



Psychological Resilience and Reintegration of Trafficking Victims: Challenges in European and Romanian Policy Frameworks

Mihaela RUS^{1*}, Carmen Mihaela Băiceanu², Silvia Georgeta PETROV³

¹Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences, *Ovidius University*, Constanța, Romania The Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy

^{2,3}Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, *Ovidius University*, Constanța, Romania

Abstract

This study examines the psychological resilience and social reintegration of human trafficking victims within the framework of European and Romanian policies. The objective of the research is to analyze how current legal and psychosocial systems support or hinder victims' recovery and reintegration, emphasizing the role of resilience as a mediating factor between trauma and social adaptation. Human trafficking remains one of the most complex forms of human rights violations, generating deep psychological scars that extend beyond the cessation of exploitation. The paper adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining psychological, legal, and policy analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions and victim-centered rehabilitation programs. Drawing on European Union directives—particularly Directive 2011/36/EU—and Romanian national strategies, the study investigates the alignment between policy frameworks and psychological needs identified in clinical and social practice. Findings indicate that while European standards promote comprehensive assistance and empowerment, practical implementation in Romania often faces challenges such as limited interinstitutional coordination, insufficient mental health resources, and societal stigma. The research highlights resilience not as an innate trait but as a dynamic process fostered through supportive environments, access to psychological care, and community inclusion. It concludes that sustainable reintegration requires a multidimensional approach that integrates legal protection with long-term psychological and social support. By linking policy evaluation with psychological theory, this study contributes to strengthening victim-centered practices and the human rights dimension of anti-trafficking policies in Europe and Romania.

Keywords: psychological resilience, human trafficking, victim reintegration, European policy, Romanian framework, trauma recovery, human rights

1. Introduction

Human trafficking constitutes one of the most severe human rights violations in contemporary Europe, producing long-lasting psychological trauma and social dislocation (UNODC, 2024). While legislative and prosecutorial frameworks have strengthened considerably since the adoption of Directive 2011/36/EU, the psychosocial dimension—especially the resilience and reintegration of victims—remains underdeveloped (European Commission, 2023).

This article aims to examine the extent to which European and Romanian policies address the psychological needs of trafficking survivors. It argues that genuine reintegration requires not only legal protection and compensation but also long-term support fostering resilience, identity reconstruction, and agency restoration. The research adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary lens, integrating psychological, legal, and policy perspectives.

Research questions:

1. How do European and Romanian frameworks conceptualize and support victims' psychological resilience?
2. What barriers impede effective reintegration in practice?
3. How can trauma-informed and resilience-based models enhance existing reintegration policies?

2. Theoretical Background: Trauma and Resilience in Human Trafficking

Trafficking survivors often experience prolonged trauma, including chronic fear, dependency, and identity loss, which severely disrupt their capacity for autonomous functioning (Zimmerman et al., 2018). The psychological consequences of trafficking are comparable to those of prolonged captivity and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), as survivors are frequently subjected to continuous coercion, manipulation, and degradation. Repeated exposure to fear and helplessness results in learned dependency—a psychological mechanism that undermines self-efficacy and internal locus of control (Herman, 1992). As a consequence, victims may internalize the trafficker's authority as a survival strategy, developing trauma bonds that blur the boundaries between coercion and perceived consent. This process severely compromises personal agency and the capacity to make autonomous decisions, even after physical liberation.

The psychological resilience paradigm defines resilience as the dynamic ability to adapt positively despite adversity and traumatic stress (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). In contrast to earlier conceptions of resilience as a static personality trait, contemporary trauma research conceptualizes it as a developmental and relational process, constantly reconstructed through interaction with supportive environments. In the context of trafficking, resilience is thus not an innate quality but an evolving capacity for reconstructing agency through experiences of safety, attachment, and meaning-making. Safety provides the neurobiological foundation for recovery by stabilizing the stress response system; attachment enables emotional regulation and re-establishment of trust; while meaning-making allows survivors to integrate their traumatic experiences into a coherent sense of identity.

