

Countering Anti-Child Rights Movements in Europe

The need for a European mechanism

POSITION PAPER



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

February 2022

About Eurochild



Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

Eurochild AISBL

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83 Fax +32 (0)2 511 72 98
info@eurochild.org – www.eurochild.org

For more information, contact:

Mieke Schuurman

Senior Policy Advisor Children's Rights & Safeguarding, Eurochild
Mieke.Schuurman@eurochild.org

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014-2020. For further information please consult <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>. The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.



© Eurochild 2015

SUMMARY

Anti-rights groups are non-state groups that position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights. They typically campaign against the rights of excluded groups – women, children and young people, LGBTQI+ people, religious minorities, ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and refugees. Consequently, civil society that defends the rights of those groups comes under attack as well. In this paper, Eurochild explores the possibility of founding a European mechanism that protects human rights, with a specific focus on children’s rights and children’s rights defenders.

Countering Anti-Child Rights Movements in Europe

The need for a mechanism to counteract anti-child rights movements

Anti-rights groups are non-state groups that position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights. They typically campaign against the rights of excluded groups – women, children and young people, LGBTQI+ people, religious minorities, ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and refugees. Consequently, civil society that defends the rights of those groups comes under attack as well. Anti-rights groups are impacting directly on people’s lives and civic space¹.

The need for a mechanism to monitor and counteract this trend is paramount. As institutions with respective mandates on human rights, including children’s rights, it is essential that the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) work together to address this growing challenge. To make such a mechanism a reality as soon as possible, the EU and CoE should explore the possibility of including the monitoring of anti-child rights movements and activities within existing mechanisms at European level.

Eurochild, its members and other children’s rights organisations² have voiced concerns about anti-child rights movements in several countries across Europe. Nonetheless, these movements have gained significant support, using social media to amplify their messages spreading misinformation and ‘fake news’.

Attacks from anti-child rights movements have taken different forms:

¹ CIVICUS (2019) [Against the Wave. Civil society Responses to Anti-Rights Groups](#)

² CIVICUS (2019) [‘Anti-child rights groups are making up stories to convince the public’](#)

- Children human rights defenders are targeted for their human rights activities and for speaking out;
- Children have reported³ being subject to adverse experiences such as heckling, interruption, being joked about, belittled or insulted when speaking about children's rights;
- Children's rights are denounced as being against the family and 'traditional family values' and seen as undermining parents' rights;
- Well-known public figures are part of anti-child rights movements;
- The supposed wellbeing of children is used as a cover to oppose rights and protections for girls, women and LGBTQI+ people and block efforts to protect and advance sexual and reproductive rights;
- Organisations working on children's rights - including children's rights bodies and experts such as the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child - are attacked and undermined;
- Laws, strategies and initiatives to further children's rights are opposed, blocked or repealed.

³ Eurochild and RAND Europe (2021) [Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life](#)

Evidence of anti-child rights activity and why cooperation is needed to counter this

Protection of Traditional Family Rights

- Under the banner of protecting family rights, child rights opponents have also targeted the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**. In 2014, the FamilyPolicy.ru group issued a 97-page report to delegitimise the Committee, calling into question its core functions and calling on states to denounce the Convention.
- Initiatives on the protection of ‘traditional family values’ are brought to the UN Human Rights Council⁴, undermining the rights of LGBTQI+ children and parents.
- Opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul convention from several countries, presenting the Convention as contrary to ‘traditional family values’ and threatening children’s wellbeing⁵.
- In December 2020, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a law that strips non-married couples of the right to adoption and two constitutional amendments that further restrict the rights of LGBTQI+ children and parents⁶. In 2021, the **Hungarian** Parliament adopted amendments⁷ to various laws that contravene the rights of the child and stigmatise LGBTQI+ persons, using child protection as an excuse to curtail the rights of children.
- In January 2021, a **Latvian** right-wing political grouping submitted a draft law regarding an amendment to the Constitution, which intends to define the concept of family as a union between a male and a female person⁸.
- In **Poland**, MPs voted in favour of proposed new legislation whereby extra-curricular activities by NGOs in schools would need to be approved by a government-appointed supervisor. The ruling conservative party claims the law is needed to protect children⁹. The Commissioner for Children’s Rights has echoed the government in criticising what they call “LGBTQI+ ideology” and has spoken out against sex educators in schools claiming they target “unstable” children¹⁰.
- The **Serbian** Government has proposed that the Family Law will ensure a total ban of corporal punishment of children. However, several well-known public figures, openly support corporal punishment towards children as a way of proper upbringing of a

