

Empowering Youth for Rural Revival in Chereshovo

Objectives and Relevance

This youth exchange project takes place in Chereshovo, a small rural village in the Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria, with a focus on empowering local Pomak youth (Bulgarian-speaking Muslim minority) aged 13–18 who face social and economic marginalization ¹. The community is remote and disadvantaged, offering very few opportunities for young people – there are limited educational or leisure activities, low digital connectivity, and little exposure to broader European experiences. By bringing ~15 local youth together with ~15 international peers from similar rural or inclusion-focused backgrounds, the project aims to address these needs through collaborative community work, skill-building, and intercultural learning over a 10-day exchange in summer 2026.

Project Objectives: The project's objectives respond directly to the identified needs of the target group and align with Erasmus+ youth priorities. The specific objectives are:

- **Empower marginalized youth with skills and confidence:** Equip participants with practical skills in environmental stewardship, digital literacy, and civic engagement through hands-on activities (trail marking, village clean-up, digital storytelling) and non-formal workshops. By the end, the young people will have improved competencies and self-esteem to actively shape their communities.
- **Foster social inclusion and intercultural dialogue:** Unite diverse young people from rural, marginalized communities in different countries, enabling them to learn about each other's cultures and realities. This will break down prejudices and build mutual understanding and friendships across cultural/religious divides, reducing the isolation of the Pomak youth.
- **Improve the local environment and community pride:** Engage youth in tangible actions that benefit Chereshovo – creating a marked hiking trail with signage, cleaning and beautifying shared spaces – to make the village more attractive and sustainable. These activities raise environmental awareness and instill pride and ownership in participants and local residents for their heritage and surroundings.
- **Strengthen European identity and active citizenship:** Use the exchange as a living laboratory of European values, where participants experience solidarity and democracy in action. Through teamwork, discussions, and sharing of European perspectives, the youth will develop a feeling of being European and be inspired to participate in society as active citizens. They will directly practice civic engagement by taking initiative in their community and will better understand EU ideals like unity in diversity.
- **Build capacity and partnerships for youth work:** Enhance the capacity of the hosting organization and partners to support rural youth. The project will establish a strong partnership between organizations, laying groundwork for future cooperation. Local stakeholders (e.g. community centers, municipality) will see the positive impact of youth-led action, hopefully leading to ongoing support for such initiatives.

Relevance to Erasmus+ priorities: This project strongly contributes to the goals of Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges to *engage and empower young people to become active citizens, connect them to the European project, and help them develop competences for life* ². It embodies the core aims of youth exchanges –

fostering intercultural dialogue, developing skills and attitudes, promoting European values, and stimulating societal engagement ³. In particular, the project addresses several Erasmus+ horizontal priorities:

- **Inclusion and Diversity:** We actively include youth with fewer opportunities from a disadvantaged, remote area. Pomak youth in Chereshovo have faced geographic and socioeconomic barriers, so this project provides them equal access to an international learning experience ⁴. All activities will be made accessible, fair and welcoming, removing any barriers to participation (financial, linguistic, cultural) in line with Erasmus+ inclusion goals.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** By focusing on trail creation, village clean-up, and respect for nature, the exchange raises awareness about environmental issues and promotes sustainable habits ⁵. Participants learn *by doing* how to care for their environment (e.g. waste reduction, preserving local biodiversity), contributing to the Erasmus+ priority of environmental protection and the green transition.
- **Digital Transformation:** The project integrates a digital skills component to bridge the digital divide for rural youth. Through workshops on digital storytelling, use of online tools, and creating social media content, participants gain confidence with technology in a meaningful way ⁶. This addresses the priority of enhancing digital literacy and inclusion, empowering young people to use ICT for education, communication and civic engagement.
- **Participation in Democratic Life:** By engaging youth in community decision-making (planning improvements, voicing ideas) and encouraging them to take responsibility, the project nurtures active participation in society ⁷. The international dimension further gives them a sense of belonging to a wider European community. Through teamwork and collective actions, they exercise democratic values (dialogue, cooperation, consensus) and develop civic competences. In essence, the exchange encourages the young participants to become active, critically thinking members of both their local and European society.

Participant Selection and Inclusion

Participant profile: The exchange will involve ~30 young people (approximately 15 local Bulgarians and 15 internationals), plus a few adult group leaders/facilitators. The Bulgarian participants will be Pomak youth from Chereshovo and nearby villages, aged 13–18, encompassing both boys and girls and a mix of religious/ethnic backgrounds reflective of the local Muslim community. International participants will be of similar age (roughly 15–19) from partner NGOs in other countries – specifically organizations that work with youth in rural or marginalized settings (for example, small towns or minority communities in Europe). By having a peer group of rural youth from different countries, we ensure a common understanding of challenges as well as diversity in cultures. All participants are within the eligible age range for Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges, and each group will be accompanied by at least one adult youth leader (aged 18+) to ensure guidance and safety.

Selection process: Recruitment will be carried out in an inclusive and transparent manner by each partner. Locally, the hosting organization will coordinate with the school and community center in Chereshovo to identify and encourage eligible youth to apply – especially those who are motivated but have never had a chance to join such projects. We will hold info sessions in the village to explain the opportunity to families (important in a close-knit rural community). International partners will circulate calls for participants through their networks, targeting young people who fit the profile (from remote/rural areas, economically or socially disadvantaged, keen on the project topics). Selection criteria will emphasize motivation, willingness to learn and contribute, and need for inclusion (ensuring those who lack other opportunities are prioritized). We will strive for gender balance and diversity in each national team. No participant will be excluded on grounds of ethnicity, religion, disability or other status – everyone is welcome, and the groups will likely include youth who are facing various obstacles

(economic hardship, cultural isolation, etc.). This approach reflects Erasmus+ focus on actively involving young people with fewer opportunities ⁸. All partners will coordinate to make sure the overall group of 30 is balanced and compatible. Prior to finalizing the list, we may have the prospective participants write a short motivation statement or have an informal interview (conducted by the partner organizations) to ensure they understand the commitment and are truly interested in the themes.