Resilience-based recovery differs fundamentally from traditional victim-assistance models, which often emphasize protection and basic needs but risk reproducing passive dependency. In contrast, resilience-oriented frameworks promote empowerment, active participation, and the development of socio-emotional competencies as central mechanisms of psychological healing (Ungar, 2013). Within these frameworks, survivors are recognized as agents of recovery rather than passive recipients of aid. Empowerment involves fostering decision-

making capacity, rebuilding self-esteem, and restoring a sense of personal control. Participation enhances motivation and social belonging by involving survivors in community life, education, and employment. Socio-emotional competence—encompassing emotion regulation, interpersonal skills, and self-awareness—serves as both an outcome and a catalyst of recovery.

Interventions grounded in resilience theory typically combine therapeutic continuity, community integration, and peer support. Therapeutic continuity ensures that psychological assistance extends beyond crisis intervention, offering consistent and long-term therapy that adapts to survivors' changing needs. Community integration initiatives facilitate gradual exposure to safe social environments, encouraging survivors to form constructive relationships and access meaningful roles in society. Peer support, often provided by other survivors, enhances resilience through shared understanding, modeling of coping strategies, and validation of lived experience. These approaches correspond closely to the trauma-informed care model promoted by the World Health Organization and the Council of Europe, which identifies safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity as the fundamental principles of effective rehabilitation (WHO, 2022).

In sum, the resilience paradigm reframes post-trafficking recovery as a process of reconstructing autonomy and relational security. Rather than perceiving victims solely through the lens of vulnerability, it acknowledges their adaptive capacities and potential for growth. This perspective calls for a paradigm shift in European and Romanian policy—from crisis management toward sustained psychosocial empowerment—where the ultimate goal of reintegration is not merely functional independence, but psychological wholeness and restored dignity.

3. European Policy Framework

Directive 2011/36/EU establishes a comprehensive victim-centered paradigm that integrates protection, assistance, and reintegration as interconnected components of anti-trafficking policy. This directive represents a paradigmatic shift from a purely criminal justice approach toward a human right-based framework, where the dignity, agency, and well-being of victims are central to institutional response (European Commission, 2021). Article 11 specifically mandates Member States to ensure “assistance and support for victims before, during, and after criminal proceedings,” thereby recognizing that recovery extends beyond the temporal boundaries of prosecution. It also requires that such support not be conditional upon victims' cooperation with law enforcement authorities, acknowledging the psychological vulnerability and fear of retaliation that often prevent survivors from testifying.

Complementary to the Directive, the *EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021–2025* outlines a multidimensional approach linking prevention, protection, and prosecution to sustainable reintegration. The Strategy emphasizes access to education, employment, housing, and psychosocial services as essential elements of recovery, thereby broadening the concept of rehabilitation from emergency support to long-term social inclusion (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, it promotes multi-agency coordination among national referral mechanisms (NRMs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and social services, highlighting the need for trauma-informed and gender-sensitive practices consistent with international human rights instruments such as the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (2005).

Despite these normative advances, significant gaps persist in implementation. GRETA (2023) evaluations consistently reveal fragmentation and unevenness across Member States in translating the Directive's standards into practice. Many national systems provide

comprehensive services only until the conclusion of criminal proceedings, after which survivors are left without continued psychological or social support. Reintegration measures are frequently short-term, project-based, and dependent on NGO funding rather than embedded in public welfare systems. This results in discontinuity of care and an increased risk of secondary victimization or re-trafficking (Council of Europe, 2023).

A recurrent structural weakness identified by GRETA and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2022) concerns the lack of coordinated governance between institutional and civil-society actors. National referral mechanisms often suffer from overlapping mandates, poor data exchange, and insufficient training on trauma-informed care. Consequently, the psychosocial dimension of reintegration remains marginal compared to legal or administrative objectives such as residence permits, employment assistance, or repatriation. Reintegration, in practice, is thus predominantly defined administratively rather than psychologically—focused on economic self-sufficiency and documentation rather than mental health, self-efficacy, and relational recovery (Council of Europe, 2023).

Furthermore, while the resilience framework is implicitly present in EU discourse through concepts such as “empowerment,” “agency,” and “long-term recovery,” it lacks explicit operationalization through measurable indicators. Neither the Directive nor the EU Strategy provides standardized metrics for assessing psychological resilience, emotional well-being, or the quality of post-traumatic adaptation. As a result, evaluation remains largely quantitative—counting beneficiaries, services provided, or funds allocated—without capturing the qualitative dimensions of psychological transformation that define genuine reintegration.

