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## WORKING PAPER

RECOGNITION OF LGBTQI+ STUDENTS AS A  
VULNERABLE GROUP IN ERASMUS+ NATIONAL  
FRAMEWORKS:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GREECE,  
AUSTRIA, AND ITALY

Thomas Kefalos



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**Recognition of LGBTQI+ Students as a Vulnerable  
Group in Erasmus+ National Frameworks:**

**A Comparative Analysis of Greece, Austria, and Italy**

**Thomas Kefalos**

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## **Abstract**

This research employs a qualitative comparative policy analysis, trying to answer the question of whether LGBTQI+ (the term stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex with the "plus" sign signifying other identities not included in the acronym) students are recognized as a group with fewer opportunities that grant them access to additional financial support within the national Erasmus+ frameworks of Greece, Austria, and Italy. Despite strong European-level commitments to equity in educational mobility, the operationalization of inclusion criteria remains mostly delegated to national agencies, leading to significant disparities. Using a qualitative, multi- case policy analysis, this study examines legal texts, national strategies, and institutional practices, revealing three distinct paradigms of (non-)inclusion.

Findings highlight that LGBTQI+ students, particularly those facing family estrangement, economic insecurity, or gender-affirming healthcare needs, encounter unique and intersectional barriers that are not adequately addressed by broad vulnerability categories. The lack of standardized criteria across member states weakens the Erasmus+ program’s commitment to inclusion, leading to unequal access to mobility opportunities.

This research emphasizes the urgent need to recognise LGBTQI+ status within national eligibility frameworks, supported by binding EU-level mandates and monitoring systems. Without such systemic changes, the principle of educational equity risks becoming superficial rather than transformative, leaving the most marginalized youth behind in European mobility programs.

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## **Introduction**

This research dives into whether LGBTQI+ students are recognized as a group with fewer opportunities, which gives them access to additional financial support, within the national Erasmus+ frameworks of Greece, Austria, and Italy which are the case studies of this research. The analysis of policy documents from each country’s national agency reveals the existence of significant gaps in their recognition despite varying levels of LGBTQI+ rights protections. Greece, while a regional leader in LGBTQI+ rights, its main focus is on economic and geographical barriers in its Erasmus+ criteria. Austria, despite its progressive human rights reputation, maintains broad inclusion strategies without specific LGBTQI+ categorizations. Lastly, Italy’s framework, reflecting its declining LGBTQI+ protections, narrowly defines vulnerability through economic hardship and disability.

## **1. Methodology**

### **1.1. Research Design and Limitations**

This study employs a **qualitative comparative policy analysis** to examine the explicit recognition of LGBTQI+ students as a group with fewer opportunities within the national Erasmus+ frameworks of Greece, Austria, and Italy. The comparative approach was selected to illuminate how diverse socio-political and legal contexts across Europe shape the inclusion (or exclusion) of LGBTQI+ youth in educational mobility programs.

This analysis is structured as a multiple case study, allowing an in-depth exploration of each country’s policy environment, legal framework, and practical implementation of Erasmus+ inclusion strategies. This approach enables the identification of both convergences and divergences in national practices and enables the drawing of broader conclusions regarding barriers and opportunities for LGBTQI+ students within the Erasmus+ program.

Beyond the already identified challenge regarding the availability of data, especially that many national policy documents are not available in the general public, this research faces additional limitations. A significant unstated limitation is the absence of quantitative data regarding the actual participation rates of LGBTQI+ students in Erasmus+ programs or the direct impact of the policies on their mobility outcomes. The source used in this research provides an estimation of the people with fewer opportunities that participated in an Erasmus+ program and not the exact number as the National Agencies lack this data.

Additionally, the research analyzes the recognition of LGBTQI+ students within official policy documents, although its methodology, as a qualitative comparative policy analysis, does not incorporate the direct empirical data on the lived experiences

of the LGBTQI+ students. The study focuses on how policies are stated rather than gathering first-hand experiences from LGBTQI+ students, program administrators, or faculty concerning the practical challenges faced, and the effectiveness of support mechanisms on the ground.