Inclusion measures: To enable full participation of marginalized youth, we will implement strong inclusion support before and during the exchange. **Financial barriers** will be removed: the project is 100% grant-funded for participants, so there are no fees. Travel costs, accommodation, food and materials are covered by the Erasmus+ grant (with reimbursement provided upfront whenever possible so that families do not need to pay out-of-pocket). We will use the grant's *inclusion support* funds to cater to any special needs arising from participants' situations (for example, purchasing personal gear for the activities if a youngster cannot afford it, or covering extra luggage fees so they can bring necessary items). **Linguistic and cultural barriers** will be addressed through thorough preparation and on-site facilitation. Many local youth have limited foreign language skills, so key information (schedules, rules, safety instructions) will be explained in their mother tongue as well. We will have bilingual staff/volunteers available to translate or support communication when needed. Activities will rely on simple English and non-verbal methods (visual aids, demonstrations) to ensure understanding across all nationalities. **Accessibility and support:** We will ensure the venue and activities are youth-friendly and accessible. If any participant has a disability or health issue, we will accommodate them (e.g. selecting lodging on a ground floor, planning alternative tasks if someone cannot do intensive physical work). Group leaders will play a crucial role in inclusion – acting as mentors and looking after the well-being of each young person. The ratio of adults to minors will be about 1:5, allowing close supervision and individual support. We will also form *mixed-nationality teams* during activities so that local and foreign youth work side by side; this helps those who are shy or less experienced to integrate with peer support. Throughout the project, facilitators will cultivate a safe, respectful atmosphere where every participant is valued and encouraged to contribute. These measures align with Erasmus+ inclusion standards to *make learning environments more accessible, fair and welcoming* and to remove barriers for under-represented groups ⁹. By proactively supporting participants' needs, we aim to empower even the most vulnerable youth to fully engage and succeed in the exchange.

Participant involvement: In line with the youth-driven spirit of Erasmus+, participants will be actively involved in all stages of the project – not just as beneficiaries, but as co-creators. During the **planning stage**, we have included youth input by surveying local teens on what improvements they'd like to see in their village, which informed the choice of activities (trail work, clean-up, etc.). Once the international partners select their participants, we will facilitate online introductions (e.g. a group video call) so the youngsters can meet virtually and share ideas or expectations. Each national group will take on preparatory tasks: for example, preparing a cultural presentation or a game to bring to the exchange. This gives them ownership and a chance to shape the content. We intend to organize a short **preparatory visit** for group leaders (and perhaps a youth representative) before the exchange, which will help fine-tune the program with participants' perspectives in mind. During the **implementation**, the exchange activities are designed to maximize active involvement. Participants won't be passive learners; instead, they will lead and collaborate. They will be given roles such as team captains for certain tasks, co-facilitators for workshops (each country group might run a session about an issue in their community), or in charge of documenting the day's events for the blog. Youth will be encouraged to make decisions collectively – for instance, deciding the rules for living together, or choosing methods to use in a workshop – thereby practicing democratic participation. This active engagement not only keeps them motivated but is also a learning process itself (leadership, responsibility). Finally, in the **evaluation and follow-up**, participants will voice their opinions through evaluation forms and discussions, and their feedback will shape the follow-up actions (like what kind of local volunteering they want to do post-project). By involving young people in **planning, preparation, implementation**

and follow-up, we ensure the project is truly “for and by youth.” This approach follows the Erasmus+ quality standards that a good Youth Exchange *relies on the active involvement of young people in all project stages*, enhancing their learning experience ¹⁰ . It also boosts their ownership: participants who help create the project are more invested in its success and more likely to carry the outcomes forward.

Activities and Methodology

Overview of activities: “Empowering Youth for Rural Revival in Chereshovo” is structured around a **10-day youth exchange** (not including travel days) hosted entirely in Chereshovo. The days will be filled with a balanced mix of **hands-on community service, educational workshops, and intercultural activities**, all delivered through non-formal learning methods. A typical day might start with energizers and team-building games, then a morning of outdoor work in the community, an afternoon workshop or field visit, and an evening cultural or reflective activity. The program will be intensive but also enjoyable, with built-in breaks and recreation to keep energy high. By combining physical activities (outdoor, practical tasks) with intellectual and creative ones (discussions, digital storytelling, cultural exchange), we cater to different interests and learning styles. Safety and well-being will be monitored throughout (e.g. ensuring participants stay hydrated and take rests during physical work, etc.). The entire programme is a jointly implemented learning journey where participants learn by doing, rather than through lectures ¹¹ . Below are the key activities planned during the exchange:

- **Community trail creation and eco-workshops***: *A flagship activity is creating a marked eco-trail in the scenic area around Chereshovo. Guided by local volunteers or experts, participants will map out a suitable trail route (connecting points of natural or cultural interest), clear minor overgrowth if needed, and mark the trail with painted blazes and signposts. They will design and install simple wooden signs (e.g. arrows, distance markers, or informational boards describing local landmarks, flora/fauna in the Pomak and English languages). This hands-on work will be split into teams (mixing nationalities) tackling different sections of the trail or different tasks (painting, carpentry, documentation). In parallel, we will hold short *eco-workshops* to provide context – for instance, one session on *Leave No Trace* principles and local biodiversity, and another on how trails promote sustainable rural tourism. These workshops will use non-formal methods like role-play (simulating scenarios of environmental issues) or quizzes, making them interactive. The combination of theory and practice will enhance environmental competencies and show youth how communal efforts can positively impact their environment. By the end of the exchange, the participants will have created a tangible output: a usable nature trail for villagers and visitors, instilling pride in their accomplishment.
- **Village clean-up and community beautification**: Another major component is a community service campaign in Chereshovo itself. Participants will organize and execute a “Village Clean-up Day,” collecting litter from streets, public areas, and nature spots around the village. They will sort and dispose of waste properly (learning about recycling in the process). Additionally, small beautification projects will be done based on local needs – for example, repainting benches or playground equipment, planting flowers or trees in a common area, cleaning and arranging the community center space, etc. We plan these actions in consultation with village authorities so they address real community needs. This activity is highly hands-on and will be a vivid lesson in civic engagement and environmental responsibility. Youth will see immediate results (a cleaner, more welcoming village) and learn teamwork and project management (dividing tasks, using tools safely, cooperating). We will also invite local residents (and parents) to join in part of the clean-up, turning it into a community-building event that connects the locals with the international participants. Such direct action to improve the local environment reinforces lessons about sustainability and caring for one’s community ⁵ , and demonstrates to the youth their own power to effect change.