The European Union’s future policy directions increasingly acknowledge this gap. The *EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator’s Report* (2023) recommends developing outcome-based monitoring systems that include psychosocial indicators and survivor-led evaluation frameworks. Such instruments could translate the resilience paradigm into concrete governance tools, allowing Member States to measure not only compliance with procedural standards but also the substantive effectiveness of recovery and reintegration. Without such measures, the risk persists that trafficking victims will continue to transition from legal protection to psychosocial neglect—a paradox that undermines the Directive’s very purpose of restoring human dignity and autonomy.

From Legal Protection to Psychosocial Reintegration: Operational Gaps and Future Directions

While Directive 2011/36/EU and subsequent EU strategies have significantly advanced victim protection at the legal and institutional level, the transition from *formal compliance* to *functional reintegration* remains incomplete. This gap reflects a broader structural challenge within European governance: the persistence of a legalistic paradigm that prioritizes procedural alignment and measurable administrative outcomes over the lived, psychological dimensions of recovery (GRETA, 2023; FRA, 2022).

In many Member States, victim assistance frameworks still operate within a time-limited and conditional model, where services are tied to legal status, cooperation with prosecutors, or fixed funding cycles. Once judicial proceedings conclude, survivors frequently lose access to specialized psychological care or social support programs. This discontinuity reflects a systemic misunderstanding of trauma recovery as a short-term event rather than a prolonged process requiring sustained engagement. As trauma theorists have demonstrated, survivors of chronic exploitation often need years to rebuild safety, identity, and relational trust (Van der

Kolk, 2014; Herman, 1992). When support ends prematurely, the risk of retraumatization, social marginalization, or re-exploitation substantially increases.

Another operational gap concerns the fragmentation of responsibilities between governmental and non-governmental actors. Although the EU encourages the establishment of National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs), their effectiveness depends on interagency cooperation, information sharing, and clear role delineation. In practice, GRETA reports (2023) indicate that coordination often remains ad hoc and personality-driven rather than institutionalized. NGOs continue to carry a disproportionate burden in providing psychosocial services, while state agencies focus primarily on legal procedures. This structural imbalance leads to parallel systems that operate without unified standards, monitoring, or sustainable funding.

Moreover, reintegration remains conceptually underdeveloped in European policy. It is often equated with the cessation of trafficking-related vulnerability or the achievement of economic independence. However, psychosocial reintegration entails much more—it involves reconstructing identity, re-establishing trust, and developing emotional self-regulation and social belonging. Without addressing these dimensions, survivors may achieve administrative stability without attaining psychological well-being or a sense of agency.

Despite these limitations, several Member States have begun to model more comprehensive, resilience-oriented approaches to reintegration:

- **The Netherlands** implements a long-term, multidisciplinary care model in which survivors are assigned a single case coordinator who follows them through all recovery phases. This continuity promotes safety, trust, and therapeutic stability (GRETA, 2022).
- **Sweden** integrates trauma-informed mental-health services into municipal welfare programs, ensuring access to specialized psychotherapy, housing, and employment counseling even after criminal cases end.
- **Spain's Proyecto Esperanza** represents a civil-society-led initiative that combines psychological counseling, peer mentoring, and social entrepreneurship to promote survivor agency and autonomy (European Commission, 2021).

These examples illustrate that functional harmonization—the genuine alignment between legal standards and psychosocial practice—is achievable when policy is guided by trauma-informed and resilience-based principles. What distinguishes these models is not the quantity of services provided but the quality of continuity, trust, and empowerment that underpins them.

Future EU policy directions, as indicated by the *EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator's Annual Report* (2023), should therefore aim to operationalize resilience through measurable outcomes, including:

1. **Psychological well-being indicators** (self-efficacy, emotional regulation, social connectedness);
2. **Long-term monitoring systems** that track reintegration beyond the judicial phase;
3. **Cross-sectoral training** for social workers, law enforcement, and health professionals in trauma-informed methodologies;
4. **Survivor-led evaluation mechanisms** to ensure that policies reflect lived experiences and not only institutional expectations.

