

# **Strengthening Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Europe: The Need for Legal Regulation of Psychotherapy within MHPSS Systems**

Evidence and Policy Recommendations from Bosnia and Herzegovina

Prepared for discussions at the European Parliament, Brussels

Across Europe, increasing mental health needs among children and young people are placing growing demands on national systems, highlighting the urgency of strengthening integrated and sustainable responses.

## **From System Gaps to Legislative Responsibility**

Evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina points to the absence of a clearly regulated psychotherapeutic profession as a key barrier to an effective Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) system.

While the need for specialised support is increasing, access to qualified psychotherapists remains:

- **uneven and insufficient**
- often dependent on private provision
- and inadequately integrated into public child protection systems

This gap results in:

- delayed or inadequate support for children and young people
- overburdening of other sectors (education, social protection, primary healthcare)
- and an increased risk of long-term mental health difficulties

These findings are consistent with global evidence. The World Health Organization highlights that **half of all mental health conditions begin before the age of 14**, underscoring the urgency of early, accessible, and systemically integrated interventions.

## Why Psychotherapy Must Be Recognised as a Regulated Profession

Psychotherapy is a **highly specialised, evidence-informed intervention**, particularly essential in working with:

- trauma
- violence and abuse
- developmental and relational difficulties
- crisis and post-crisis recovery

Without legal recognition and regulation:

- there is **no assurance of quality and standards of care**
- professional roles between psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists remain unclear
- children and families may be exposed to **inadequate or unqualified services**

A regulated framework ensures:

- clearly defined **competencies, training standards, and ethical guidelines**
- established **referral pathways within MHPSS systems**
- accountability and protection of service users

According to the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification (Code 2634.2.4), psychotherapy is recognised as an independent occupation, distinct from psychology, psychiatry, and counselling. Psychotherapists provide treatment and support for individuals with psychological, psychosocial, and psychosomatic conditions through science-based methods, while contributing to personal development and wellbeing.

This classification further reinforces the need for clear legal recognition and regulation of psychotherapy within national systems, particularly in the context of child and adolescent mental health.

This aligns with the World Health Organization call for **transforming mental health systems toward quality-assured, rights-based, and community-oriented care** (WHO, 2022).

## Why a Specific Focus on Children and Adolescents Is Critical

Children and young people are not “small adults.” Their mental health needs are:

- **developmentally specific**
- strongly shaped by family, school, and community systems
- particularly sensitive to trauma and environmental influences

The findings point to a systemic lack of **specialised knowledge and training for working with children and adolescents, particularly in trauma-related contexts**

Without explicit legal recognition of **child and adolescent psychotherapy**:

- interventions risk being inadequate or potentially harmful
- early signs of distress remain unaddressed
- critical opportunities for prevention are lost

This directly contradicts the **“do no harm” principle** and rights-based approaches to child protection, strongly emphasised in international frameworks.

### **Connection with MHPSS System Strengthening**

An effective MHPSS system is based on a **layered model of care**, where:

- non-specialised support is provided at community level
- and specialised services address complex needs

Psychotherapy represents a **core pillar of specialised MHPSS services**.

Without its formal inclusion in legislation:

- the system remains incomplete
- referral pathways are disrupted
- continuity of care cannot be ensured

Legal regulation therefore enables:

- integration of psychotherapy across **health, education, and social protection systems**
- development and strengthening of **multidisciplinary teams**
- sustainability beyond short-term, project-based interventions

This approach is fully consistent with global MHPSS frameworks and system-strengthening models promoted by the World Health Organization and UNICEF.

## **Alignment with European and International Frameworks**

Establishing a legal framework for psychotherapy aligns with:

- European efforts to strengthen **mental health systems**
- child protection and safeguarding standards
- and the Sarajevo Declaration on the Mental Health of Children and Young People

These frameworks emphasise:

- participation of children and young people
- “do no harm” and rights-based approaches
- accessibility, non-discrimination, and confidentiality
- sustainable and integrated service provision

## **Why This Is a Strategic Investment**

Legislating psychotherapy, particularly in the field of child and adolescent mental health, is not only a professional issue, but a **strategic societal investment**.

It enables:

- earlier and more effective interventions
- reduction of long-term healthcare and social costs
- strengthened resilience of children, families, and communities

Most importantly, it ensures that children and young people receive **timely, safe, and developmentally appropriate support when they need it most**.

Without a regulated psychotherapeutic profession, MHPSS systems remain structurally incomplete.

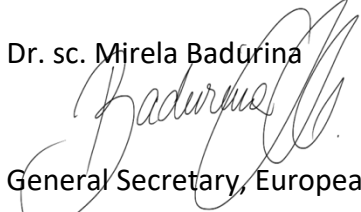
## Conclusion

Strengthening MHPSS systems without regulating psychotherapy creates a structural gap.

Introducing legislation on psychotherapeutic practice, **with explicit recognition of child and adolescent psychotherapy**, is therefore essential for:

- building integrated systems
- protecting children's rights
- and ensuring quality, accessible, and sustainable mental health care

Dr. sc. Mirela Badurina

  
General Secretary, European Association for Integrative Psychotherapy (EAIP)  
Registrar, EIATSCYP

Founder and Director, BHIDAPA – EAPTI (Academy for Psychotherapy)  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

## References and Further Reading

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