

Roma children across Europe

Taken from *Children's Rights:
Political will or won't?*
Eurochild 2023 report on children
in need across Europe.



Eurochild
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February 2024

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Introduction

Roma¹ constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Europe², with about 12 million people. Around two-thirds live in central and eastern European countries³, and approximately 6 million are citizens or residents of the EU.

Although Roma are often described as leading a nomadic way of life, **95% of European Roma are settled in one place** and have been a part of European society for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, despite the efforts to close educational and poverty gaps, due to historic discrimination and segregation, many barriers remain for Roma to access employment, healthcare, and essential services.

Against this background, young Roma children and their families face challenges that are often multi-layered and intersectional, with negative impacts upon many aspects of their lives⁴. Children are usually taken away from Roma families because of poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, school absenteeism, single parenthood or migration². The lack of access to key services hinders healthy early-child development and inhibits Roma children from growing up surrounded by the support they need in reaching their full potential.

In Eurochild's "[Children's Rights: Political will or won't?](#)" report, 38 Eurochild members in 26 countries provide recommendations on how to address among others, child poverty and social exclusion, and discrimination. It also assesses whether the Child Guarantee National Action Plans (NAPs) align with the countries' needs and highlights the future priorities that EU decision-makers and national governments can pursue to address the needs of the most vulnerable children, including Roma children.

This sub report includes country specific descriptions of the situation of Roma children, shares input of the gaps identified by our members, and provides recommendations for national policy-makers to take action on as to alleviate child poverty and prevent child-family separations.

Facts in the spotlight

- All 26 participating countries address the needs of Roma children by mainstreaming them in measures targeting poverty reduction, increased access to healthcare and essential services.
- 14 of the 26 countries have mentioned Roma children among the most vulnerable ones and are addressing their needs through targeted measures. Our members report that the grounds for identifying Roma children among the ones most in need are poverty (9 countries), social exclusion or discrimination (6 countries), and hindered access to education (5 countries).

¹ [Roma people in Europe](#)

² European Roma Rights Centre [ROMANI CHILDREN IN EUROPE – THE FACTS](#)

³ UNICEF, [Roma Children](#)

⁴ [Young Roma children and their families](#)

- 6 of the participating countries report that their National Action Plans for the European Child Guarantee explicitly mention/foresee measures to support Roma children - HR, DE, LV, PT, SL, ES.
- 3 European Semester Country Specific Reports discuss mainstream measures, including Roma children, in tackling child poverty - BG, HU, LT.

Country Reports and Recommendations

1. Albania

Albania has a total child population of 579,203, of which 51% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2020. This amounts to an estimated 304,204 children in need in Albania. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased over the last couple of years, as a result of positive economic development⁵.

According to Child Rights Center Albania (CRCA) the groups of children most in need in Albania are children living in extreme poverty, Roma and Egyptian children, and children without family care.

Around 7% of Albanian children are forced to work as they grow up in poverty⁶, leading to 15,000 children not attending school at all, which is most often related to the financial income of the families.⁷ Moreover, almost 22% of Roma children in Albania between 10 and 18 years have never been to school.⁸

CRCA concludes that to help alleviate child poverty and social exclusion, the Albanian government should establish a National Programme with the overall goal of reducing children in poverty to zero. Moreover, appropriate housing and free education and support for every child is needed. Moreover, the government should guarantee access to social care services for all children, no matter their background.

2. Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a total child population of 1,188,803 (17,4% of total population), 33.9 % of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to 403,004 children in need in Bulgaria. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased by 0.9% since 2021.

Children from marginalised⁹ communities and children with disabilities are among the ones currently placed in out-of-family state sponsored care due to a consistent failure to apply the ‘necessity principle’ in child-family separations. Furthermore, there are groups of children in state sponsored

⁵ World Bank, *Poverty and Equity Brief*, April 2023

⁶ National Agency for Child Rights in Albania, Annual Report on the Situation of Children in Albania 2015. Report can be accessed in the following address: <http://femijet.gov.al/al/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Raport-kombëtar-mbi-situatën-e-te-drejtave-të-fëmijëve-në-Shqipëri.pdf>.

