



# Council of the European Union

## *Study Guide*

Ensuring care for patients with mental illnesses

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## 1. Introduction to the Council of the European Union

The **Council of the European Union**, often referred to simply as the Council, is one of the main legislators of the European Union. As one of the two pillars the **OLP**<sup>1</sup>, along with the Parliament of Europe, the Council is composed of government ministers from each EU member state who is responsible for making decisions that affect the EU as a whole (European Parliament n.d.). The Council, which has its headquarters in Brussels, meets regularly to discuss and coordinate policies on a wide range of issues, such as economic policy, foreign affairs, and justice and home affairs with the following aim: “to achieve a greater unity between its members” rather than the sole purpose of political integration (Fawcett 1974). The Council is one of the EU's seven institutions and plays a central role in shaping the direction of the European Union and has been instrumental in the development of the EU and continues to play a significant role in ensuring the success of the European project.

The Council is responsible for coordinating and implementing the policies of the European Union. Each member state takes a turn presiding over the Council for six months, and the foreign minister of each member state holds the rotating presidency for six months. The Council takes a great responsibility to solve the problems created by the general apathy among people and decision-makers in Europe by holding discussions on a wide range of issues, such as trade, agriculture, fisheries, environmental protection, energy, and security (Boothby 1952).

Main responsibilities of the Council can be summarized as:

- Negotiating and adopting EU laws, together with the European Parliament, based on proposals from the European Commission,
- Developing the EU's foreign & security policy, based on European Council guidelines,
- Concluding agreements between the EU and other countries or international organisations,
- Adopting the annual EU budget - jointly with the European Parliament (European Union, n.d.).

Overall, the Council plays a crucial role in the European Union's decision-making process and in promoting the interests of the EU citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> The ordinary legislative procedure is the general rule for adopting legislation at European Union level. It revolves around a joint consensus between the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament on legislative texts proposed by the European Commission.

## 2. Introduction to the Issue

Mental illness is not a new phenomenon in history; however, it could be just as easily stated that care for patients with mental illnesses has either been misplaced or altogether ignored until very recently by health authorities. It was as late as the 1950s that the precursors of today's psychiatric medicine were introduced to the wider public: before, dangerous practices such as lobotomy and insulin coma therapy were commonplace for the treatment of mental illnesses and even remained in usage until decades later (Concordia University St. Paul 2020).

That is not to say that the matter of ensuring care for patients with mental illnesses has been completely resolved today. Regardless, contemporary political authorities are more aware of the existence of mental disorders and the need to tackle them. **Social welfare**<sup>2</sup> is a **public good**<sup>3</sup> and it is intrinsically tied to mental health. Therefore, governments have the incentive to implement sound policies in order to adequately address mental health challenges across the public. Particularly with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the observance of mental health issues has become more of a conventional affair: practices such as social distancing have been linked with this worsening of the mental health status of the broader public (Mersh 2022a). Thus, governments and international organizations now have stronger reason to try and tackle the issue.

The European Union is similarly concerned with this rise in mental illness cases. In this context, it is the European Commission (EC) which has taken the initiative to come up with a sound strategy to ensure care for patients with mental illnesses. According to EU scholars Stephen George and Ian Bache (2001, 237), the European Commission may be considered an “autonomous actor” which bestows “policy leadership” to EU member states. Supporting this definition, the EC has been active regarding mental health issues since 2005, contributing to the achievement of productive policymaking regarding this agenda item throughout the EU.

In recent history, two major developments regarding the agenda item have taken place. Firstly, in December 2021, the EC introduced “Healthier Together – EU Non-Communicable Diseases Initiative” which gave strong attention to “mental health and neurological disorders” on top of other non-communicable diseases (European Commission n.d.). In specific, the EC outlined public awareness, strengthened political rights, access to mental health facilities, prevention

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<sup>2</sup> “Social welfare” can be described as a set of policies meant to ameliorate the living conditions of the public, particularly those who are disadvantaged in some shape or form.

<sup>3</sup> A “public good” is defined as a commodity all members of the public have access to. Public goods are provided by governments via taxation and public spending (Fernando 2022).

and implementation of the mental-health-in-all principle as key aims (European Commission n.d.). Secondly, current Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in a speech on 14 September 2022, stated that the EC would make mental health a priority in 2023 (Mental Health Europe 2022). Accordingly, she promised the creation of an “EU Action Plan” and a new initiative that would target mental health woes of EU citizens in a multidimensional manner (Mersh 2022b).