Ultimately, the sustainability of the European anti-trafficking framework depends on its capacity to move from legal protection to psychosocial transformation—from compliance to compassion, from short-term aid to long-term empowerment. Only by embedding resilience

as both a principle and a measurable policy outcome can the European Union achieve substantive harmonization between law and humanity.

4. Romanian Policy Context

Romania, a key source country for victims of trafficking within the European Union, has formally transposed Directive 2011/36/EU through Law No. 678/2001 on preventing and combating trafficking in persons and its subsequent amendments, as well as through the National Strategy Against Trafficking in Persons 2024–2028 coordinated by the National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP, 2024). These instruments collectively establish the legislative and institutional backbone of Romania's anti-trafficking system, outlining procedures for victim identification, referral, assistance, and reintegration. In formal terms, the Romanian legal framework demonstrates a high level of alignment with European standards, guaranteeing access to emergency shelters, medical care, psychological counseling, and legal aid for identified victims (European Commission, 2023).

However, as GRETA (2022) and multiple civil-society reports (e.g., *eLiberare*, 2023; *Pro Refugiu*, 2022) emphasize, the implementation of psychosocial and reintegration measures remains inconsistent, underfunded, and largely dependent on non-governmental organizations. In practice, assistance is often short-term, reactive, and unevenly distributed across regions, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Victim identification is still predominantly conducted by law enforcement, while social and psychological services are subordinated to the logic of prosecution rather than to survivors' long-term recovery trajectories.

Several structural challenges undermine the effectiveness of Romania's reintegration system:

- Limited psychological capacity. Only a small number of shelters operate with specialized trauma therapists or psychologists trained in complex trauma, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress. In many counties, mental-health care for trafficking survivors is provided by generalist social workers or volunteers without clinical supervision. Consequently, therapeutic interventions often address immediate distress rather than the deep-seated trauma that affects identity reconstruction and interpersonal functioning (GRETA, 2022).
- Short-term interventions. Psychological counseling is typically confined to the minimum duration of residence in shelters—most often a period of two to three months. Once victims exit institutional accommodation, psychological services are discontinued, leaving survivors without continuity of care. This time-limited model contrasts sharply with trauma research demonstrating that recovery from chronic exploitation requires multi-year therapeutic engagement (Van der Kolk, 2014).
- Lack of continuity between emergency accommodation and community reintegration. The transition from shelter care to community life is one of the most critical yet least supported phases of recovery. Survivors frequently return to vulnerable environments or face economic and social isolation. The absence of structured follow-up programs—such as supported housing, vocational mentorship, or peer-guided reintegration—creates a vacuum in which resilience cannot consolidate (Council of Europe, 2023).
- Institutional burnout and secondary victimization. Frontline professionals, including police officers, psychologists, and case managers, often work under high emotional strain and insufficient supervision. The repetitive exposure to traumatic narratives, combined with bureaucratic workload and limited resources, leads to compassion fatigue and emotional desensitization (Moldovan & Tănăsescu, 2021). This phenomenon can indirectly reproduce

forms of secondary victimization when survivors perceive institutional interactions as impersonal, rushed, or judgmental.

- Beyond these systemic obstacles, there is a broader conceptual gap: Romania's reintegration framework continues to emphasize protection and assistance rather than empowerment and resilience. Support is often framed in terms of sheltering and subsistence rather than in fostering autonomy, self-efficacy, and social participation. This orientation reflects the historical legacy of social welfare systems that prioritize compliance with administrative procedures over individualized psychosocial recovery (ANITP, 2024).

- Nevertheless, recent developments indicate a gradual paradigm shift. Local pilot initiatives—such as *community resilience projects* developed by NGOs in Constanța, Cluj-Napoca, and Iași—have begun to integrate trauma-informed and empowerment-oriented methodologies. These programs combine psychological therapy with education, vocational training, and survivor mentorship, creating safe relational spaces that reinforce agency and belonging. Survivor peer networks, supported by international partners like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and eLiberare Foundation, have emerged as innovative platforms where former victims engage in advocacy, peer support, and awareness campaigns. Such networks have proven effective in reducing isolation and promoting self-worth, essential components of resilience (Ungar, 2013).