⁷ Albania: The cost of underinvestment in education, UNICEF. Report can be accessed in the following address: https://www.unicef.org/albania/2017_ALB_Underinvestment_in_education-en.pdf.

⁸ Census of Roma Population in Albania, Open Society Foundation Albania, Tirana 2014: https://childhub.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/english-final_roma_census.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=13132.

⁹ Toneva E., *Protection as punishment: alternative care for children in Bulgaria, Structural violence and human dignity*, 2023, ISBN: 978-619-01-1275-4, pp. 81-103

alternative care that are overrepresented - 31% of all children in institutional/residential care are children with disabilities and Roma children (figures as of 2021).¹⁰

There is a serious discrepancy between the general child poverty rate and that of children from different ethnic backgrounds - 37.5% children of Turkish and 69.4% from Roma backgrounds respectively are growing up in poverty.

This year's European Semester Country Report for Bulgaria outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children with disabilities, Roma children, children living in rural and remote areas, children impacted by the pandemic, and children with a migration background.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria, the European Commission made social recommendations to allocate higher spending on social, health and educational policy, as well as higher spending on public investment. These are necessary factors to support children's development. However, to ensure that all children reach their potential, a more targeted approach for children in disadvantage is necessary. Spreading the measures equally across all groups of children will not solve the problem due to regional imbalances, vulnerabilities and inequality. Eurochild members recommend more strategic and cross-sectoral reforms concerning the protection of children's rights.

3. Croatia

According to Eurostat data, Croatia has a total child population of 666,615, of which 18.1% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to approximately 120,657 children in need in Croatia.

The National Action Plan of Croatia was published on 16 August 2022. The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely among others children of the Roma national minority, child beneficiaries of ZMN (*Zajamčenu minimalnu naknadu* – Guaranteed minimum benefit in the social welfare system), children in less developed, especially rural areas, children with disabilities, migrant children.

4. Cyprus

Cyprus has a total child population of 173,028, of which 18.1% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to approximately 31,318 children in need in Cyprus. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021.

The National Action Plan of Cyprus was published on 5 December 2022¹¹. It targets, among others, children belonging to a minority racial or ethnic group (especially Roma).

Although the NAP includes various actions, it fails to consider child poverty in its entirety – the NAP consists of bits and pieces that can contribute to combatting child poverty. According to PCCPWC, a more holistic and comprehensive approach to combatting child poverty should be employed.

¹⁰ UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, [The situation of children in Europe and Central Asia, 2023](#)

¹¹ The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

5. Greece

Greece has a total child population of 2.8 million, 28.1% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. Despite these worryingly high figures, the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Greece has decreased since 2021 (32%), which is the lowest rate since 2015.

Despite positive developments, the child protection system still copes inefficiently due to its fragmentation. Child protection services are designed for different groups of children: children in institutions, Roma children, children on the move, and child victims of abuse.

Increased investment and awareness raising in health and mental health services for children is needed to make them more accessible in rural areas, and for vulnerable/low-income groups such as Roma and children with disabilities.

While **primary and secondary education** is compulsory in Greece, there are children who face difficulties in accessing it. The rates of school attendance for Roma children are significantly lower than the national average. Only 32% of Roma children are enrolled in pre-school. There is also a distinction between Roma girls, as they are pulled out of the school system sooner than male students.

In this regard, the Government should align with the 2020-2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework to ensure better educational outcomes for Roma students.

A Special Roma Secretariat has been established in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, to coordinate Roma social integration activities.

6. Hungary

Hungary has a total child population of 1.7 million, 18.1% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 308,970 children in need in Hungary. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion decreased by more than five percentage points since 2021. Although improvement was measured in the overall indicators for poverty and social exclusion, the data shows that the groups of children most in need, and according to Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (HCR), often forgotten in policy responses, are children with a single-parent, children of unemployed parents, and Roma children.