⁴ The Conversation, [United Nations under pressure to protect ‘traditional families’ over individual rights](#), September 2014

⁵ The Advocates for Human Rights, [A Roll Back for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack](#), December 2021

⁶ Amnesty International, [Hungary: Dark day for LGBTI community as homophobic discriminatory bill and constitutional amendments are passed](#), Dec. 2020

⁷ Eurochild, [New Hungarian legislation not only fails to protect children, it puts them at greater risk of harm](#), June 2021

⁸ [National Alliance wants Constitution of Latvia to strictly define ‘family’](#), January 2021

⁹ Euronews, [Poland: MPs back control of schools to stop threats to children’s morals](#), January 2022

¹⁰ Notes from Poland, [Young Poles urgently need improved mental health care, warns children’s rights commissioner](#), November 2020

child and a valid mechanism for changing a child's behaviour. Their main argument is that such actions from the government represent direct interference and involvement in family issues that should be considered private. Some of these well-known public figures have many followers on social media or appear as guests in TV shows on public channels.

Hate Speech against specific groups of children

- In **Spain**, some extreme right-wing political parties have used the situation of unaccompanied migrant children as a controversial issue by linking them with delinquency in their political campaigns, placing advertising that spreads messages of racism in public spaces, such as the Madrid subway. They have proposed the expulsion of these children from Spanish territory. This would be a violation of the UNCRC. Some extreme right-wing political party leaders have also proposed that Spain withdraw from the UNCRC to remove the need to respect the rights of unaccompanied migrant children.
- Migrant children living under the protection system in institutions are particularly vulnerable in **Spain**. Demonstrations against these children have been organised and took place in front of these centres. Similarly, in **Serbia**, members of the organisation "*No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija*" with black hoods on their heads, intercepted smaller groups of migrants in Belgrade. These public patrols shared leaflets to the migrant population, exchanging information that they have restricted movements close to migrant centres. From 22:00 until 6:00, migrants are not allowed to be on the street. Migrants were openly threatened with punishment if they did not comply with these rules. Since there are many children and minors in the migrant population, many of them unaccompanied, these threats also included them. Many situations involved physical violence, and many of those situations were recorded by camera to set an example for the others. The government's answer to this is not clear and inconclusive¹¹.
- In **Spain**, LGBTQI+ children have been targeted by hate crimes and by measures that allow parents to permit which human rights workshops their children can attend, as they are concerned that workshops on sexuality education and citizenship could indoctrinate their children.

Disinformation Campaigns

- The QAnon conspiracy theory, originating in the US and famous for spreading fake news on child trafficking, is gaining ground in Europe¹². Children are often instrumentalised and used in disinformation discourses, e.g. claiming that vaccines "turn children gay or trans".

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/cyr/srbija-51761864>

¹² Politico, [QAnon goes European Populists, protesters, conspiracy theorists: How Europe is embracing America's latest export](#), October 2021

- In **Hungary**, the CitizenGo organisation¹³ is very active. It is a global community of active citizens who work together, using online petitions and action alerts as a resource to defend and promote ‘**life, family, and liberty**’. [Its headquarters are in Madrid. It encourages citizens to sign petitions against LGBTQI+ rights and so-called ‘harmful sexual education’ at schools.](#)
- In **Serbia**, a newly formed association called “*The knights of the order of the dragon*” is claiming as its main goal the protection of children, but in practice disputes children’s right to participation and denies the concept of children’s rights in general: “we gave them too many rights, and what about responsibilities”. They do not share facts but unverified information. There is a threat that they can mislead the public, in particular about the necessity of the Child Rights Law, currently in the making.
- Those opposing gender-based rights manufacture threats to children’s welfare and safety and manipulate public opinion to create ‘moral panic’ to suppress human rights and women’s, LGBTQI+ and sexual and reproductive rights. For example, such gender-restrictive groups in **Bulgaria** have successfully blocked the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, as well as several Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) initiatives, and the implementation of the National Strategy for the Child and the Social Services Act¹⁴.