## **1.2. Rationale for Country Selection: Greece, Austria, and Italy**

Based on research made by the European Parliament in 2022 (where LGBTQI+ people were included within the people with fewer opportunities) there is not clear percentage of participants in the Erasmus+ program that are also included within the people with fewer opportunities as the statistics collected by the National Agencies of each country are ranging between 1% to 40% showing thereof lack of data. When the same stakeholders were asked if the participation of people with fewer opportunities enhanced their learning opportunities, everyone responded positively, showing the importance of supporting the inclusion of these people within the Erasmus+ program (Committee on Culture and Education, 2022). Keeping this in mind and considering the European countries that are beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ Program, the selection of countries followed the rationale stated below.

The selection of Greece, Austria, and Italy as case studies for this comparative analysis is rooted in their divergent trajectories regarding LGBTQI+ rights, the structure and inclusivity of national youth policies, and their positions on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map. These countries represent a spectrum of policy environments within Europe, ranging from progressive legislative advancements coupled with implementation gaps to reputedly inclusive frameworks with ambiguous protections, and overt legislative regression.

## **2. The Importance of Recognizing LGBTQI+ University Students as People with Fewer Opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programs**

In order to guarantee that LGBTQI+ university students have fair access to mobility and educational opportunities throughout Europe, it is not only a question of principle but also a practical imperative to explicitly include them as people with fewer opportunities inside Erasmus+ programs. In order to address the particular and multifaceted obstacles that LGBTQI+ youth encounter in higher education, this acknowledgment is essential. These obstacles can seriously limit their ability to take advantage of chances for international mobility in the absence of focused assistance, especially financial assistance.

LGBTQI+ students often encounter distinct forms of marginalization that are not adequately captured by traditional vulnerability categories such as economic hardship or disability. One of the most significant barriers is the lack of family support, which

is disproportionately evident among LGBTQI+ youth. Research across Europe shows that coming out as LGBTQI+ can lead to family rejection, emotional estrangement, or even expulsion from the family home (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020a). For university students, this translates to them probably being unable to rely on supplementary financial assistance from their families, a resource that many of their peers take for granted when participating in Erasmus+ mobility, while relying on an extra income from their own job sometimes is harder than it looks because for members of the LGBTQI+ community finding a job is difficult due to stereotypes that exist in each country (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020b). The absence of this safety net can render even the standard Erasmus+ grant insufficient to cover the costs of living, travel, and accommodation abroad, particularly in higher-cost destinations.

Additionally, LGBTQI+ students and particularly trans and non-binary face significant healthcare-related financial challenges. The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) does not cover gender-affirming medical treatment, hormone therapy, or psychological assistance (European Parliament, 2021; European Commission, 2020). Moreover, many EU nations either impose extra criteria, such as mental exams or required paperwork, or do not fully cover trans-specific healthcare, including hormone therapy making it difficult to seek medical assistance even out of their own pocket for trans people trying to continue their hormone therapy abroad (European Union, n.d.). This self-funded process which can be possible only if permitted under the national regulation for continuing the hormone therapy as in some cases, in order to be able to continue in another country, might take up to years to be approved.

Indirect financial and psychological hurdles are also brought about by discrimination and social isolation. According to Russell and Fish (2016) and UNESCO (2016), LGBTQI+ students may encounter harassment or microaggressions at their host institutions, which may result in heightened mental health requirements and, in certain situations, the need to move or seek out additional support services (Russell & Fish, 2016; UNESCO, 2016). As a result of these difficulties, LGBTQI+ students are more likely than their non-LGBTQI+ classmates to drop out of mobility programs and have lower participation rates (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020a).

Recognizing LGBTQI+ students as people with fewer opportunities within the Erasmus+ framework is thus a critical step towards the fulfilment of the program's commitment to inclusion and equal access. It would enable national agencies and higher education institutions to allocate supplementary financial support targeting those who are at risk of exclusion due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics. Such support could include, but not be limited to, increased mobility grants, dedicated funds for healthcare and psychological services (European Commission, 2023). By addressing these specific needs, the Erasmus+ can help ensure that LGBTQI+ students are not forced to choose between their safety, health, and educational aspirations.

In conclusion, the recognition of the LGBTQI+ students as persons with fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ programs is crucial for ensuring that the promise of European educational mobility is actually available and accessible to everyone. The hurdles that LGBTQI+ students face will continue to translate into actual obstacles of their participation in the absence of tailored institutional and financial assistance, undermining both the spirit and the inclusion policies of the EU.