To ensure the sustainability and scalability of these promising practices, Romania must address several structural priorities:

- Institutionalize trauma-informed training for all professionals within ANITP and its partner institutions;
- Establish multi-agency coordination frameworks linking shelters, mental-health services, employment agencies, and local communities;
- Secure stable public funding for long-term psychological and social reintegration programs;
- Introduce psychosocial outcome indicators—such as emotional well-being, social integration, and self-efficacy—to evaluate reintegration beyond administrative metrics.
- Ultimately, Romania's path toward full compliance with the spirit of Directive 2011/36/EU depends not only on its legal framework but on its capacity to translate rights into *psychological realities*. True reintegration must be conceived as a transformative process of empowerment and resilience-building, wherein survivors recover not only safety and livelihood but also dignity, identity, and hope.

A comparative perspective reveals that Romania's anti-trafficking framework is formally aligned with the European Union's legislative architecture but functionally divergent in its implementation of psychosocial and resilience-oriented measures. While both systems share a legal commitment to victim protection and reintegration, the EU framework is increasingly guided by *human rights and trauma-informed principles*, whereas Romania's national practice remains primarily *procedural and reactive*.

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining doctrinal legal analysis, policy analysis, and psychological interpretation. The research corpus includes European Union directives, GRETA evaluations, FRA reports, Romanian national strategies, and recent academic literature on trauma, resilience, and victim reintegration published between 2018 and 2024. Documents were selected based on their relevance to trafficking victim support, psychosocial reintegration, and resilience-oriented approaches. The analysis

follows a thematic and comparative approach, focusing on the relationship between legal frameworks and trauma-informed reintegration practices.

The following table summarizes the main points of convergence and divergence between the European and Romanian frameworks:

Table 1: convergence and divergence between the European and Romanian frameworks:

Dimension	European Union Framework (Directive 2011/36/EU; EU Strategy 2021–2025)	Romanian Framework (Law No. 678/2001; National Strategy 2024–2028)
Legal Orientation	Human rights–based and victim-centered; focuses on prevention, protection, and long-term recovery.	Compliance-oriented; emphasizes legal definitions, prosecution, and short-term victim assistance.
Concept of Reintegration	Holistic reintegration including psychological, social, and economic dimensions.	Primarily administrative, centered on residence, employment, and documentation.
Psychological Support	Recognized as a continuous need before, during, and after legal proceedings; encourages trauma-informed services.	Intermittent and time-limited counseling; absence of national standards for trauma care.
Coordination Mechanisms	National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) promote multi-agency collaboration between institutions and NGOs.	Fragmented coordination between ANITP, local authorities, and NGOs; duplication of roles.
Funding Structure	Stable funding through multiannual EU programs (AMIF, CERV, ESF+).	Predominantly donor-based, project-dependent; limited state budget allocation for psychological services.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Emphasizes measurable outcomes and survivor feedback in recent policy recommendations (EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, 2023).	Evaluation remains quantitative and bureaucratic (number of victims assisted, cases closed).
Resilience and Empowerment	Emerging as an explicit policy goal; promotes survivor participation and agency restoration.	Rarely operationalized; survivors often treated as passive beneficiaries.
Training and Capacity Building	Expanding EU-level training on trauma-informed and gender-sensitive approaches.	Sporadic professional training; insufficient psychological specialization among service providers.

Interpretative Commentary

From a comparative standpoint, Romania demonstrates strong legislative convergence with the European *acquis* but limited functional harmonization in translating legal obligations into survivor-centered, psychosocially sustainable interventions. The Directive 2011/36/EU envisions reintegration as a multidimensional process—one that restores victims’ autonomy, resilience, and dignity through continued support and social inclusion. Romanian implementation, however, remains anchored in a protectionist paradigm, where assistance is equated with sheltering, legal aid, and short-term subsistence.

At the European level, there is a discernible transition toward *outcome-based governance*, where the quality and sustainability of recovery are measured through psychosocial indicators such as well-being, social participation, and self-efficacy. The *EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025)* explicitly promotes empowerment, gender sensitivity, and survivor participation in policy design. In contrast, Romanian reintegration programs remain compliance-driven, focusing on the procedural completion of aid rather than the transformation of victims into autonomous social actors.