- **Digital storytelling and media skills workshops:** To address the digital skills gap of our rural participants, we will include daily or alternating-day **digital workshops**. With the help of a trainer or tech-savvy youth leader, participants will learn to use accessible digital tools to capture and share their project experience. For example, workshops will cover basic photography and video skills using smartphones, creating a blog or social media page, and crafting engaging stories (posts, short videos) about the project's activities. Participants will form a "media team" (rotating members so everyone gets a turn) responsible for producing content each day – e.g. a blog entry with photos about the day's achievements, interviews with participants, or an Instagram update. Not only does this give them ICT competence, it also encourages reflection on what they are doing (they must explain it to an audience). For many of the local youth, this will be a first exposure to creating digital content and using the internet proactively rather than passively. By the end, they will gain confidence in using technology and understand how digital tools can promote community causes. This directly supports Erasmus+'s digital transformation priority by strengthening digital literacy in a meaningful context ⁶ . The online outputs (blog, social media posts) additionally serve dissemination purposes, allowing others to follow the journey in real time.

- **Non-formal education workshops on themes:** Interspersed with the field work, we will hold several thematic workshops to deepen understanding of **environmental sustainability, active citizenship, and cultural diversity**. These sessions will use non-formal education techniques – such as brainstorming in small groups, role-playing games, creative arts, or outdoor experiential learning – rather than lectures. For example, one workshop on "*Climate Change and Us*" might involve a simulation game where participants represent different stakeholders (farmers, youth, officials) in a scenario of environmental challenge and have to negotiate solutions, thus learning about climate issues and decision-making. Another session on "*Active Youth, Strong Community*" could have participants map out what youth can do in their own towns and share success stories, thereby inspiring civic activism. We will also include space for participants to present issues from their own communities (e.g. a participant from Country X might share how their town tackled illegal dumping, etc.), turning workshops into peer learning exchanges. All workshops will be interactive and encourage critical thinking. By linking local actions (what they've been doing on the trail/cleanup) to global concepts (sustainability, community participation), we ensure the learning is holistic. The content reinforces values of environmental care and democratic participation that the EU promotes. These sessions, combined with the practical tasks, help raise awareness about socially relevant topics in an engaging way – exactly the kind of outcome youth exchanges are meant to stimulate ³ .

- **Intercultural learning and European identity:** A core element throughout the exchange is fostering intercultural dialogue and a sense of European unity. We will implement various **intercultural activities**: each evening, one country team will host a cultural night where they showcase their traditions (food tasting, music, dances, quizzes about their country, etc.), giving others a window into their culture. There will be facilitated discussions on topics like "Growing up in my village" where participants compare their daily lives and find commonalities and differences. Informal moments – cooking and eating meals together, sports and games, celebrating national songs or stories – will also be leveraged as intercultural learning opportunities. We plan an **excursion** to a nearby town or cultural site (perhaps a historical mosque or a craft museum in the region) so that everyone can learn about the Pomak/Bulgarian cultural heritage in context. Through these experiences, participants naturally develop intercultural competences: they practice empathy, foreign language skills, and openness to new perspectives. Friendships that cross borders and cultures will form, helping to break stereotypes and prejudice. This intense intercultural exposure in a safe setting will give the youth a real sense of what it means to be European – appreciating diversity while finding unity. It *fosters*

intercultural dialogue and learning and a feeling of being European in a very concrete way ³ . Many will likely experience for the first time that despite different languages or backgrounds, young people across Europe share common dreams and challenges.

- **Reflection and learning recognition:** Each day will include time for **reflection** so participants can process their learning. For instance, every evening after activities, small mixed groups will gather in “reflection circles” guided by a facilitator or group leader. They will discuss questions like: What did I learn today? What was I proud of? What was challenging? This helps consolidate new knowledge and self-awareness. We will use creative evaluation tools (e.g. each person places a sticker on a “learning tree” drawing to represent something they learned, or writes a postcard to themselves about their experience) to make reflection engaging for teenagers. Halfway through the exchange, we’ll have a mid-term evaluation to allow any adjustments and to let participants voice how they feel. At the end, a **final evaluation session** will enable participants to assess the whole project, give feedback, and celebrate their achievements (possibly with a small certificate ceremony or farewell party involving the community). Crucially, we will implement the Youthpass process to recognize learning outcomes. Early in the program, we introduce Youthpass and help the youth identify personal learning goals. They will maintain simple learning journals or the reflection notes which will feed into their Youthpass self-assessment. The facilitators and group leaders will assist in articulating skills gained (especially for those who need help with writing or vocabulary). Finally, each participant will receive a Youthpass certificate highlighting the key competences they developed. This not only serves as a formal recognition (useful for their future), but also reinforces their self-confidence as they see in writing how much they accomplished. By documenting and reflecting on learning, we ensure the impact is understood and lasting. This approach aligns with the Erasmus+ priority on quality non-formal learning – we make sure *learning outcomes are identified and documented* for each participant, and that they reflect on European values and topics during the experience ¹² .

Methodology: The project’s methodology is firmly grounded in the principles of non-formal education and youth empowerment. The activities described are all **participant-centered, experiential, and inclusive**. Instead of classroom teaching, learning happens through real experiences: building a trail, running a cleanup, creating digital stories, and engaging in dialogue. This experiential learning cycle (do -> reflect -> generalize -> apply) ensures deeper impact on the young people. We will use a wide range of methods: group work, outdoor education, role-play and simulations, creative arts (e.g. making posters, filming videos), peer teaching (youth teaching each other skills), and personal reflection. The diversity of methods keeps participants interested and caters to different learning styles. Importantly, the **role of facilitators** is to guide and mentor, not to lecture. They will create the framework and safe space for learning, then encourage participants to take active roles. The youth will have a voice in how activities unfold (as noted, they help lead some activities and shape rules), embodying the “learning by youth, with youth” ethos.