### **3. The Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Policy Framework at the European Level**

The Erasmus+ Program stands as a flagship initiative of the EU, designed to promote educational mobility, social inclusion, and equal opportunities across member states. Central to its mission is the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, which is articulated in the official Erasmus+ Program Guide and accompanies policy documents. This framework mandates that the program must actively support “people with fewer opportunities,” a term defined broadly at the European level to encompass individuals facing barriers due to economic, social, cultural, geographical, or health-related factors (European Commission, 2024). More specifically the LGBTQI+ community is within the larger category of barriers linked to discrimination as seen below (European Commission, 2023, pp. 7–8):

*“Barriers linked to discrimination: Barriers can occur as a result of discrimination linked to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, or intersectional factors (a combination of two or several of the mentioned kinds of discrimination).”*

Within this European framework, the definition of “people with fewer opportunities” is intentionally expansive and includes, but is not limited to, those who experience discrimination based on grounds protected under European Union law. Notably, Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, among other characteristics (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2009). This legal foundation creates a clear obligation for EU programs, including Erasmus+, to address the needs of LGBTQI+ individuals and ensure their equal access to opportunities. Notably the Erasmus+ Guide includes as grounds for inclusion within the people with fewer opportunities not only the sexual orientation as defined by Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU but expands it adding also the gender identity, showing a rather inclusion tendency (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2023).

The inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in the category of “people with fewer opportunities” is reinforced by two key EU strategies. One is the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027. This one sets out a vision for empowering all young people, with a

particular focus on inclusion, diversity, and the fight against discrimination. It calls for the removal of barriers that prevent young people, including the LGBTQI+ youth, from fully participating in society and benefiting from EU programs (European Union, 2019; Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting within the Council on a Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, 2018b).

The second one is the EU Strategy for LGBTQI+ Equality 2020–2025, which provides a comprehensive policy roadmap for advancing the rights and well-being of LGBTQI+ people across the EU. This explicitly highlights the importance of equal access to education and youth opportunities, and calls on member states and EU institutions to ensure that LGBTQI+ youth is not left behind (European Commission, 2020).

Despite these robust commitments at the European level, the operationalization of inclusion criteria within Erasmus+ is delegated to national agencies as seen in the most recent Erasmus+ guide where it is stated that (European Commission, 2023, p. 73):

*“Students and recent graduates with fewer opportunities receive a top-up amount to the individual support of their EU Erasmus+ grant with an amount of 250 EUR per month. The criteria to be applied are defined at national level by the National Agencies in agreement with National Authorities.”*

While it is also stated in the Erasmus Guide that (European Commission, 2023, p. 68):

*“Inclusion support for participants: Additional costs directly related to participants with fewer opportunities. In particular these costs aim at covering the extra financial support required for participants with physical, mental or health related conditions to allow their participation in the mobility as well as in preparatory visits and for accompanying persons (including costs related to travel and subsistence, if justified and as long as it is not covered through budget categories “travel support” and “individual support” for these participants)”*

This clause is applicable to the LGBTQI+ community mostly for people who are undergoing a gender reassignment procedure and their country is not recognizing them as people with fewer opportunities and thus they are not receiving the 250 euros per month. This clause provides them a 100% cost coverage for actual health expenses in the country of destination (European Commission, 2023, p. 68). Although, this is just a solution for extreme situations, where the state refuses to recognize them as people with fewer opportunities and grant them the 250 euros per month.

In summary, while the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Policy Framework at the European level provides a strong legal and strategic foundation for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ youth. Although, the practical realization of these principles depends on national-level implementation. The lack of explicit and harmonized recognition of

LGBTQI+ students as a group with fewer opportunities, in some member states, undermines the commitment of the EU to equal access and risks perpetuating disparities in educational mobility(Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2023, p. 73)

#### **4. Introduction to Comparative Analysis**

The selection of Greece, Austria, and Italy enables a triangulated comparative analysis that captures three distinct mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within the Erasmus+ program. Greece exemplifies “strategic silence,” where robust legal frameworks are not always translated into operational policies. Austria even though it has a broad anti-discrimination language, its practices are seen to be inclusive towards the LGBTQI+ community. Italy, in contrast, illustrates “active exclusion,” where restrictive legal and policy definitions systematically marginalize LGBTQI+ people.