Another key divergence lies in interinstitutional coordination. While the EU promotes integrated National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) that connect law enforcement, healthcare, and civil society, Romania's network remains fragmented and heavily centralized. ANITP operates as the coordinating authority but lacks sufficient human resources, data integration, and sustained cooperation with local service providers. This administrative rigidity perpetuates dependency on NGOs and international donors, undermining sustainability once external funding ends (GRETA, 2022; ANITP, 2024).

The resilience paradigm, though increasingly present in European discourse, has yet to be internalized within Romanian practice. In most Romanian shelters, resilience is not conceptualized as a measurable outcome, and interventions seldom include structured programs for empowerment, self-regulation, or community participation. By contrast, EU best practices in countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden integrate resilience-building through multidisciplinary care teams, survivor-led advocacy, and long-term therapeutic continuity (GRETA, 2023; Council of Europe, 2023).

Despite these shortcomings, Romania's national strategy (2024–2028) includes positive provisions that could bridge this gap—namely, the recognition of mental health as an integral part of recovery and the promotion of intersectoral partnerships for social reintegration. If operationalized through stable funding, standardized training, and psychosocial monitoring, these measures could align Romania more closely with the EU's trauma-informed and resilience-based model.

In summary, the comparative analysis underscores that Romania has achieved legislative harmonization but not yet functional harmonization with European standards. True convergence will depend on Romania's capacity to transform its anti-trafficking policy from a legal compliance framework into a holistic, resilience-centered system that values survivors' psychological recovery as much as their procedural protection.

6. Discussion

The comparative analysis highlights that while Romania has formally aligned its anti-trafficking legislation with the European Union's normative framework, functional harmonization—understood as the integration of legal, psychological, and social mechanisms into a coherent recovery system—remains incomplete. The persistence of this gap demonstrates the enduring tension between *legal compliance* and *substantive protection*, a dilemma common to many post-accession Member States that prioritize institutional conformity over psychosocial transformation.

At the European level, the Directive 2011/36/EU and the *EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025)* articulate a comprehensive vision of victim-centered recovery that encompasses empowerment, participation, and resilience. This model assumes that survivors must be recognized not only as beneficiaries of protection but also as active participants in their reintegration. In practice, however, the implementation of such a vision requires continuous funding, specialized training, and cross-sectoral coordination—elements that remain fragile within Romania's administrative and social infrastructure.

Practitioners working in Romanian shelters frequently report that survivors experience profound emotional isolation after leaving emergency accommodation, particularly when long-term psychological support is unavailable. According to NGO reports, many survivors describe reintegration not as a “return to normality” but as a prolonged struggle to rebuild trust, identity, and social belonging.

6.1 The Structural Asymmetry Between Law and Practice

Romania’s system illustrates what can be described as structural asymmetry: a situation in which robust legal provisions coexist with weak psychosocial mechanisms. While national legislation guarantees assistance “before, during, and after criminal proceedings,” the actual duration of services is short, often terminating when judicial processes end. As a result, the legal right to rehabilitation is fulfilled in form but not in substance.

This disjunction is reinforced by a bureaucratic culture that interprets reintegration primarily through administrative criteria—such as residence status, legal documentation, or employment placement—without considering psychological healing or community belonging as measurable outcomes. Consequently, victims’ recovery is assessed through institutional performance indicators rather than individual well-being (Council of Europe, 2023).

Such formalism also contributes to the phenomenon of secondary victimization. Survivors repeatedly recount their experiences within a fragmented system that lacks continuity, trust, or empathy. Each institutional transfer—between police, prosecutors, shelters, and social services—risks reactivating trauma rather than alleviating it (Moldovan & Tănăsescu, 2021).

6.2 The Psychosocial Dimension of Resilience

In the context of human trafficking, resilience must be understood as a multilevel construct—psychological, relational, and systemic. At the individual level, resilience involves cognitive restructuring, emotion regulation, and the capacity to rebuild a coherent sense of self after prolonged trauma. At the relational level, it depends on the creation of stable attachments and supportive networks that validate survivors’ experiences and foster trust (Ungar, 2013). At the systemic level, resilience emerges when institutions themselves operate according to trauma-informed principles—ensuring predictability, respect, and empowerment.