We have chosen this methodology to ensure the project’s goals are met effectively. For example, to build digital skills among rural youth, a hands-on workshop where they actually make a blog is far more effective than a lecture about digital literacy – it gives immediate practice and results. To foster inclusion and European identity, nothing works better than youths from different countries living and working together on a common mission; thus, teamwork and intercultural living are at the heart of the method. By doing visible community service, the concept of active citizenship is no longer abstract to participants – they experience it firsthand. This aligns with Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges being about **non-formal learning in a peer context** rather than formal instruction ¹¹ .

Our methodology also incorporates **flexibility and adaptation**. Given the age range (13–18) and the mixed abilities of participants, we will remain flexible with the agenda – adjusting the pace or method if

we observe fatigue, varying activity types to maintain engagement, and providing additional support where needed (e.g. if some participants struggle with a task, we might reassign roles so everyone can contribute meaningfully). The presence of experienced youth workers in the team helps ensure that activities are facilitated with empathy and inclusion in mind.

All planned methods serve to achieve the learning outcomes in a fun, engaging way. By the end of the exchange, participants will not only have tangible results (trail, signs, media content) but also internalized knowledge, skills, and attitudes – achieved through this well-rounded non-formal methodology. In summary, the project's method is **participatory, learning-by-doing, and youth-led**, reflecting Erasmus+ quality standards and the essence of a Youth Exchange. This approach will maximize the exchange's educational value and make it a memorable, life-changing experience for the young participants.

Project Management and Preparation

Partner roles and cooperation: This project is implemented by a partnership of organizations led by the applicant/host in Bulgaria. The host organization (based in the region of Chereshovo) will coordinate the overall project, given its familiarity with the local context and ability to mobilize local stakeholders. Three (for example) partner organizations from different countries (to be confirmed, but e.g. one from Romania, one from Greece, one from Italy – all experienced in rural youth work) will send the international participants. We have selected partners whose expertise complements the project: some might bring know-how in environmental youth projects, others in digital inclusion or intercultural dialogue, ensuring a well-rounded team.

All partners have been involved from the proposal development stage to ensure a shared vision. We have clear agreements on responsibilities: the **host organization** handles practical arrangements in Chereshovo (venue, local transport, materials for activities, contacting local community members), liaises with the National Agency, manages the budget and reporting, and leads on safety/risk management plans. The **sending partner organizations** recruit and prepare their participants, arrange travel to Bulgaria, and contribute to designing activities (each partner might be in charge of leading one workshop or cultural activity during the exchange, leveraging their strengths). Communication is maintained through regular online meetings (monthly in the run-up to the exchange, and more frequently as the date approaches) and a shared online workspace for documents and schedules. We will designate one coordinator from each organization to form a project steering group – they will be in daily contact via email/WhatsApp for quick decision-making as needed.

To formalize cooperation, we will sign **inter-institutional agreements** outlining roles, financial details, and contingency plans. This ensures everyone is on the same page regarding tasks and Erasmus+ rules (e.g. publicity, dissemination, insurance obligations). We also plan to have a **kick-off meeting** (virtually) as soon as the project is approved, to revisit the project design, set timelines for preparation tasks, and establish the conflict resolution mechanism (how we handle any disagreements or changes). A spirit of trust and openness is fostered among partners, as we recognize that a smooth collaboration is key to project success. Our partnership includes both experienced Erasmus+ players and perhaps one newer organization; we will support each other by sharing knowledge on administrative and pedagogical matters.

Preparatory Visit: Recognizing the importance of planning and risk mitigation, we intend to organize a short Preparatory Visit (PV) in Chereshovo prior to the exchange activity. Ideally about 4-6 weeks before the youth exchange, 1 representative from each partner (the group leader or project coordinator, possibly accompanied by one local youth representative) will travel to the host village for 2 days. The

aims of the PV are to **fine-tune logistics, build trust, and ensure specific needs are catered for**, which is especially crucial since our project involves minors and youth with fewer opportunities ¹³ . During this visit, the team will inspect accommodation and facilities, discuss the detailed timetable day-by-day, assign roles for facilitation, and review the risk assessment on-site (e.g. check the trail route for any hazards, locate the nearest clinic). We will also use this time to meet local stakeholders: for example, a meeting with the village mayor or school principal, so that partners understand the local support network. The PV allows partners to preempt any problems (if, say, the planned lodging needs adaptation or materials need sourcing, we handle it in advance). It also greatly strengthens the partnership by allowing face-to-face rapport and clarifying any cultural or communication differences. If for some reason travel is restricted, we will conduct virtual video “visits” – the host could video-stream a tour of the venue, etc., to simulate some benefits of a PV. However, we consider the in-person PV highly valuable for *setting up a solid partnership and administrative arrangements* in line with quality expectations ¹⁴ . The PV outcomes will be documented in a revised activity plan and checklist, which all partners sign off on, ensuring everyone returns home aligned and confident about the upcoming exchange.

Preparation of participants (training and support): Each partner organization will prepare its selected participants well in advance to ensure they are ready for the intercultural experience and the activities. **Pre-departure training** will be organized in every country. For the Bulgarian group, since they are new to international projects, we will hold multiple sessions at the community center: covering topics like *Intercultural Preparation* (learning about the countries of the other participants, discussing cultural differences and tolerance), *Basic Language and Communication* (practicing simple English phrases, learning to introduce oneself, possibly a few words in partners’ languages for fun), and *Teamwork and Expectations* (what is a youth exchange, what do they want to learn or contribute). Similar sessions will be run by partners with their youth – ensuring everyone gets input on intercultural awareness (to prevent culture shock), *linguistic prep* (if any participants have very low English, partners will provide some language support or assign a peer to help them), and *topic-related prep* (e.g. learning about environmental issues in their home area so they can share during workshops). We will also explain to all participants the *objectives* of the project and Erasmus+ ethos, so they understand this is not a tourist trip but a learning experience where they have responsibilities. Each participant will receive an **Info Pack** (developed collaboratively by the partners) containing practical details: the daily schedule outline, what to bring (appropriate clothes, personal items), rules and code of conduct, emergency contacts, etc. This Info Pack will be translated or explained in native languages as needed to ensure comprehension by both youth and their parents.