Additionally, the three nations vary in the presence and context of their national youth plans as well as the degree to which these strategies tackle the issues LGBTQI+ adolescents experience. Italy's youth policy is largely silent on the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity. While Greece and Austria have created youth strategies that mention diversity and inclusion, there is a different degree of specificity regarding LGBTQI+ issues between them(Dipartimento per le Politiche Giovanili e il Servizio Civile Universale, 2023; Parliament, 2022). In order to contextualize the policy conditions in which the Erasmus+ frameworks function, the evolution of each nation's rating on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map offers an empirical measure of progress or regression.

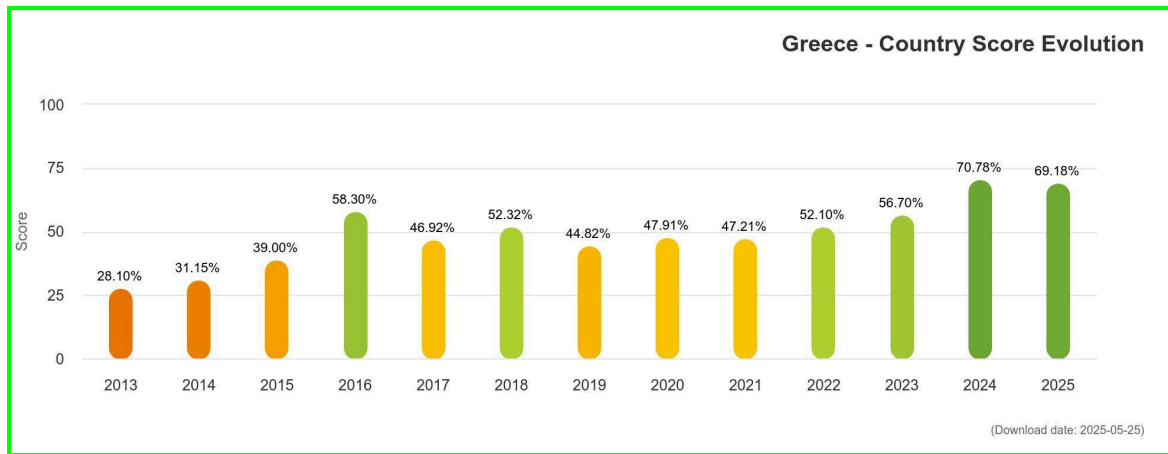
By selecting countries with divergent legal, policy, and institutional landscapes, this research is able to identify both common challenges and context-specific barriers to the explicit recognition of LGBTQI+ students as a group with fewer opportunities. This approach facilitates the development of differentiated policy recommendations that are sensitive to national realities, while also highlighting the need for harmonized European guidance to ensure equitable access to Erasmus+ opportunities for all youth.

##### **4.1. Greece: Regional Leadership, Progressive Legislation, and Institutional Gaps**

Greece is a nation that has been established as a regional leader in the Balkans by enacting important laws about LGBTQI+ rights in the last ten years. Significant advancements in the legal protection of LGBTQI+ people have been made through the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2024 and the acknowledgment of gender identity with Law 4491/2017(Law 4491/2017, 2017). Furthermore, although its

implementation is more selective than horizontal, Greece has adopted a National Strategy for the Equality of LGBTQI+ Persons (2021–2025) that specifically addresses discrimination in health, employment, and education and makes reference to the needs of LGBTQI+ youth (Greek Government, 2021). In the meanwhile, the Supreme Court declared in 2025 that same-sex civil marriages were constitutional (Spigou, 2025).

Even though a general inclusion is seen in the legislative framework of Greece, there is a complete absence of the LGBTQI+ community in the latest Youth Strategy, where there is only a generic impression with the use of the term “vulnerable people” without referring to the definition of the term, leaving it thus open to interpretation (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs & General Secretariat for Employment Promotion, 2023).