Romania’s reintegration policies, however, have yet to internalize this ecological understanding. Most services remain crisis-oriented, providing temporary relief rather than long-term empowerment. A resilience-based approach would require sustained therapeutic engagement that addresses both the neurobiological sequelae of trauma and the social determinants of recovery, such as housing, education, and community belonging (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Moreover, resilience cannot be fostered in isolation. It depends on institutional resilience—the capacity of organizations and professionals to withstand the emotional demands of working with trauma without reproducing burnout or detachment. Without systematic supervision and mental-health support for staff, the system risks perpetuating emotional fatigue that compromises the quality of care.

6.3 Toward a Trauma-Informed and Resilience-Based Policy Model

To move beyond formal compliance, Romania must adopt a **trauma-informed and resilience-based model of reintegration**, operationalized through concrete policy and institutional reforms:

1. **Institutionalization of trauma-informed training.** All professionals involved in victim identification and assistance—police officers, prosecutors, social workers, and

therapists—should receive standardized training in trauma psychology, empathy-based interviewing, and cultural sensitivity. This would reduce secondary victimization and enhance interagency cooperation (WHO, 2022).

2. **Long-term and integrated support services.** Reintegration should be designed as a continuum rather than a sequence of disconnected phases. Multidisciplinary teams—including psychologists, employment counselors, and peer mentors—must accompany survivors beyond the shelter phase into education, employment, and community life.
3. **Sustainable funding mechanisms.** Reliance on short-term NGO projects undermines consistency and quality. The Romanian state should institutionalize budgetary allocations for psychological and social reintegration, potentially supplemented by European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) grants.
4. **Survivor participation and feedback.** Policy design and evaluation should involve survivors as consultants, trainers, or peer supporters. Participatory mechanisms would transform reintegration from a top-down bureaucratic process into a collaborative and empowering experience (GRETA, 2023).
5. **Outcome-based monitoring.** The success of reintegration programs should be measured through psychosocial indicators—such as emotional stability, social connectedness, and perceived self-efficacy—rather than quantitative counts of “assisted victims.” This approach would align Romania with the EU’s current move toward qualitative, survivor-centered evaluation frameworks (European Commission, 2023).

6.4 Bridging Compliance and Compassion

The broader implication of this analysis is that harmonization cannot be reduced to legal uniformity. True harmonization within the European anti-trafficking regime requires a convergence of *values, practices, and psychological insight*. Romania’s progress will thus depend not merely on updating its laws but on transforming its institutional ethos—from reactive assistance to proactive empowerment, from protection to participation, and from short-term relief to long-term resilience.

Ultimately, the measure of success in anti-trafficking policy lies not in the number of convictions or shelters, but in the quality of survivors’ reintegration and well-being. Aligning national systems with the resilience paradigm means redefining justice itself—not as retribution or compliance, but as the restoration of human dignity, autonomy, and hope.

7. Conclusions

Human trafficking remains one of the most complex and persistent violations of human rights in Europe, demanding coordinated responses that integrate legal, psychological, and social perspectives. The comparative analysis of the European and Romanian frameworks reveals a paradox that continues to define anti-trafficking governance: Romania has achieved legal harmonization with the European Union, yet functional and psychosocial harmonization remains partial and inconsistent.

At the European level, *Directive 2011/36/EU* and the *EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025)* have established a comprehensive, victim-centered paradigm based on empowerment, participation, and resilience. These instruments recognize that effective recovery extends beyond criminal prosecution and material assistance to include long-term psychological stability and social inclusion. However, at the national level, Romania’s implementation still reflects a predominantly administrative interpretation of reintegration—focused on compliance, documentation, and temporary sheltering rather than sustained psychosocial recovery.

The central argument of this study is that true reintegration cannot be legislated solely through procedural norms; it must be cultivated through trauma-informed and resilience-based practice. Reintegration represents not a return to pre-trafficking normality but the gradual reconstruction of autonomy, trust, and identity after profound disempowerment. As such, the ultimate goal of anti-trafficking policy should not be limited to protection or rehabilitation but should aspire to empowerment—the restoration of survivors as active, self-determining participants in social and economic life.

To bridge the gap between legal compliance and psychosocial transformation, Romania and the wider European community should prioritize the following strategic directions:

Institutionalize a trauma-informed culture across all levels of intervention. Mandatory training in trauma awareness, empathy-based communication, and resilience theory should be integrated into the professional development of law enforcement, judiciary, and social service personnel. Trauma-informed systems create predictability, respect, and safety—conditions essential for healing.

