

2024 European Semester Spring Package

**An underutilised opportunity to
strengthen the EU's future through
the protection and advancement of
children's rights**



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

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Abbreviations

AROE: At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

CR: Country Reports

CSRs: Country Specific Recommendations

EC: European Commission

ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care

ECG: European Child Guarantee

EPSR: European Pillar of Social Rights

EU: European Union

DI: Deinstitutionalisation

TFEU: Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

Country codes

Austria (AT)

Belgium (BE)

Bulgaria (BG)

Croatia (HR)

Cyprus (CY)

Czechia (CZ)

Denmark (DK)

Estonia (EE)

Finland (FI)

France (FR)

Germany (DE)

Greece (EL)

Hungary (HU)

Ireland (IE)

Italy (IT)

Latvia (LV)

Lithuania (LT)

Luxembourg (LU)

Malta (MT)

Netherlands (NL)

Poland (PL)

Portugal (PT)

Romania (RO)

Slovakia (SK)

Slovenia (SI)

Spain (ES)

Sweden (SE)

Summary

The European Semester has the **potential to foster an integrated approach and steer national policies**. The Spring Semester's Country Reports are capital for holding Member States accountable and **ensuring that children's rights are a priority in national policy** agendas to end the cycle of poverty. More importantly, in the Country Specific Recommendations, the EC summarises the most pressing challenges identified in the Country Reports and concludes with recommendations for implementation in the coming year.

Despite some efforts to tackle child poverty across the EU, **progress remains uneven**, with common factors like low-income perpetuating household vulnerability. While some countries have implemented promising measures, challenges are still notable. **Child poverty, early childhood development, education, and deinstitutionalisation remain critical areas, with varying degrees of progress. Mental health services** for children, in particular, require greater attention. Furthermore, issues such as **children's digital safety, climate change, and their right to be heard** are largely neglected in 2024 Spring Package of the European Semester.

Furthermore, there is often a **gap between the recommendations and their implementation** at the national level. Additionally, the focus on fiscal discipline can sometimes conflict with the need for social investment, including measures such as an increase in child benefits to reduce social inequalities among children.

In conclusion, while the European Commission plays a pivotal role in protecting children's rights and tackling poverty, its approach has notable gaps. Although it addresses key issues like education in several Member States, other critical areas such as poverty reduction, healthcare, digital safety, and deinstitutionalisation receive insufficient attention. **The lack of comprehensive recommendations for many countries limits the potential impact of the European Semester. Ensuring a more consistent focus on children's rights, including health, education, and social inclusion, is essential for breaking cycles of poverty and fostering long-term societal cohesion.**

Introduction

Launched in 2010 in response to the 2008 economic crisis, the European Semester is an EU economic governance framework designed to enhance the coordination of public policies and prevent divergences across Member States, by providing assessment and guidance to Member States' performance in economic, fiscal and social areas. Led by the European Commission (EC) and established by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)¹, the Semester precisely aims to:

¹**Art 5 TFEU:** The Member States shall coordinate their economic policies within the Union. To this end, the Council shall adopt measures, in particular broad guidelines for these policies. 2. The Union shall take measures to ensure coordination

- Ensure sound public finances, prevent excessive deficits, and reduce public debt;
- Promote economic growth, convergence and stability across the EU;
- Prevent macroeconomic imbalances;
- Monitor the implementation of national recovery and resilience plans;
- Coordinate and monitor employment and social policies.

Although intended as an instrument of soft power, the European Semester warns against the macroeconomic imbalance procedure (MIP), which can be followed by financial sanctions under the excessive imbalance procedure (EIP).

The European Semester operates on an annual cycle made up of two packages, kicked off by the Autumn Package and completed by the Spring Package. While the Autumn Package sets policy priorities for the following year to meet sustainable competitiveness amidst the present context, the Spring Package provides guidance on the identified key challenges in the Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP) and the EC Cohesion Policy, and through them, contributes to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The EC is committed to implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including eradicating poverty in all EU policies. The Spring Package consists of two types of documents: the Country Reports (CR) and the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). These follow up on the objectives set in the Autumn Package and allow for monitoring progress by commenting on challenges and gaps identified.

Focus on Children's Rights - The European Semester has increasingly integrated social considerations. Since 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) has guided the European Semester to be an essential tool to promote and protect social rights, including children's social rights. Moreover, specific targets were identified in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (2021). In 2021, the European Child Guarantee (ECG) was added to the assessments conducted by the European Semester. The key priority is to eradicate child poverty and social exclusion and promote children's rights and well-being, achieving the ambitious aim to lift 5 million children out of poverty by 2030.

These legal provisions are appraised through the Social Scoreboard, in which three indicators pertain to children: child poverty and social exclusion, children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare, and early leavers from education and training.

The importance of the European Semester in eradicating children's poverty - Although the EU stands as one of the most prosperous regions globally, the rights and well-being of many children within its borders remain jeopardised or outright denied. In 2023, in the EU, the

of the employment policies of the Member States, in particular by defining guidelines for these policies. 3. The Union may take initiatives to ensure coordination of Member States' social policies.