Although seemingly plentiful, EU initiatives on mental health have been criticized on the grounds of being not substantial enough and being outmoded. For instance, Culture Action Europe (2022), a non-governmental organization operating in the EU, finds fault with the fact that **social prescribing**<sup>4</sup> has not been implemented yet in the wider EU. Currently, von der Leyen’s new initiative and Action Plan remain works in progress and no concrete step has been taken since their introduction in late 2022. In other words, innovative solutions and bold action are necessary to tackle mental illnesses in the EU.

### 3. Definition of Key Terms

This section will focus on providing in-depth definitions of those terms which are crucial to the agenda item at hand. When having related discussions, it is of utmost importance that the members of the Council of the European Union remain on the same page and share the same understandings when it comes to potentially controversial terms such as “mental illness”. With this, it will be easier to coordinate responses and to come up with potential solutions for the issues raised by the agenda item.

**Mental health/well-being:** The European Union adopts the definition of “mental health/well-being” as put forth by the World Health Organization (WHO). This is a positive definition meant to lay down what it means to be mentally healthy. It reads as follows: “Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in.” (WHO 2022)

**Non-communicable disease (NCD):** A “non-communicable disease” is one that is not transmitted through infections and thus cannot be spread from person to person. They are

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<sup>4</sup> The Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (n.d.) defines social prescribing as “a means of enabling GPs, nurses and other health and care professionals to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services.”

usually caused by “unhealthy behaviours” (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, n.d.).

**Mental illness:** The European Commission (2022, 94) defines mental illness as the “loss of mental health due to a mental disorder”.

**Mental disorder:** In turn, a person is declared to have a “mental disorder” when they reach the “clinical threshold of a diagnosis according to psychiatric classification systems” (European Commission 2022, 94) For the EU, the aforementioned “psychiatric classification systems” specifically entail Chapter 5 of the International Classification of Diseases as formulated by the WHO (European Commission 2022, 94). Examples of mental disorders include depression, schizophrenia and so forth.

**Mental health problems:** This is a more general term that encompasses not just mental disorders but also “psychological distress”, which is caused by “symptoms or conditions that do not reach the clinical threshold of a diagnosis within the classification systems, but which can account for significant suffering and hardship, and can be enduring and disabling.” (European Commission 2022, 94-95)

**Mental health-in-all-policies:** This is a formulation first envisioned by the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) and is meant to underline the fact that a holistic approach is required to tackle mental health problems in the public. Here, “cross-sectoral action” and “changes in delivery of policies and services” are emphasized (OECD n.d.). The aim is to create an environment in which those suffering from mental health problems can exist without being precluded from participating in economic and social activities. Moreover, the OECD oversees the implementation of a “three-way change” to achieve a mental health-in-all-policies approach: “(1) intervention and support by the right persons and especially front-line actors (the ‘who’), (2) early intervention, including the timely identification of mental health issues (the ‘when’), and (3) the provision of integrated services and interventions (the ‘what’).” (OECD n.d.)



Figure 1: Ursula von der Leyen delivering the State of the Union speech (Eric Vidal, Untitled, 2022, photograph, European Parliament)

#### **4. Current Situation**

##### **a. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on individuals, families, and communities worldwide. Among the many impacts of the pandemic, one group that has been particularly affected are those with pre-existing mental health conditions. The pandemic has worsened the symptoms and severity of mental health issues and created new mental health challenges for many individuals.

The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health issues can be divided in two categories, first of the two would be the effects on the individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions and the second one would be newly created issues caused by the pandemic's environment.

One of the primary effects of COVID-19 on patients with mental illness is that their mental health problems may be affected by the pandemic and get worse over time. Due to the pandemic, many mental health services and facilities have had to reduce their capacity or temporarily close, leaving patients with limited access to care. Additionally, social distancing measures and quarantine requirements have led to increased isolation and loneliness, which can

intensify existing mental health conditions or trigger new ones. Even if the patient was not in a facility beforehand of the pandemic newly created rules of the pandemic had negative effects on the health of the individual.

The pandemic has also caused significant economic hardship for many individuals, which can increase stress and anxiety levels and worsen mental health. The loss of employment, financial insecurity, and uncertainty about the future have created new challenges for those struggling with mental health issues. These events are one of the primary reasons for the high rates of depression in and after 2019.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the level of fear and uncertainty worldwide, leading to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. Especially in the earlier stages of the pandemic the uncertainty of the quarantined individuals led to increase in levels of fear. The constant news cycle, coupled with misinformation and conflicting information, can further exacerbate these issues. Whether the individual had earlier signs of mental health issues or not it became inevitable for anyone living in the pandemic era to develop new problems related to the conditions of the quarantine.