HCR has continuously underlined various groups of vulnerable children who face discrimination – Roma children, children with disabilities, and children in low-income families. Additional state programmes and support are needed to bring more visibility to the needs of those children.

This year's European Semester Country Report for Hungary outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children facing poverty and social exclusion, and children who drop out of school early. On the former, the material and social deprivation rate is specifically high for Roma children.

7. Ireland

Ireland has a total child population of 1.19 million, 22.7% of which live at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022. This figure shows a decrease from 2020, where the rate of children at risk was 23.5%.

The prevalence of poverty in Traveller and Roma households is not captured in official statistics. However, research shows they have greater difficulty making ends meet when compared to the

general population. Traveller families face significant barriers to accessing their right to housing and are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness than settled families. It is calculated that approximately 39% of Travellers are experiencing homelessness.

School completion rates for Travellers are significantly lower than the general population, and analysis of census data suggests Travellers benefitted less from overall improvements in educational levels since the 1960s. Traveller and Roma children are significantly less likely to attend early years services, with 17% of services reporting having one Traveller child attending their service, and only 7% reporting a Roma child in their service.

While this year's European Semester Country Report for Ireland references poverty, there is no specific focus on children. To effectively reduce child poverty and social exclusion in Ireland in order to support Roma and Traveller children, the government should:

- Benchmark all social welfare rates to a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) to ensure that all households with children can afford a minimum standard of living.
- Appoint an expert on play in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to lead the development of a new National Play Plan.

8. Latvia

Latvia has a total child population of 356,864, of which 19.8% of children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 70,659 children in need in Latvia. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has slightly decreased by 0.3% since 2021.

According to the Association Latvian Child Welfare Network (LCWN), the groups of children identified as most in need, in Latvia are a children with disabilities, children from families at social risk, Roma children, refugee children, including Ukrainian children, children in alternative care.

Overall, the European Semester Country report did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. The Country Report failed to include the needs of families with children (especially single-parent families), families with children with disabilities, young people after leaving alternative care, families with children at social risk, street children, and Roma children.

9. Lithuania

Lithuania has a total child population of 495,618, of which 22.4% of children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 93,098 children in need in Lithuania. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased by 0.8% since 2021.

Inequalities in school education remain a key challenge that is observed by the European Semester Country Report. It further explains that academic performance is closely related to socio-economic background where learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be attending the same schools.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Lithuania, the European Commission made a relevant social recommendation to "Improve the planning and delivery of social services and improve access to and quality of social housing". VŠĮ Auto Moto group welcomes this recommendation to solve the situation of vulnerable families when it comes to their access to social services as well as the provision of social housing. Social housing is a key component of support for disadvantaged families with children.

10. Portugal

Portugal has a total child population of 1,636,138. Of which 20.7% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to almost 340,000 children in need in Portugal. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion decreased from 22.9% in 2021.

The National Action Plan of Portugal (NAP) was published in January 2023. The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children in situations of abandonment or severe housing deprivation, children and young people with disabilities, children and young people with a migrant background, children and young people from Roma communities, and children integrated in alternative childcare structures.

Child poverty and social exclusion are only mentioned on the Social Scoreboard of the European Semester Country Report, as a headline indicator, and the impact of the pandemic on children is only mentioned briefly in relation to education - because the pandemic may have increased inequalities among students.

11. Serbia

Children from marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as Roma children, children with disabilities, children living in rural areas are most in need. According to Eurostat data, the risk of poverty for children was 27.5% in 2021, above the general poverty risk rate was 21.2%, but just under the general rate of risk of poverty or social exclusion at 28.5%. Household with dependent children, especially those consisting of two adults with three or more dependent children, face the highest risk of poverty at 38.8%. Despite this, child poverty is not recognised as a priority in public policies.