Source: (ILGA Europe, 2025b)

The evolution of Greece’s ranking on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map reflects the dynamics that exist in the country. In 2015, Greece ranked among the lowest in Western Europe, but by 2023 its position improved and reached to the top position in the Balkans and later in 2025 reached the place 13th in the EU, with a score of 68/100; although the gaps in the implementation persist (ILGA Europe, 2025b). For instance, mandatory training programs on LGBTQI+ inclusion for civil servants, which are key components of the national strategy remain optional, limiting their impact (ILGA Europe, 2023).

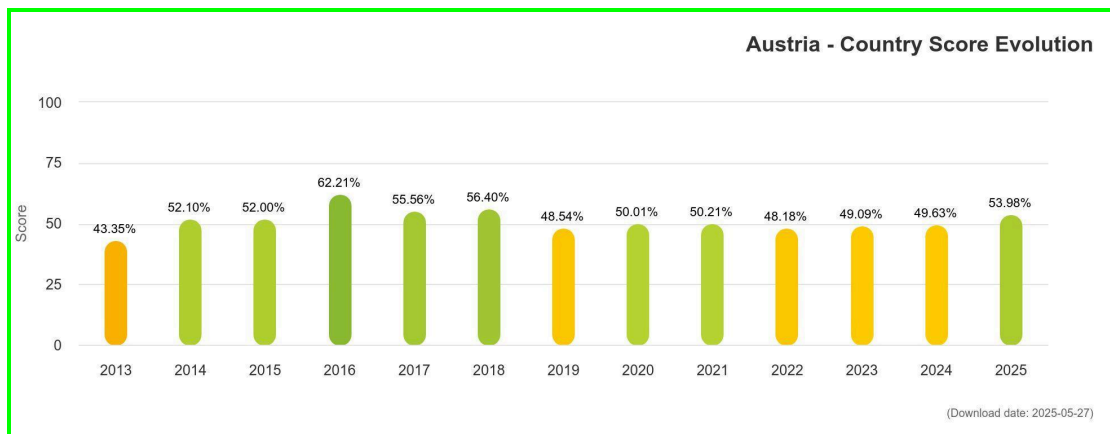
Furthermore, the public opinion reflects this duality, as only 49% would accept having a close gay family member in 2020 (Equaldex, 2025). At the same time, based on the most recent survey conducted by FRA, only 35% are open about being LGBTQI+ in Greece, when the EU average is 51% (European Union Agency for

Fundamental Rights, 2024b). All of these show the sociocultural resistance that exists in the country.

Greece is an important example for examining the relationship between policy and practice because of the conflict between progressive laws and social opposition. Even while this consistent progress shows that laws and policies are moving in the right direction, the absence of clear institutional frameworks for LGBTQI+ inclusion throughout Greece's many sectors emphasizes how implementation gaps still exist.

#### 4.2. Austria: Progressive Reputation, Youth Policy Integration, and Policy Ambiguity

Austria provides an instructive example of a country with a strong international reputation for human rights and a well-developed infrastructure for youth and diversity policies. Vienna’s status as a “human rights city” is emblematic of Austria’s broader commitment to inclusion(Declaration ‘Vienna - City of Human Rights’, 2014). Although the Austrian Federal Youth Strategy (Österreichische Jugendstrategie) does explicitly recognize diversity, equal opportunities, and the fight against discrimination as core principles, it does not include references to sexual orientation and gender identity as protected grounds (Parliament, 2022). At the same time, the country is missing a Strategy and Action Plan on the Equality of the LGBTQI+ people, where within it, the rights of the LGBTQI+ youth could be promoted(ILGA Europe, 2025a).



Source:(ILGA Europe, 2025a)

From the perspective of ILGA Europe the Austrian position on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map has shown gradual improvement over the past decade, moving from 52/100 in 2015 to 54/100 in 2025 (ILGA-Europe, 2025). This moderate increase reflects ongoing legislative and policy advancement. However, the absence of targeted measures for LGBTQI+ youth in national policies highlights a disconnect between Austria’s progressive reputation and its policy frameworks. For example, while the