Strategic litigation to combat disinformation campaigns

- In **Bulgaria**, six lawsuits have been filed on behalf of Mr George Bogdanov and/or the National Network for Children (NNC) since 2019 in connection with part of the ongoing disinformation campaigns on behalf of right-wing leaders in the country. For several years, a systematic disinformation campaign has been underway in Bulgaria, aimed at denigrating civil society organisations in the NGO sector that profess Euro-Atlantic values and advocate for the rights of various vulnerable groups. Since NNC is the largest group of NGOs working with and for children and families, they and their director have become the main target for disinformation attacks on behalf of right-wing leaders.

¹³ <https://www.citizenngo.org>

¹⁴ Global Philanthropy Project and Elevate Children Funders Group, [Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights](#), March 2021

The role of collaborative mechanisms in the EU and Europe

Attacks on human rights and human rights defenders – including those upholding and defending children’s rights – are not new. In response, mechanisms¹⁵ at the national, regional and international levels have been created to support and protect those who defend human rights. For example, at EU level, ProtectDefenders.eu provides a mechanism to protect human rights defenders at risk for their activities worldwide. This mechanism is led by a consortium of human rights organisations and funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. However, such mechanisms do not have a specific child rights focus, despite the growing role of children human rights defenders. There is no specific mechanism to monitor and counteract anti-child rights movements in Europe and their harmful rhetoric and actions.

Such a mechanism could serve several functions, depending on capacity and resources. It could:

- **Monitor and document** anti-child rights discourse and actions at the European level;
- **Sound the alert** on activities that threaten children’s rights work and those working in defence of children’s rights, including children human rights defenders;
- **Provide a platform** (a safe space) for children’s rights organisations and defenders to share experiences and evidence of anti-child rights activities they face and possible ways to counteract them;
- **Support organisations and individuals at risk** from anti-child rights movements. This could include signposting to other organisations that support individuals at risk and publicly denouncing anti-child rights rhetoric or actions;
- **Support collaboration between European institutions and UN human rights bodies** to counteract misinformation and attacks from anti-child rights movements;
- **Promote collaboration and sharing of information and expertise** between those working on children’s rights, including children human rights defenders, and other human rights actors (e.g. organisations working on women’s rights, disability rights, refugees and migrants’ rights, LGBTQI+ rights).

¹⁵ For example: [The Observatory for the Universality of Rights](#) (OURS) coordinated by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)

How could such a collaborative mechanism work in practice?

Having a mechanism where the EU and Europe collaborate to monitor and counteract anti-child rights discourse and actions could require dedicated capacity and expertise, or two Secretariats, both housed within existing mechanisms, acting as an institutional repository for information and documentation of anti-child rights activities and the impacts on individuals, organisations and communities. They could be supported by a network of expert individuals and organisations and funded from EU and European institutional funding with contributions by Member States.

Such mechanisms could draw on the experience of existing systems while adopting specific standards required to meet children's needs and ensure their safeguarding, wellbeing and participation. The mechanism could support:

- Regular institutional dialogue and collaboration with relevant EU, European and international bodies and institutions;
- Publication of reports documenting anti-child rights activities and their impacts and speaking out in defence of children's rights;
- Regular exchange with children's organisations and children's human rights defenders;
- Promotion of best practice in countering the misinformation, manipulation and undermining of children's rights.

For more information, contact [Mieke Schuurman](#), Senior Policy Advisor Children's Rights & Safeguarding.