Children from minority groups (Roma children) face multiple forms of discrimination leading to poverty and social exclusion. Roma children also face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, due to lack of information, missing health infrastructure in the settlements, and discriminatory attitudes of healthcare providers. Although Serbian law guarantees all children the right to live free of discrimination, Roma children, children with disabilities and children in rural areas, do not exercise this right.

Additionally, the problem of child marriages is predominantly among Roma population. In Serbia, 22% of young women from the poorest households and 56 % from Roma settlements are married before their 18th birthday. When it comes to education, according to data, only 7% of children (aged 3–4 years) from Roma settlements attend pre-school education.

12. Slovenia

Slovenia has a total child population of 376,390, of which 10.3% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. Children most affected by poverty and social exclusion include children who live in single-parent family, children in families with both working parents whose income does not cover all monthly costs, children with special needs, and children in families with long-term sick parents or children.

Families and children from the Roma community also struggle, and experience social exclusion by struggling to access the main services such as healthcare and adequate housing, as well as facing stigmatisation that often leads to bullying and peer violence.

Although there is high awareness of children's rights and protection of children against all forms of violence, there are still "eavesdroppers" or forced marriages of Roma girls. Another emerging issue is peer violence which deserves adequate response. Moreover, the current child protection system is bureaucratic mechanism without any aspiration to reach out and speak to children in a child friendly manner.

13. Spain

Spain has a total child population of 8.13 million, 32.2% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. This is the third highest rate in the EU, although the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021 (33.4%). This decrease is mainly thanks to urgent actions in the social and economic fields implemented by the government of Spain to address the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Escudo Social measures).

The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, Roma children, children in the child protection system, children living in singleparent households, children experiencing severe housing deprivation, children in conflict with the law, and victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation.

14. Türkiye

Türkiye has a total child population of 22,738,300 (2022). In 2021, the child poverty rate stood at 45.2%, marking an increase in child poverty levels from 2020 (43.4%).

This surge in poverty across Türkiye can be primarily attributed to economic disparities and imbalances in recent years. The repercussions of this trend include a heightened risk of neglect, child abuse, child labour, and early marriages within impoverished families. Children residing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, those raised by single parents, Roma children, and migrant children are particularly vulnerable.

To address the pressing issues in Türkiye, our member identified stabilising the economy and providing financial support for families and communities to ensure a stable economic environment - extending financial support to families and communities are essential steps to alleviate child poverty as one of five policy priorities.

Promising Practices

15. Croatia

The Child Guarantee piloting programme focused in the Međimurje county, in north Croatia, aims to support and develop social services, focusing on including Roma children. According to CAC, the initial results of providing access to integrated and multidisciplinary services look promising.

16. Hungary

To promote social inclusion, the Catching up municipalities initiative aims to improve access to social services, healthcare, employment, and housing across 300 of the poorest municipalities in Hungary.

In addition, the report reflects that further efforts are required to support children with a disadvantaged background (including Roma children and children who live in rural areas) that continue to face challenges in terms of accessing inclusive and quality education.

17. Lithuania

The NAP does include a range of key services that would be key to lifting children out of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania. These include organising after-school activities, also for Roma children and children in migration, increasing monthly allowances for children, free positive parenting consultations.

18. Serbia

Pomoc deci currently implements EU-funded projects: the Children's Rights, UP! project is developing gender equality from early years; tackling child sexual abuse; and the [ECD+ project - early childhood development and care for marginalised Roma communities](#).

Final thoughts

Overall, Roma children are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to essential services, education, and the right to equal opportunities. With the input of our members and Eurochild's continuous work, this report seeks to raise awareness of the importance of policies and programmes that aim at tackling discrimination in order to build cohesive communities that support and strengthen families. The childhood of Roma children, should not equate to poverty, exclusion, or vulnerability. Roma children should receive support that enhances their vivacity, wit, and creativity, and allows them to grow up in healthy family environments.

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