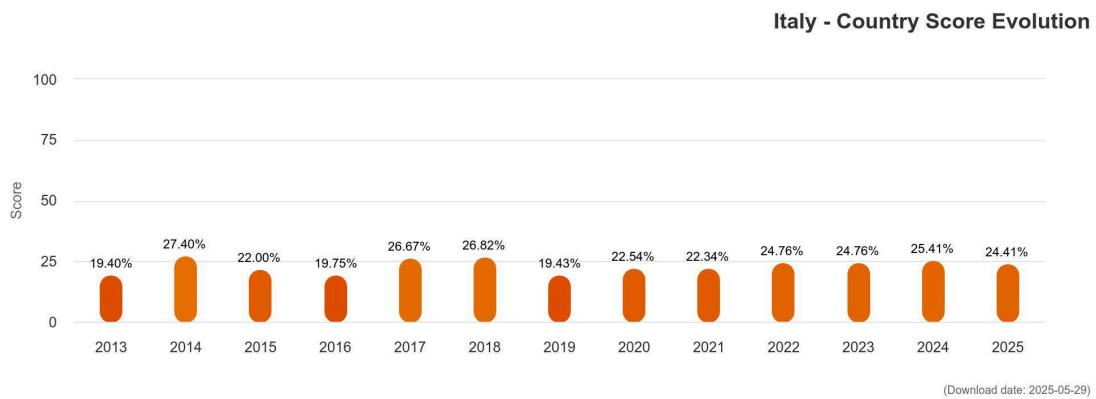
EU’s *Inclusion and Diversity Strategy* advocates for tailored outreach in youth programs, Austria’s reliance on broad definitions of diversity and inclusion such as serving the general goals of "Gleichberechtigung aller Geschlechter" and “unterschiedlichen Lebensrealitäten von jungen Menschen in Österreich" without specifying at all the need for tailored-made approaches for the LGBTQI+ youth in their Youth Strategy, risks overlooking the specific needs of the LGBTQI+ people.

Austria is an example where public opinion is better than the legislation. This is shown in the most recent survey from FRA, where 60% of the LGBTQI+ people are open about their sexual orientation or gender identity without the fear of being discriminated against (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024a). This paradox positions Austria as a pivotal case for examining how reputational commitments translate, or fail to translate, into concrete protections.

#### **4.3. Italy: Legislative Regression, Exclusionary Youth Policy, and Structural Barriers**

Italy serves as a case of legislative regression and structural exclusion for LGBTQI+ rights. The 2021 rejection of the Zan Bill, which sought to criminalize homophobic and transphobic violence, marked a turning point in Italy’s retreat from progressive reforms (Tondo, 2021). This regression is mirrored in the *National Youth Strategy* (Strategia Nazionale per la Gioventù), which lacks any reference to LGBTQI+ youth despite the EU’s explicit calls for intersectional approaches (Dipartimento per le Politiche Giovanili e il Servizio Civile Universale, 2023; Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting within the Council on a Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, 2018a).

Moreover, even though a National LGBTQI+ Strategy exists for the period 2022-2025, based on the latest report from ILGA Europe, it is not implemented at all showing in practice the regression on the protection of the LGBTQI+ rights in the country (ILGA Europe, 2025c; Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali, 2022). Additionally, there is no reference of the LGBTQI+ community in the National Strategy for Inclusion and Diversity of 2025, showing that no progress on the recognition of the vulnerability of the LGBTQI+ people has been made (Agenzia Nazionale Erasmus+ INDIRE, 2025).



Source: (ILGA Europe, 2025d)

Italy’s trajectory on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map illustrates this regression. In 2015, Italy scored 22/100, but by 2025 it remained in the same general spectrum reaching 24,4/100 with the years in between showing no improvement(ILGA Europe, 2025d). This stagnation is mirrored in the absence of meaningful policy initiatives for the LGBTQI+ people and the failure to integrate their needs into the national framework. While, from the side of the public opinion and the societal norms, based on the survey conducted by FRA 43% of the LGBTQI+ people in Italy are open regarding the sexual orientation or gender identity, a percentage generally high considering the general situation in the country (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024c). This shows a tendency of acceptance towards the LGBTQI+ community from the society, while conservative far right government and the catholic church is not allowing for any legislative progress on the matter.

## 5. National Agency Analysis

### 5.1. Greece: Progress Without Specificity

Greece’s State Scholarships Foundation (IKY) administers Erasmus+ with a focus on economic disadvantage, disability, geographical isolation, religious minority, refugees, people undergoing gender reassignment etc. The people undergoing gender reassignment were added as people with fewer opportunities in 2024, making it the most recent addition(State Scholarship Foundation, 2024).