Practical arrangements: The host will coordinate travel plans with each partner to make sure arrivals/departures go smoothly. Given Chereshovo is remote, likely all international groups will travel to a nearest city (e.g. Plovdiv or Smolyan) and then be picked up by organized bus to the village. We will arrange group travel where possible so that participants are not traveling alone, and where not possible, ensure that minors are accompanied by their group leader at all times during transit. All travel itineraries will be checked for safety and comfort (avoiding overly long layovers, etc.). The host will book a suitable accommodation (e.g. a guesthouse or school dormitory in or near Chereshovo). The accommodation will be simple but adequate, providing separate rooms or dorms for males and females, and privacy and security. Meals will be arranged either via catering or self-cooking in teams; we plan to involve participants in cooking some intercultural dinners as part of the experience (with supervision). Dietary needs (halal food for Muslim participants, vegetarian options, etc.) will be fully respected – we will collect this info in advance on the participants’ application forms.

Risk assessment and management: Prior to the exchange, the project team will draft a detailed **Risk Management Plan**. This will identify potential risks (accidents during outdoor work, illness, conflicts, homesickness, etc.) and list preventive measures and response actions. For example, for outdoor

activities, we will have first aid kits on hand and at least one staff trained in first aid; for the hiking trail work, participants will be briefed on safety (wear suitable shoes, take breaks, etc.), and an emergency vehicle will be on call if someone gets injured. We will gather health information for each participant (allergies, medications) during preparation and ensure these are considered (e.g. having appropriate food, knowing how to handle a medical issue if it arises). All participants and staff will be covered by medical insurance (either via the European Health Insurance Card and/or additional travel insurance for those from non-EU countries or to cover specific activities). **Child protection:** since many participants are minors, we will implement child protection guidelines. This includes: obtaining parental consent for all activities (parents will be informed about the nature of tasks like hiking or painting), requiring a code of conduct from all adults (no unsupervised one-on-one situations with minors, maintaining professional boundaries, etc.), and ensuring gender-balanced supervision (male and female leaders) so that both boys and girls have someone approachable. If any participant has special medical needs, we will have a plan (e.g. if someone has asthma, ensuring they carry inhalers and the staff knows the plan in case of an attack). We will also set up a simple incident reporting mechanism – any incident will be logged and reviewed to improve safety. Local emergency contacts (nearest doctor, hospital, police, etc.) will be posted at the venue and known to all leaders.

Upon arrival, we will conduct a **safety briefing** with participants: explaining house rules at accommodation, what to do in case of emergency, assigning buddy pairs (each youth has a “buddy” to look out for, ideally from another country), and establishing a daily check-in system (e.g. every evening we account for everyone). A **ratio of about 1 adult per 5 youths** allows close oversight. During the exchange, the team will monitor weather conditions for outdoor work and adjust if needed (e.g. if it's too hot or a storm, we reschedule activities to indoors for that time). Curfews and quiet hours will be agreed upon to ensure participants get enough rest. We will also enforce rules like no alcohol/drugs (clearly communicated in the rules and agreed by all, given the age group) and respectful behavior expectations to prevent any bullying or misbehavior. If minor conflicts or discipline issues arise, staff will mediate immediately using dialogue and if needed involve parents or the sending organization to resolve it. These management measures are in line with Erasmus+ Youth safety and quality standards, ensuring a secure environment so the educational goals can be met without incident.

Support and monitoring during the project: The project coordinator and leaders will monitor the progress of activities daily. We will hold brief team meetings (with all group leaders and facilitators) each morning to review the previous day, address any issues (e.g. a participant feeling unwell or isolated), and adjust plans if necessary. This allows us to be responsive to the group's needs. Participants will also be given voice – through the daily reflection groups and an anonymous “suggestion box” – so they can express if something is troubling them or if they have ideas to improve their experience. The multicultural aspect means we must be attentive to group dynamics: we will encourage mixing and watch out that no national subgroup isolates themselves. If we notice, for example, that language is a barrier for some of the youngest locals, we might assign a bilingual peer or volunteer to accompany them in workshops. Our approach is to anticipate and promptly support any participant who is struggling (be it homesickness, understanding tasks, etc.). Leaders will provide one-on-one encouragement and guidance as needed, acting as mentors.

After the mobility (follow-up): The project doesn't end when the 10 days are over – a strong follow-up plan is in place to capitalize on the momentum. On the last day of the exchange, we will devote time to discuss next steps: participants will be asked how they plan to use what they learned and what initiatives they might want to do back home. We'll introduce them to local opportunities (for Bulgarian youth, perhaps joining a local eco-club or youth parliament; for others, similar channels in their area) and to other Erasmus+ possibilities (like the European Solidarity Corps volunteering, future exchanges, etc.). Each partner will organize a **reunion meeting** or at least an online call with their participants about 1-2 months after the exchange. In that session, youths can reflect after some time has passed,

share if they have done something new (maybe they started a recycling drive at school, etc.), and we can reinforce the lessons learned. We will also use these follow-up meetings to help participants finalize any remaining Youthpass reflection and ensure they have their certificates. Furthermore, the partners will encourage participants to stay connected informally. We will maintain the project's WhatsApp/Facebook group so they can continue chatting, sharing photos, and possibly planning visits. It's quite possible friendships made will result in personal exchanges (youth visiting each other through private travel) or joint micro-projects online – we will certainly encourage such grassroots networking as a positive outcome.