Ensure continuity of psychological and social support beyond the trial phase. Assistance must follow survivors throughout the reintegration trajectory—from immediate recovery to community integration—through multidisciplinary teams and long-term counseling programs. Reintegration should be conceptualized as a process extending over years, not months.

Stabilize funding and infrastructure for reintegration programs. Sustainable public funding—supplemented by European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and CERV mechanisms—should replace reliance on short-term donor projects. Budgetary predictability is crucial to maintain therapeutic continuity and institutional accountability.

Promote survivor participation in policy design and monitoring. Survivors possess experiential knowledge that can inform more humane and effective responses. Their involvement in training, evaluation, and advocacy transforms reintegration from a bureaucratic process into a shared social responsibility.

Adopt outcome-based evaluation using psychosocial indicators. Progress should be measured not only by the number of victims assisted but by improvements in resilience, emotional well-being, and social connectedness. Establishing common EU-wide metrics for psychosocial recovery would enable more coherent comparative monitoring.

Strengthen interagency and cross-sectoral coordination. Effective reintegration requires the integration of public institutions, NGOs, local authorities, and mental-health professionals into a unified referral and follow-up system. Coordination should be institutionalized rather than project-based, supported by interoperable data platforms and clear role definitions.

If implemented, these measures would enable Romania to move from formal to substantive compliance, transforming its anti-trafficking framework into a sustainable, survivor-centered system aligned with the EU's human rights principles. In the broader European context, embedding resilience as a measurable policy dimension would mark a paradigmatic evolution—from protection and assistance toward recovery, autonomy, and human dignity.

Ultimately, combating human trafficking requires not only legal precision but moral imagination: the capacity to view survivors not as perpetual victims but as individuals capable of regeneration and leadership. By integrating the language of resilience into policy and practice, both Romania and the European Union can advance from procedural justice to *restorative justice*—a form of justice that heals, empowers, and restores the human capacity to thrive after trauma.

8. Limitations of the Study

Although this paper provides an integrative perspective on the relationship between psychological resilience and reintegration within European and Romanian anti-trafficking frameworks, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize its scope and interpretation.

First, the study is conceptual and policy-analytical rather than empirical. It synthesizes secondary sources, legal documents, and institutional reports rather than primary data from trafficking survivors or practitioners. Consequently, while the analysis identifies systemic and psychological gaps in implementation, it does not directly measure survivors' lived experiences or quantify the impact of resilience-based interventions. Future research should therefore incorporate qualitative and mixed-method designs—including interviews, focus groups, and longitudinal case studies—to validate and enrich the conceptual model proposed here.

Second, the comparative scope is limited to the European Union and Romania, with references to select best-practice countries. Although this focus allows for depth and specificity, it restricts the generalizability of conclusions to broader regional or global contexts. Including additional EU Member States or non-EU regions could illuminate alternative policy approaches, cultural variables, and contextual determinants of resilience.

Third, the study's reliance on institutional and NGO reports (e.g., GRETA, ANITP, eLiberare) introduces potential bias stemming from political, administrative, or funding agendas. These sources, while credible, may emphasize compliance narratives or programmatic successes rather than underlying deficiencies. Cross-verification through independent field evaluations and survivor-led research initiatives would strengthen the robustness of future analyses.

Fourth, the concept of psychological resilience—though central to this paper—remains multidimensional and context-dependent. Its operationalization in policy terms is still emerging, and varying definitions across disciplines (psychology, social work, law) complicate comparative assessment. The absence of standardized EU indicators for psychosocial well-being limits the ability to evaluate resilience systematically across national contexts.

Finally, the paper's normative orientation—advocating a resilience-based, trauma-informed paradigm—inevitably reflects a prescriptive analytical stance. While grounded in evidence and aligned with international human rights frameworks, the discussion may underrepresent structural and economic constraints faced by state institutions, particularly in low-resource environments.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable theoretical and policy foundation for advancing the integration of psychological resilience into anti-trafficking governance. Its findings highlight critical directions for empirical validation and institutional innovation, underscoring the need for sustained, interdisciplinary research linking legal harmonization with psychosocial recovery.

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