The people with fewer opportunities (which for the LGBTQI+ community are eligible only the people undergoing hormone therapy) are not always eligible to receive the extra economic contribution based on the criteria set by IKY. These people are

eligible only if their income per capita is less than 6.000 euros. This poses a problem as students are most likely to be dependent on their families in the tax declaration. This happens when they are up to 25 years old and are attending schools, institutes of vocational education or universities in Greece or abroad, and they do not earn from their job more than 3.000 euros per year(Dandalou, 2022). Thus, the majority of the students are unable to be independent in their tax declaration. This automatically increases their income per capita. Which leads to them having a high income per capita even when their parents are not supporting them financially, making them in a lot of cases, ineligible to take the extra economic support given to the people with fewer opportunities(State Scholarship Foundation, 2024).

The exclusion of the rest of the LGBTQI+ community and the barriers put for the people undergoing gender reassignment in the eligibility criteria for additional financial support demonstrate a form of "strategic silence", whereby legal advances are not systematically operationalized within youth mobility policies. This gap is further underscored by the fact that, despite the existence of a National Youth Strategy (2022–2027) which references diversity and inclusion, there are no targeted measures for the protection and empowerment of LGBTQI+ youth (Greek Ministry of Education, 2022).

## **5.2. Austria: Broad Strokes, Limited Impact**

The OeAD-GmbH (Austrian National Agency) is handling the Erasmus+ programs in the country and has developed a comprehensive inclusion strategy, which includes support for people with fewer opportunities such as students with disabilities, chronic illnesses, cultural differences and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, as well as individuals from the LGBTQI+ community and other categories (OeAD-GmbH, n.d.). Moreover, people with fewer opportunities receive an additional monthly flat-rate subsidy (top-up) (set throughout Austria) or coverage of actual additional costs based on an application (inclusion support) (OeAD-GmbH, n.d.).

Although, when applying for an Erasmus+ in any university in the country the people with fewer opportunities can indeed receive the top up that is for students with health problems that is 250 euros per month. As stated, the main focus of this top-up is to cover the additional costs of those with physical, mental or health-related impairments. At the same time there is the inclusion support top up which is to cover actual real costs that arise during Erasmus and it is intended to be granted to people with physical, mental or health-related impairments explaining that these are people defined as participants with fewer opportunities (students with children, students with health problems) and the students who are recognized as students with fewer opportunities and can demonstrate that they have a real need for additional financial support on a real costs basis(University of Vienna, n.d.).

This means that LGBTQI+ people that are not on any gender reaffirming procedure can receive the 250 euros flat rate while those who are going through a gender reassignment process can also receive the inclusion support top up. Although, costs of psychotherapy, which is a service that is usually used by LGBTQI+ people can only be covered if its cost is higher than the one in Austria and the health insurance does not cover it, where in this case the top up will cover the difference(University of Vienna, 2024).

### **5.3. Italy: Legislative Regression and Policy Neglect**

Italy’s Erasmus+ framework, governed by INDIRE, exemplifies how national regression on LGBTQI+ rights permeate educational policy. The 2024 "Disposizioni nazionali per l’inclusione" defines vulnerability exclusively through economic indicators (ISEE certifications), disabilities under Law 104/1992, caregivers based on Article 1 Paragraph 255 of the Law 205/2017, the adult learners with low literacy levels, the non-Italian adult learners, the unemployed, the victims of violence, single parents of minor children, prisoners or ex-prisoners, adults learners and school staff working at educational centers and schools located on smaller islands or mountains(Instituto Nazionale Documentazione Innovazione Ricerca Educativa, 2021). Based on these, sexual orientation and gender identity remain absent from eligibility criteria, a reflection of Parliament’s 2023 rejection of the Zan Bill against homophobia(Carlo, 2021).

Although, based on the call for applications in 2025-2026 it is stated that

*“Students with disabilities, learning difficulties and certified health conditions who are awarded the Erasmus+ grant can access an additional financial contribution, provided after evaluation by the Erasmus+ National Agency.”.*

This extra funding is based on real-costs and can be attributed only to people undergoing a gender reassignment. Thus, it is not available to all LGBTQI+ students.