These cases of newly developed or worsened mental health problems were especially seen in children and adolescents in the COVID-19 pandemic. In many surveys and experiments it was seen that anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress was the most seen mental health issues during the pandemic. In the same experiments it was shown that if a child or a teen already had some type of mental health problem, whether it is related to their social life or it is about a chronic health issue they were more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on patients with mental illness. The pandemic has disrupted mental health care, increased isolation, and loneliness, created economic hardship, and increased fear and uncertainty worldwide. It is crucial that mental health services and resources are prioritized during and after the pandemic to ensure that individuals with mental health conditions receive the support and care they need.

#### **b. Active EU Initiatives on the Agenda Item**

Mental health can be defined as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own potential and can cope with the normal stresses of life. It is a dynamic process that encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Good mental health helps people to maintain positive relationships, make healthy choices, and cope with the challenges of life.

While mental disorders can sometimes interfere with an individual's mental health, mental health is not just the absence of mental illness. It involves a complex interplay of factors such as personal life experiences, genetics, and environmental factors.

Mental health is deeply impacted by various stress factors such as environmental, physical, and psychological stresses. Any type of stress factor can trigger psychological problems and instabilities and these problems are much harder to solve when occurred during childhood (Peek et al. 2017). Without doubt, one of these stress factors is war. Wars around the globe affect the mental health of individuals, especially those who live in belligerent countries.

One of contemporary examples of this situation is the Russo-Ukrainian War and its tremendous impact on the mental health of Ukrainian youth. According to the new research that was published in International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, depressive symptoms among Ukrainian youth rocketed especially given the fact that the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic are also continuing (Riad et al. 2022).

To overcome the negative impacts of the pandemic and wars, the European Union has been taking an active role in addressing mental health issues through various initiatives and organizations. One of these organizations is the **European Psychiatric Association (EPA)**, which aims to promote mental health research, education, and advocacy. The EPA conducts research and surveys each year and funds many more as well as training experts on different aspects of crises' mental impacts. Another initiative is the **European Youth Forum**, which focuses on improving mental health services and support for young<sup>5</sup> people across Europe. The EYF sees itself within a mission that encompasses every corner of Europe by updating its agenda on a yearly basis (Muraille 2022). Through these efforts, the EU has been able to effectively address mental health issues not only at a regional level but also at a global level.

In conclusion, these initiatives are designed to address the unique challenges facing individuals who struggle with mental health issues, and to provide them with the resources they need to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. Therefore, to analyse their agendas and systematic approaches would, and should, lead to a better understanding of the subject.

## 5. The Agenda of the Committee

As the issue at hand is a complex and detailed one, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union will be expected to focus on only two specific subtopics:

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<sup>5</sup> The term “young people” is generally defined as being between 15 and 29 years old.

**developing/strengthening measures to meet the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health and tackling mental health issues in European youth.**

**a. Developing/Strengthening Measures to Meet the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health**

The WHO provision and work for Action on Mental Health is a comprehensive mental health policy agreement, designed to guide and coordinate policy at the national level, streamline service provision, and facilitate cross-border cooperation among member states. This Framework seeks to promote and support policies that will help to prevent mental disorders, raise awareness of mental health issues, provide early intervention and treatment, reduce stigma, and protect the rights and dignity of those with mental illness.

Developing and strengthening measures of European Union to meet the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health is an essential step towards improving mental health in the region. The framework provides clear guidance on what actions need to be taken to improve mental health, and the EU's commitment to implementing measures that meet the framework's recommendations is vital.

To meet the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health, the EU develops measures that address the key challenges faced by the region. This includes improving access to mental health services, increasing awareness about mental health, and ensuring that mental health is a priority in all policies and decisions (Muijen 2013). Some of these measures were set by the mental health in all policies project of EU. Mental Health in “All Policies in the Joint Action for Mental Health and Well-being is about how the policies of different sectors can have an impact on mental health” (“Mental Health in All Policies - Mental Health and Wellbeing” 2018). The focus of the working group was at identifying, evaluating and disseminating population level practices on how to take mental health and wellbeing into account in decision making processes. The aim of the project that started in 2013 was to present in the end of 2015 a Framework for Mental Health in All Policies as a useful tool for Member States at different levels of governance (local, regional, national). In 2015, the outputs of the project were preseng in Helsinki, Finland and became an example of how much countries can achieve in terms of protecting mental health in a larger scale when they work together. To increase awareness about mental health, the public awareness campaigns EU has launched involve:

- Emphasizing the importance of mental health,
- Reducing the stigma associated with mental illness,

- Funding research concerning mental health.

The European Union tries to emphasize the importance of mental health by funding relevant research of psychological institutions and initiating new ways to teach cases to young people. Last but not the least, reducing the stigma associated with mental illnesses plays a crucial role in this case. As society and its taboos affect the individuals, teaching not to judge becomes the first concern of EU (Beldie et al. 2012). In addition, these campaigns are to be targeted at different segments of the population, such as young people or older adults, to ensure that they are effective.