On the organizational level, the partners will evaluate the project outcomes together (likely via an online meeting and written report exchange) and discuss how to sustain the partnership. Concretely, we aim to develop a follow-up Erasmus+ project (perhaps a Youth Exchange in one of the partner's communities on a related theme, or a small strategic partnership for rural youth empowerment) to deepen and expand the impact. Because we have involved local community members in Chereshevo (like authorities, families) during the project, they are now aware and hopefully supportive of youth initiatives. The hosting organization will leverage this increased support to advocate for a local youth space or regular youth activities funded by the municipality. In short, our management approach treats the project as a cycle – planning, preparation, implementation, follow-up – with each stage given due attention and quality control. We are confident that with this thorough management and preparation, the project will run smoothly and achieve its objectives in a safe, inclusive manner.

Impact, Dissemination, and Sustainability

Expected impact on participants: The primary impact will be on the 30 young people who take part in the exchange. We anticipate a transformative effect on their skills, attitudes, and future perspectives. By completing the project, participants will have achieved the following outcomes:

- **Enhanced personal and professional skills:** All youth will improve their *hard skills* and *knowledge*. For example, they will learn practical environmental skills (how to mark trails, organize a clean-up, proper waste management), gain basic project management experience (planning tasks, working to a schedule), and acquire digital competencies (using digital cameras or social media for advocacy). Many participants, especially the local ones, will have their first exposure to using technology creatively and to practicing English daily – thus significantly improving their digital literacy and communication skills. These new competences can be life-changing in terms of future education or job opportunities in rural areas.
- **Improved soft skills and social abilities:** Through constant teamwork in a multicultural setting, participants will develop strong *transversal skills* such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and adaptability. They will have navigated living with peers from different backgrounds for 10 days, which builds resilience and emotional intelligence. Shy individuals are expected to come out of their shells, gaining confidence in expressing themselves. Participants will also learn to take responsibility and initiative – for instance, leading a group task or making decisions during activities. Overall, their self-esteem will grow as they overcome challenges together and succeed in their projects. We expect the young people to realize their potential and feel more empowered to handle challenges in the future (like speaking in public, leading a volunteer action, or even pursuing higher education/careers that they might have thought “not for someone like me” before).
- **Stronger European identity and intercultural competence:** A key impact is that participants will develop a sense of belonging to Europe and an appreciation of cultural diversity. Many of the

local Pomak youth have never interacted closely with foreigners or traveled outside their region; this exchange will broaden their horizons dramatically. They will break down stereotypes (both about others and how others see them) by discovering how much they have in common with peers abroad. As a result, they will feel less isolated as a minority group and more a part of the broader European youth community. Likewise, the international participants will gain insight into the Pomak culture and rural Bulgarian life, enriching their understanding of Europe's cultural mosaic. We anticipate all participants will emerge with new friendships across borders and a lasting curiosity about other countries. This aligns with the Erasmus+ youth goal of fostering intercultural dialogue and a feeling of being European ³. Concretely, we might see participants visiting each other after the project or collaborating online, which indicates a personal European network has been built. They will also likely be more open-minded and tolerant individuals, having lived and worked closely with diverse teammates.

- **Greater motivation for civic engagement:** By actively contributing to community improvement during the exchange, the young people will internalize the value of *active citizenship*. They will have seen first-hand that youth action can make a difference – e.g. their trail and clean-up visibly improved the village, and they received gratitude from locals. This is a powerful validation for a teenager. We expect this will spur many of them to remain engaged in community or volunteer work. For the local group, having successfully executed a project at home, they might become role models for their peers and continue as a youth volunteer group after the international team leaves. International participants, too, will carry ideas back home (for example, a Romanian participant might start a similar clean-up in their own village, inspired by Chereshovo). In broader terms, the project will *stimulate their interest in societal issues and democratic participation*. They will be more likely to vote, join youth organizations, or raise their voice on issues, because they have practiced these during the exchange. This outcome is in line with similar Erasmus+ projects' findings that empowering rural youth with skills and confidence leads to "*vibrant, active communities and greater youth participation in civic life*" ¹⁵. We intend to gather testimonies after the project where participants describe their attitude change – we expect statements like "I used to feel I couldn't change anything, but now I see even as a teenager I can improve my village" or "I wasn't interested in environmental issues before, but now I started a recycling drive at home." These will illustrate the deep personal impact.

In summary, each participant will leave the project with a richer set of competences (documented in their Youthpass), a broadened worldview, new international friends, and the inspiration to take an active role in their community and in Europe. This empowerment of marginalized rural youth embodies the Erasmus+ mission of youth engagement and inclusion. In many ways, the project will be a turning point in their lives – increasing their opportunities and aspirations for the future. For instance, some may be motivated to continue studies (like learning IT or English further), seek other Erasmus+ opportunities (EVS/ESC volunteering, training courses), or simply be more proactive locally. We will measure this impact through feedback surveys and follow-up contact, looking at indicators such as how many participants engage in new activities or initiatives in the 6-12 months after the exchange.

Impact on organizations and local community: The project will also produce significant benefits for the organizations involved and the Chereshovo community:

- *For the participating organizations:* The host organization in Chereshovo will greatly strengthen its capacity and experience. Successfully managing an international youth exchange will improve its project management skills, staff competencies in non-formal education, and reputation in the community and among Bulgarian youth organizations. This can lead to new partnerships and more projects in the future. The partner NGOs will likewise benefit: they gain experience in inclusion-focused exchanges, new methodologies (they learn from the activities we implement,

which they can replicate), and a network of partner organizations for future collaboration. All partners will improve their ability to work with rural youth and fewer-opportunity groups, incorporating the best practices developed in this project into their regular work. Additionally, the partnership formed is a durable outcome – we expect these organizations to continue cooperating, having built trust and understanding through this project. This could mean future Erasmus+ projects (KA1 or KA2) together, staff exchanges, or at minimum an ongoing exchange of knowledge in the field of youth work. In essence, the project creates a **small network of organizations committed to rural youth empowerment**, which is itself a valuable impact.

