening by providing counselling and basic medical care and referring individuals to specialised support services. In areas lacking resources, CONCORDIA collaborates with local stakeholders to develop community-based services. By providing information about available services and advocating for vulnerable members' needs, CONCORDIA facilitates long-term, socially sustainable impacts.

PATHWAY 3

EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Ensuring access to education is paramount. Educational services like after-school support and remedial education provide additional academic help, improving school performance, building confidence, and reducing dropout rates. Vocational training equips young people with practical skills and qualifications that enhance employment prospects and open pathways to stable and well-paid jobs.

CONCORDIA works to address barriers such as transportation, and access to learning materials and creates support systems for vulnerable children and young people. Collaborating with educators and decision-makers, CONCORDIA creates respectful and nurturing learning environments that cater to the needs of marginalised communities, such as daily learning support and remedial education or early childhood education. By bridging education and social services, CONCORDIA facilitates tailored paths for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, enhancing their academic success and future employment opportunities. As part of the EduCampus in Romania, CONCORDIA runs a primary school and a vocational school.

"Our work at CONCORDIA is driven by the belief that every child has the right to a safe, healthy, and fulfilling childhood. But we cannot achieve this alone. It requires collaboration across sectors and borders, a united effort to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality. The children we serve cannot afford to wait. Their futures are at stake, and with them, the future of our society."

Martina Raytchinova, International Programme Director



PATHWAY 4

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL BUSINESS

Employment support services assist individuals in finding employment by offering training that matches market needs, thus improving job prospects. Career counselling guides individuals in choosing suitable career paths and developing necessary skills, increasing their chances of long-term employment. Workshops and internships provide real-world experience and networking opportunities, leading to better job opportunities and career advancement.

Many young people from marginalised backgrounds require additional support to access employment opportunities. CONCORDIA provides mentoring, job coaching, and advocacy to ensure fair employment practices and continued professional development. Through partnerships with the corporate sector, CONCORDIA advocates for supportive workplaces and raises awareness about the unique needs of marginalised youth. By empowering employers to understand and accommodate these needs, CONCORDIA creates pathways for inclusive economic participation. CONCORDIA also offers long-term employment opportunities in its social businesses.



PATHWAY 5

EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment initiatives build self-esteem and confidence in children and young people, helping them develop a positive self-image and the determination to pursue their goals. By teaching essential life skills such as financial literacy, decision-making, and leadership, these programmes prepare young people to navigate adulthood successfully. Involving young people in decision-making processes and advocacy initiatives gives them a voice and a sense of agency, fostering a commitment to their community and future.

CONCORDIA aims to empower children and young people to become informed citizens and agents of change through a participatory approach. CONCORDIA educates them about their rights and encourages them to connect with peers, express themselves, and advocate for their rights. By providing accessible information and opportunities for participation, we integrate their voices into decision-making processes, fostering greater social responsibility and inclusion within society.

Together, these interventions address both the immediate needs and the underlying causes of generational child poverty, creating a supportive environment that enables individuals to escape poverty's grip and build a better future. By promoting education, providing essential services, enhancing employment prospects, and empowering individuals, these activities create pathways to long-term economic stability and social inclusion, thereby breaking the generational cycle of poverty.

A BRIEF FOR **DECISION MAKERS**
IN ALL COUNTRIES

CALL TO ACTION

CALL TO ACTION (1):

CHILD PROTECTION

In this final chapter, we present actionable strategies for policymakers to effectively combat generational child poverty in these four severely affected countries.

Firstly, the following three Calls to Action are recommended to be followed in all four countries:

Children are protected and free from harm, and their rights are respected. Future damage is prevented by creating policies and systems that identify and respond to risks before they lead to children being hurt.

Safeguarding children's well-being requires strong social protection systems to foster healthy development and mitigate vulnerability, especially during times of crisis. CONCORDIA believes the key to improving these systems lies in strategic investments in all countries, such as prioritising children's health and education, empowering social service providers and caregivers, and enhancing crisis management through improved data systems and targeted outreach. While progress has been made, there is still room for improvement, especially in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children and reducing regional disparities and rural-urban divides. Overall, a comprehensive strategy for child safeguarding, specifically targeting the children at risk, is essential for long-term success.



CALL TO ACTION (2):

CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Children and youth have meaningful participation and have a voice in decision-making.

CONCORDIA advocates for inclusive decision-making processes, recognising that effective and sustainable decisions require meaningful involvement from those affected. Children, being experts in their own lives, must have a voice in decisions concerning them. Their participation not only enhances accountability but also fosters their overall development and strengthens democratic principles and civic responsibility. In addressing critical social issues like child poverty, inequality, and child protection, policies must reflect the real-life experiences and challenges of children and young people. CONCORDIA collaborates with and supports local, national and EU governments in establishing mechanisms for child participation, and expands opportunities for child participation at local, national and EU levels to ensure representation from diverse backgrounds and age groups.

CALL TO ACTION (3):

CHILD POVERTY

Child poverty affects every aspect of a child's life, from their health and education to their future opportunities. Every child deserves the chance to grow, learn, and thrive in a safe and nurturing environment.

Breaking the cycle of generational poverty requires increasing resources for children and youth, along with better managed and governed co-ordinated collaboration across sectors. Additionally, we recommend a serious implementation of the European Child Guarantee⁵⁴ to create more equal opportunities for vulnerable children.

On a **country-by-country level**, we recommend implementing the **Policy Briefs**, based on a) key interventions from the CONCORDIA Impact model and b) essential policy decisions required at the systemic level.

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IMPRINT

Published 2024 by:

CONCORDIA Social Projects Non-Profit Foundation
Hochstettergasse 6, 1020 Vienna, Austria
T +43 1 212 81 49 | Fax +43 1 212 81 49-23
office@concordia.or.at | www.concordia-socialprojects.org

Locations:

CONCORDIA ROMÂNIA
Dr. Regimentului 20D, 013887 București
romania@concordia.org.ro | www.concordia.org.ro

CONCORDIA MOLDOVA
Str. A. Corobceanu 13/1, 2004 Chișinău
moldova@concordia.md | www.concordia.md

CONCORDIA BULGARIA
Ul. Pavlina Unufrieva N. 4, 1510 Sofia
bulgaria@concordia.bg | www.concordia.bg

CONCORDIA KOSOVO
Rr. Lahuta e Malësisë p.n., 20000 Prizren
office@concordia-kosovo.org | www.concordia-kosovo.org

Responsible for the content:

Bernhard Drumel, CONCORDIA International Executive Director

Country Directors:

Tatiana Balta and Elena Matache, CONCORDIA Moldova
Diana Certan, CONCORDIA Romania
Stanimir Georgiev, CONCORDIA Bulgaria
Mirela Lavric, CONCORDIA Kosovo

Research, editing & text:

Thomas Seifert, Eva Okonofua, Martina Raytchinova, Katharina Wagner

Proofreading:

Melissa Baird, Marion Brandner

Graphic design & layout:

Gudrun Platzl, www.eine-auge.weide.com

Photos:

Thomas Seifert

Print:

Druckwerkstatt Print & Packaging



CONCORDIA Social Projects Non-profit foundation
Hochstettergasse 6 | 1020 Wien
T +43 1 212 81 49
www.concordia-socialprojects.org