Finally, to ensure that mental health is a priority in all policies and decisions, the EU emphasizes the importance of establishing a mental health task forces that are responsible for developing policies and guidelines that take mental health into account. These task forces work closely with other EU bodies to ensure that mental health is integrated into all aspects of EU policy and decision-making.

In conclusion, by developing measures that meet the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health, the EU is actively working to decrease the negative impacts of ongoing problems that trigger traumas of people on a regional and a global scale and ensure that individuals receive the care and support they need to lead healthy and productive lives.

#### **b. Tackling Mental Health Issues in European Youth**

One of the main purposes of the European Union is to ensure the happiness and well-being of its citizens. In order to achieve that purpose, handling the mental health issues amongst the public is a major step towards to success. The European Commission is devoted to improving the mental health of people, to accomplish that goal they have been selecting and funding the best practices in line with the general policies of the European Union. Furthermore, there have been more than one cases where the Commission made changes to an already established policy to improve the conditions that could help citizens with their mental health issues (European Youth Portal 2022).

European Union had already taken some steps to solve the issue at hand, some of the actions are directly towards to European youth and many of them are related to the general public of the EU (European Youth Portal 2022). Three of the most important actions that EU already took can be listed as:

- Green Paper: Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union,
- European Alliance Against Depression (EAAD),
- Youth Wiki.

The predecessor of these actions is the World Health Organization's Mental Health Declaration of Europe. The declaration was written by the Ministers of Health of Member States in the European Region of the World Health Organization, during the writing process the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection was present, thus making the document directly related to both Europe and European Union. In this document, the WHO aims to create awareness about mental health and make sure that everyone can find help if they need it. While doing so, they claim that they will be working towards their goal regarding the countries culture and understandings of social and daily life. As a whole, the document is deeply related with any kinds of individuals who are or might be suffering from mental health issues. Especially Article 8. IV. and Article 10. XV. are related to European youth (WHO 2005).

**i. Green Paper: Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union**

The Green Paper is a direct result of the WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health, this paper is the first reply to the invitation coming from WHO. As mentioned in the paper itself, mental health of the European youth can be seen as one of the backbones to achieve a sustainable and prosperous Europe (European Commission 2005). The purpose of the Green Paper is to create an environment where European institutions, Governments, health professionals, stakeholders in other sectors, civil societies including patient organisations, and the research communities can understand the importance of mental health and can act accordingly (European Commission 2005).

The Paper covers a great range of topics such as, the definition of mental health, the importance of having healthy mental states, the current situation of mental health in Europe and its negative effects, possible responses to these negative effects and the problems itself and the importance of acting together as European Union and many more topics (European Commission 2005).

**ii. European Alliance Against Depression (EAAD)**

The European Alliance Against Depression is a non-profit organization that was established in 2008 by several mental health experts that were already working closely with many European

research institutions. The main aim of the organization is to help people with depressive disorders and suicidal thoughts. In 2014, a new project by the EAAD was launched. Entitled **ifightdepression**, this is a web-based project that targets to bring the EAAD's general purpose to a wider audience (EAAD 2020).



Figure 2: The logo of EAAD (n.d.).

### iii. Youth Wiki

Youth Wiki is an online encyclopaedia created by the European Commission which gathers valuable information about the policies regarding anything that could be related to the youth of Europe. Besides many policy fields, “Health and Well-being” is one of the main aspects of the website (European Youth Portal 2022).

Under this field, there are many actions taken to provide the youth with a more accessible and beneficial medical facilities. This field tries to support the mental and physical health of the youth. Providing them with useful tips, creating safe environments where the young individuals may get treatment and letting the general audience know about the problems that the youth may be facing against (European Commission 2005).

## 6. Country Stances

Regarding the agenda item, almost all member states of the European Union have contributed to the issue in some way or another. An example is the Joint Action ImplementAL (JA ImplementAL) project, which is being co-funded by the European Union itself: various governmental authorities from Greece, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden all take part JA ImplementAL (Joint Action ImplementAL, n.d.). A similar project, this time one that is being undertaken the EAAD, the Best project, is being supported

by Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, Ireland, Belgium, Greece, Germany, Estonia, Italy, and Poland (EAAD, n.d.).

A more specific instance of contribution to the agenda item comes in the form of mental health aid to Ukrainian refugees. The International Federation of Red Cross is working with the governments of Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania to support those mentally distressed from the ongoing war in Ukraine (European Commission, n.d.).

In conclusion, all countries of the European Union have contributed to initiatives to improve mental health care and remain supportive of the actions of the European Union and the European Commission in this regard. Despite this, certain countries, such as Denmark, Portugal, and the Baltic states, barring Estonia, are not as active as the remaining members of the EU.



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