- *Local community in Chereshovo:* The village and its residents will see concrete positive changes. Environmentally, Chereshovo will be cleaner and more attractive thanks to the clean-up and beautification. The new hiking trail and signage can potentially draw visitors or at least provide a new recreational outlet for locals, contributing to rural tourism or community well-being. Socially, the project will put Chereshovo “on the map,” showing that even a tiny village can host an international event. This can instill pride in the community – villagers can say, “Look, we had Europeans come here to work with our youth and improve our home.” The interactions between locals and participants (through the open events, daily presence in the village) can also break some mutual stereotypes. Locals might become more open to foreigners and new ideas, and participants will break any stereotypes they had about rural Bulgaria or Muslim minorities. For the families of the local youth, seeing their children take part in a European project and lead community actions can change attitudes: parents might become more supportive of youth initiatives, and siblings or peers may also get inspired to engage. We anticipate that the successful execution of this project will encourage the local authorities (e.g. the mayor’s office) to involve youth more in community matters. For example, they might form a local youth council or allocate small funds for youth-led projects, having seen the capability and enthusiasm of young people. In the longer term, if the trail becomes a small tourist attraction or annual clean-ups become a tradition, Chereshovo could experience ongoing community development sparked by this exchange.
- *Wider region and other stakeholders:* We will share our results with regional youth networks and other villages. This exchange can serve as a **pilot model** for engaging rural youth in community revival. If successful, it may attract media coverage beyond the village (perhaps a regional news story about international volunteers in a Rhodope village) which raises awareness of rural youth issues and Erasmus+ opportunities. Other NGOs or schools in the region might reach out to learn how they could do similar projects, thereby multiplying the impact. Moreover, by addressing themes like environmental care and digital inclusion, the project contributes indirectly to regional and national priorities (for instance, Bulgaria’s strategies on youth and environment). The impact at European level is admittedly on a smaller scale, but it exists in the form of contributing to the collective goals of the Erasmus+ programme – promoting inclusion, sustainability, digital skills, and participation among youth across Europe. Each participant’s personal growth and the partnership’s continued work feed into these broader impacts.

We will measure and document impact through various means: participant surveys, testimonials, observation of community feedback, media articles, and reports from partners on follow-up activities by participants. Indicators of success will include things like: number of local community members engaged (e.g. who came to the final event), qualitative feedback from youth (“I feel more confident to speak up”), and any concrete follow-up actions (like a new youth initiative or continued maintenance of the trail by locals).

Dissemination strategy: We recognize the importance of disseminating the project’s results and lessons to a wide audience, in order to amplify the impact and justify the trust and funding of

Erasmus+. Our dissemination will take place at the local, national, and international levels, targeting both the general public and specific stakeholders in youth and community development.

- *Ongoing dissemination via social media:* As mentioned in the activities, we will set up a **project blog or social media page** (e.g. a Facebook page or Instagram account) where participants post updates during the exchange. This real-time storytelling will engage a broader audience including peers, families, and community members. The content – photos of the trail building, interviews with participants about what they learned, short videos of cultural nights – will showcase the project's progress and human stories. We will encourage participants and partners to share these posts to reach networks like other youth NGOs, local interest groups, or Erasmus+ online communities. The social media campaign will use relevant hashtags (e.g. #ErasmusYouth, #YouthExchange, #RuralYouth, #GreenYouth) to increase visibility. By the end of the project, this online chronicle will serve as a digital archive of results that anyone can access.
- *Local dissemination in Chereshovo:* A high-visibility **community event** will be organized on the second-to-last day of the exchange. We plan this as a celebratory closing event where participants present what they have done and learned. For example, they might guide villagers along the newly marked trail or unveil the new informational signboards. We can have an exhibition of before-and-after photos of the clean-up sites, or a screening of a short video the participants created about the project. Certificates (Youthpass) can be awarded in front of the community to acknowledge the youths' achievements publicly. Invitations will be sent to local residents, families, representatives of the municipality, school teachers, and possibly regional media. This event not only disseminates results (people see the tangible improvements and hear youths speak about their experience) but also builds community buy-in for sustaining the results. We expect local media (newspaper or TV) to be interested in such a positive local story – we will proactively send a press release to regional media outlets highlighting the international aspect and community service angle. Any media coverage will further disseminate the project's message to the general public in the region.
- *Dissemination by partners in their communities:* After returning home, each partner organization and their participants will spread the word about the project. This could take various forms: organizing a small workshop or slideshow at a youth club or school where the participants recount their experience to peers; writing articles for their organization's newsletter or local press; sharing the project video and outcomes on their own websites; and integrating stories or methods from the project into their ongoing activities. For instance, if a partner is a school, the students who went might present at a school assembly, thus reaching many other youth with the message of European youth engagement and environmental action. We will provide all partners with a **dissemination toolkit** (comprising the project summary, photos, the link to our blog, and key messages) to ensure consistent and effective communication. They will translate/adapt this for local use as needed. Through partner dissemination, we reach audiences in at least three other countries – these could include rural communities similar to Chereshovo, local authorities, or youth workers interested in our project's theme.
- *Wider dissemination in the youth work sector:* We intend to share the results and best practices with the youth work community at large. We will upload a concise **Project Results Report** to relevant platforms such as the SALTO Youth Toolbox or Otlas forum, highlighting what we did (e.g. a PDF or online article describing the project activities, objectives, and impact). This report will focus on the innovative aspects like combining environmental action with digital storytelling and working with minority youth, which can inspire other practitioners. We will also utilize National Agency channels: for example, sending our story to the Bulgarian NA to be considered for their newsletters or success story compilations. If there are Erasmus+ dissemination events

or fairs, we are willing to present our project. Additionally, because our project aligns with multiple EU Youth Strategy priorities (green, inclusion, participation), we could write a blog post or article linking our experience to those themes (e.g. “How a Youth Exchange empowered Pomak youth to become eco-champions”) and pitch it to websites or publications focusing on youth or community development.

- *Materials and outputs:* Tangible outputs like the **trail guide/map** (if we create a small pamphlet or digital map of the trail) or the **blog** will remain available after the project. We will circulate the link to the blog and any digital materials to relevant tourism or youth networks in the region (for example, sharing the trail info with a local hiking association or putting the story on the municipality's website). The idea is that our results (like the trail or community clean-up model) might be replicated or utilized by others. We will also share our educational approach: for example, if we develop any specific workshop outlines or games (like the climate change role-play game), we will publish those as open resources for other youth workers.