Moreover, it is seen the problematic nature of the categorization of people undergoing hormone therapy as they will be recognized as people with certified health conditions as it reproduces the stereotype of the pathologization of trans identities, which was officially banned by the World Health Organization when it removed the “gender identity disorder” from the mental disorders chapter in ICD-11(World Health Organization (WHO), 2024). Moreover, it is a stigmatizing language as it emphasizes the medicalization of trans identities.

## 6. Conclusion

In light of each nation's legislative framework, institutional practices, and dominant social norms, this study has offered a thorough comparative analysis of the explicit recognition and practical inclusion of LGBTQI+ students within the Erasmus+ frameworks of Greece, Austria, and Italy.

Austria stands out as the most inclusive country in practice among the three countries in this research. The reason is that its Erasmus+ national agency explicitly recognizes LGBTQI+ students as people with fewer opportunities eligible for both the 250 euros monthly top-up and further inclusion support, based on actual costs, for those undergoing gender reaffirming procedures(OeAD-GmbH, n.d.; University of Vienna, 2024). This direct recognition translates into actual financial support, demonstrating Austria's commitment to inclusion which is not merely rhetorical but operationalised in practice. However, it is notable that Austria's Federal Youth Strategy still relies on broad, non-specific language and does not explicitly list sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics as protected grounds, showing the existing gap between policy and practice, which in this case is in favor of the LGBTQI+ community as practice is better than the policies in place(Parliament, 2022, p. 202).

Greece, even though a regional leader in legislative advances for LGBTQI+ rights, including the legalization of same-sex marriage and the adoption of a National Strategy for the Equality of LGBTQI+ Persons, shows a more limited approach within its Erasmus+ framework(Greek Government, 2021; Spigou, 2025). The State Scholarships Foundation (IKY) only recently included “people undergoing gender reassignment” as eligible for additional support, and even then, access is limited to strict income criteria. The broader LGBTQI+ community remains largely unrecognised in the Erasmus+ framework, and the latest National Youth Strategy uses only the undefined term “vulnerable people,” leaving room for interpretation and inconsistent application(State Scholarship Foundation, 2024). This “strategic silence” highlights the disconnect between progressive legislation and concrete institutional mechanisms for inclusion.

Italy exemplifies “active exclusion.” Its Erasmus+ framework, managed by INDIRE, lacks any explicit reference to sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics in defining “people with fewer opportunities.” The eligibility criteria are narrowly focused on economic difficulties, disability, and other specific categories, with gender reassignment only recognized under the stigmatizing label of “certified health conditions.”(Istituto Nazionale Documentazione Innovazione Ricerca Educativa, 2021). Italy's National Youth Strategy and its unimplemented National LGBT+ Strategy further reinforce this exclusionary approach, reflecting broader legislative regression and institutional neglect(Dipartimento per le Politiche

Giovanili e il Servizio Civile Universale, 2023). As a result, Italy provides minimal support in practice for LGBTQI+ students in the Erasmus+ context.

Legislative and policy frameworks may not necessarily reflect popular opinions, according to this research. For example, in Austria, a big percentage of LGBTQI+ persons feel comfortable being open about their identity, and the acceptance of the LGBTQI+ people surpass the specificity of state laws. From the other side, despite legislative advancements, social opposition still exists in Greece, as seen by the public's limited acceptance of LGBTQI+ people and their comparatively low levels of openness about their sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics. Italy's policy advancements are static or backward due to conservative political forces and institutional slowness, notwithstanding some popular acceptance.

In summary, the comparative analysis of Greece, Austria, and Italy illustrates three distinct models of LGBTQI+ inclusion in Erasmus+: Austria's practical inclusion despite policy ambiguity, Greece's legislative progress undermined by institutional gaps and sociocultural resistance, and Italy's active exclusion rooted in legislative regression and policy inaction. These findings underscore the urgent need for harmonized EU-level guidance that mandates the explicit recognition of LGBTQI+ students as a group with fewer opportunities, robust monitoring mechanisms, and the development of context-sensitive support measures. Only through such coordinated efforts can the Erasmus+ program realize its promise of equitable access and meaningful inclusion for all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics.

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