

Greece should reform and enhance child protection system to prioritise individual needs of every child

Eurochild position paper on developments for children in alternative care in Europe

POSITION PAPER



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

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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:

Zuzana Konradova

Thematic Coordinator Children in Alternative Care, Eurochild

Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org



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As a network advocating for children's rights in Europe, Eurochild has been actively influencing child protection reforms for over a decade. Our membership spans 37 countries. Members include organisations working with vulnerable children and families, often supporting families to prevent separation. Others are professionals and providers of alternative care. Many members also undertake advocacy towards the common goal of **ending the institutionalisation of children and strengthening families**.

As proven repeatedly¹, institutional care has a lasting, harmful effect on children's emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Moreover, it cannot provide the individualised care every child needs for healthy development. Children need long-term, secure relationships, and it is in their best interest to grow up in a family that loves, understands, and supports them.

Eurochild recognises that reforms of child welfare and protection systems are determined nationally or sub-nationally. Therefore, our efforts are directed at building members' capacity to advocate and support peer learning. We also help members leverage EU policy and funding instruments by building awareness of influencing opportunities and monitoring mechanisms.

Eurochild has been advocating for the deinstitutionalisation for children in Greece since 2009 when the Children in Alternative Care National Surveys was published.² This survey revealed there is a gap in statistics and information when it comes to children in alternative care in Greece. According to the findings, the majority of children deprived of parental care were placed in institutions.

To give a new impetus to deinstitutionalisation efforts, Eurochild member Roots Research Center in Greece joined **the Opening Doors for Europe's Children Campaign** in 2013. The campaign aimed to support national efforts to develop child protection systems that strengthen families and ensure high-quality family- and community-based alternative care for children by leveraging EU funding and policy and building capacity in civil society. Upon its closure in 2019, the campaign achieved some progress in Greece.

¹ See van Ijzendoorn et al (2020) [Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children 1: A systematic and integrative review of evidence regarding effects on development](#), Lancet Group Commission.

² [National Survey on Children without Parental Care \(eurochild.org\)](#)

Child protection reforms have remained on the political agenda. In 2018, a new law on foster care was adopted to which the national coordinator in Greece contributed.³ However, the allocation of EU funding was seen as problematic, there was an intention to support the closure of an institution for children and adults with disabilities, but without a strategy or plan on deinstitutionalisation, funds were not directed towards deinstitutionalisation reforms, but have been distributed to children's institutions.

The process had stalled in Greece, where the child protection system has been overly reliant on residential care, there were 84% of almost 2,000 children still growing up in residential care in 2021.⁴ EU pressure and European Commission's technical assistance⁵ contributed to the deinstitutionalisation strategy adopted in 2021. It focuses on transforming the care of people with disabilities and children (with & without disabilities).

Moreover, new legislation on Child Protection and Care Units - the conditions for the establishments by legal entities of private law of a non-profit nature and operation⁶ was introduced by the Greek Government in 2022. It requires obligatory registration of all children in alternative care and sets standards for residential care run by private and church organisations. In line with the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, it is important to highlight that residential care should be used only temporary and to secure children's stable care in an alternative family setting⁷.

Furthermore, Eurochild members, in cooperation with UNICEF, had an opportunity to test a model of semi-independent living for care leavers. This model was implemented as part of the pilot phase of the *European Child Guarantee*⁸ and will be further funded by Greece's *National Recovery & Resilience Plan*.

Eurochild and its members have played a key role by leveraging international and EU expertise to have a positive impact, through using the leverage of the EU, building their capacities to influence the national agenda and through technical assistance and sub-granting to support their training with foster care professionals.⁹

³ [Opening Doors contributes to the new legislation on family-based care in Greece | Opening Doors](#)

⁴ [Greece.pdf \(eurochild.org\)](#)

⁵ [DI Greece: Technical Support on deinstitutionalisation \(DI\) process in Greece - European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities \(easpd.eu\)](#)

⁶ See: [40494/3.5.2022 Conditions for the establishment and operation of Child Protection and Care Units \(MOPP\) by non-profit legal entities under private law \(Προϋποθέσεις ίδρυσης και λειτουργίας μονάδων Παιδικής Προστασίας και Φροντίδας \(ΜοΠΠ\) από νομικά πρόσωπα ιδιωτικού δικαίου μη κερδοσκοπικού χαρακτήρα\)](#)

⁷ [Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children : \(un.org\)](#)

⁸ See: [European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\); and UNICEF's Deep Dive into the European Child Guarantee - Greece](#)

⁹ [How can Child Protection Systems benefit from NGOs? – Eurochild](#)

The recently published **Greece's Child Guarantee National Action Plan**¹⁰ introduces another step forward by emphasising the need for further transition from institutional to family-based care for children. In addition, Eurochild members' priorities and recommendations that were highlighted in Greece's Eurochild Child Guarantee Taskforce Report have been partially reflected in the NAP.¹¹ We are glad that Greece has an ambition to:

- Strengthen professional foster care
- Transfer of 200 adolescents and young adults from child protection structures to Semi-Independent Living apartments ("SHD") – maintenance of structures in Epirus, Thessaly, Central Greece, Peloponnese, Attica and Crete
- Actions to promote Foster Care in Eastern Macedonia & Thrace, Central Greece, Attica and South Aegean
- Services to prepare the transition from closed care institutions to community care
- Strengthening support services at the municipal level, to prevent institutionalisation & Establish Family Support and Child Protection Units at Community level
- Establish indicators on the number of children living in residential care and the number of children in residential care out of the total number of children in alternative care (foster care, SIL) at a specific point in time (per 100,000).

Eurochild and UNICEF's research in the [DataCare project recommends that all EU countries publish baseline data on children in alternative care](#). With better data, we can design better children protection systems and hold governments accountable to ensure the best quality care for children deprived of parental care. The new law on residential care units and proposals to establish new indicators demonstrate that the Greek Government is supportive of improving public data for this group of children.

We welcome all the systematic changes that place the child at the centre and prioritise a family environment for all children to grow up in, including the most vulnerable such as children affected by violence, poverty or migration. For children with disabilities, deinstitutionalisation should be directed towards protecting the right to family life in accordance with their best interests. To ensure this, the development of a range of support services in the local community that prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families should be accessible. In addition, a range of quality alternative options for children who need alternative care should be in place. Support to young people ageing out and leaving care in their transition to independent living, including aftercare services, is also crucial.

We call on the Government to step up these efforts and **end the institutional care model in Greece**.

¹⁰ [European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹¹ [Eurochild-Child-Guarantee-Report-Greece.pdf](#)