Our dissemination efforts will continue for several months post-project to ensure maximum reach. We will document and monitor dissemination (tracking social media engagement, collecting news clippings, recording number of event attendees, etc.) to report on it and evaluate its effectiveness. Ultimately, through proactive and multi-channel dissemination, we aim to **raise awareness** about the project's achievements, promote the Erasmus+ programme, and advocate for rural youth empowerment to as wide an audience as possible.

Sustainability and follow-up: We are committed to ensuring that the effects of this project are long-lasting and that the momentum built does not dissipate after the exchange. Several strategies will support the sustainability of results:

- *Continued youth engagement in Chereshovo:* The local participants, energized by the exchange, will be encouraged and guided to continue their civic engagement. The host organization plans to create a **permanent youth group or club** in the village (if one isn't already active). This group can meet regularly (e.g. weekly or monthly) at the community center to plan small follow-up actions – such as periodic litter clean-ups, maintaining the hiking trail (repainting markers as needed), or even initiating new ideas (like starting a community garden or organizing cultural events for youth). By institutionalizing the youth group, we give structure for ongoing activism. We will involve some of the enthusiastic participants as youth leaders of this group, thereby giving them leadership experience and a stake in continuing what they started. We will also seek support from the municipality or local businesses to maybe sponsor small projects the group does (for instance, providing tools or snacks for volunteers in future clean-ups). This way, the local community invests in sustaining the spirit of the project.
- *Maintenance of project outputs:* The **trail and signage** established will be maintained beyond the project. We will hand over the “ownership” of the trail to the community – possibly the municipality or a local tourism association – with a plan for upkeep (like repainting signs every year or replacing damaged ones). The participants will create a simple *trail maintenance manual* during the project (a short document listing the steps to maintain it, which they can pass on to next year's youth or the local council). Similarly, any public spaces beautified will be cared for. For example, if we painted a wall mural during the project, we'd seal it properly and arrange for locals to touch it up if it fades. By ensuring the longevity of these physical outputs, the community continues to benefit from them. We will also monitor usage – e.g. see if locals continue to use the trail – and possibly organize an annual “hike day” or event on the trail to keep it in people's minds.

- *Long-term personal impact for participants:* From a sustainability perspective, the knowledge and attitudes gained by participants are a lasting “human capital” outcome. To reinforce this, we will keep participants connected and provide them with resources to further their journey. For instance, during follow-up meetings we’ll inform them about other opportunities (volunteering, trainings, local youth councils) so they can continue to be active. We expect some of the older participants might even become multipliers – helping to organize future exchanges or local projects. If the host or partners do another Erasmus+ project, we can invite alumni from this project to volunteer or share their experience, thus keeping them engaged. The Youthpass certificates each participant receives can be used in their CV or education portfolio indefinitely, helping them access further opportunities – this is a concrete long-term benefit for their employability and mobility. Moreover, the international friendships formed create a support network that can last a lifetime; youths might practice language and cultural exchange long after the project (we’ve seen WhatsApp groups from such exchanges stay active for years, offering peer support and updates). Such informal networks strengthen European civil society in the long run.
- *Future collaborations and projects:* The partnership between the organizations is a major sustainable outcome. We have already discussed ideas for a **reciprocal youth exchange** in one of the partner countries, possibly the following year, which would allow some of the same youth or new ones to meet again and build on what they learned (for example, the Cheresovo youth could then travel abroad, which would be a huge step for them, building on the confidence gained when they hosted). Even if not the same participants, the thematic focus could continue (e.g. “Empowering Youth for Rural Revival – Part 2” in another rural village). We will jointly seek funding for these ideas, leveraging the success of this project to justify new ones. Additionally, spin-off initiatives may arise: for example, a small-scale KA2 project to produce a guide or toolkit on involving rural youth in community improvement, using our experience as a case study. Because the needs addressed by our project (rural isolation, lack of opportunities) are not solved overnight, we view this exchange as part of a longer process. The relationships and insights gained will feed into future efforts by each partner to continue tackling these issues. In this way, Erasmus+ investment here yields ongoing projects and collaborations (a multiplier effect).
- *Policy impact:* On a higher level, we will share our positive outcomes with policymakers or community leaders. If the project clearly demonstrates improved youth engagement in Cheresovo, we can present this to the municipal council to advocate for more funding or support for youth initiatives. Perhaps we could propose a yearly budget for youth projects or the creation of a municipal youth coordinator position. While ambitious, influencing local policy would ensure long-term support for the target group. At minimum, we’ll ensure local leaders see the results – inviting them to events, giving them the project report – so that youth inclusion remains on their agenda. On the European policy side, by aligning with European Youth Goals (e.g. #3 Inclusive Society, #10 Sustainable Green Europe, #7 Quality Employment & Opportunities in Rural Areas), our project contributes to those broader strategies, and we will report our outcomes in those terms where appropriate (for example, in reports or discussions with National Agencies).

In conclusion, the project “Empowering Youth for Rural Revival in Cheresovo” is designed not as a one-off event, but as a catalyst for ongoing empowerment and development. Through careful dissemination and robust follow-up plans, we aim for its impact to ripple outward and continue well into the future. The youth who were once on the margins will become active community members and Europeans with a voice – which is the true sustainable impact we seek. As one of our objectives echoes, we want to *promote social inclusion and civic engagement among rural youth, encouraging them to become active*

members of their communities ¹⁶, and we are building the support system for them to do exactly that long after the exchange is over.

The combination of tangible community outcomes, empowered young individuals, strengthened organizations, and ongoing initiatives will ensure that the legacy of this project endures, fulfilling the Erasmus+ programme's expectations of sustainable impact and providing a model for rural youth empowerment that can be reused and scaled up in the future.

References:

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² ³ ⁸ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹² ¹³ ¹⁴ Mobility projects for young people - "Youth Exchanges" - Erasmus+

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¹⁵ ¹⁶ Empowering Rural Communities: Youth-Led Spaces for Transformation - Filiala Asociației Se Poate

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