Art 119 TFUE: adoption of an economic policy which is based on the close coordination of Member States' economic policies.. and on the definition of common objectives.

Art 121 TFUE: Member States shall regard their economic policies as a matter of common concern and shall coordinate them within the Council.

share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 24.8 %, amounting to approximately 20 million children.

While factors vary across the European Union, the risk of poverty is higher for children raised by a single parent, in families with three or more children, living in rural and the most remote areas of the EU, or with a migrant or Roma background is up to three times higher than that of other children. Indeed, **at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)**, corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity.

The **pandemic and subsequent lockdowns**, war on the EU borders, followed by and coupled with **the ongoing cost-of-living crisis**, have exposed and exacerbated inequalities, plunging many children and families, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, **deeper into poverty** and further into social exclusion.

It is recognised that children at risk of social exclusion due to poverty or other forms of disadvantages are likely to **face barriers in accessing essential services**, such as health and education. However, it is also known that one of the main determinants of social exclusion of children is the unequal access to main services, essential for their wellbeing and the development of their social, cognitive and emotional skills. Indeed, there is a **correlation** between poor health, early school leaving and lack of qualification, which can lead to unemployment.

Therefore, children growing up in poverty or social exclusion start their lives at a disadvantage, which can have long-term implications for their development and future prospects.

As a result, social exclusion can be **transmitted through generations**, threatening social cohesion over generations and generates higher costs to our welfare states, hindering economic and social resilience. It is estimated that not reducing child poverty and its effects **costs an average of 3.4% of GDP in European countries each year.**²

Children's Rights Landscape in the 2024 European Semester Spring Package - The European Semester's Country Reports assess SDG, EPSR and ECG implementation. Based on the obligations arising from this legal basis, Eurochild has identified themes related to children, underscored the extent of their implementation, and outlined the consequences of non-compliance.

The 2024 Spring Package was released on June 19, which leads us to wonder: does the 2024 European Spring Semester account for children's rights?

² Estimated total monetary value of loss of employment, income and health for people aged 25-59 due to socio-economic disadvantage during childhood in 2019.

1. Children's Related Country-Specific Recommendations

There are **16 Member States** that have received recommendations related to children based on identified key issues. The CSRs include poverty reduction, education, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation, and social dialogue. Generally, there is notable **consistency between the issues identified in the Country Reports and the Recommendations** proposed by the EC, although there are some variations in their approach.

Five Country Specific Recommendations do not mention children altogether, meaning that the EC did not perceive the situation of children as a pressing issue. However, the States concerned are Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal and Sweden, for whom the CR did feature significant dilemmas. Similarly, although barriers to children's rights were identified in the CSR of **6 Member States** (CY, EE, EL, IT, LT, ES), no **targeted recommendation on children's rights and well-being was addressed**.³

Overall, **11 Member States did not receive any recommendations related to children**. While this is not the majority, it highlights an underutilisation of the European Semester's potential to address social issues, particularly those affecting children.

Child poverty - Country Specific Recommendations **recognised needs in 7 Member States** (HU, NL, RO, FR, EL, PL, ES), such as the necessity to continue measures to combat poverty or to address the social housing crisis (RO, FR, EL) and regional disparities (HU, PL). Though only 4 Member States received recommendations on poverty reduction (HU, PL, RO, FI), consistency can be observed.⁴

Education - Education is at the **forefront of several Country Specific Recommendations**. The EC discerned areas for enhancement in **12 countries** (BE, MT, NL, SI, BG, CY, HU, RO, BE, LT, LU, FR), and allocated **recommendations for pressing improvement in 13 Member States** (BE, MT, NL, SI, BG, HU, DE, LU, FR, AT, HR, IE, SK), leaving Cyprus, Romania and Lithuania out.⁵ Certain Member States received similar recommendations, such as **raising the levels of basic skills** (AT, NL, HR, SI), **improving educational outcomes and/or levels** (DE, HU, IE, MT, SI) and **enhancing the teaching profession** (BE, BG, LU, MT).⁶

Early Childhood Development - Even though ECEC is proven to be of critical importance in providing every child with a fair and equitable start in life, it was not adequately addressed in the CSRs. **ECEC was highlighted in only six Country Specific Recommendations' introduction** (HR, AT, HG, IT, SK, EL) and provides **recommendations only to Austria and Slovakia**, despite 13 countries falling below the EU average.⁷

³ See annex A21 and B21.

⁴ See annex A1-5 and B1-4

⁵ See annex A6-11 and B6-12

⁶ See annex A6-11 and B6-12

⁷ See annex A13-15 and B13

Deinstitutionalisation - Along the same line, although deinstitutionalisation was largely overlooked by most Member States and highlighted as an important issue in a few others, **DI of long-term care was only mentioned in the introduction of CSRs for Croatia and Greece, with Croatia being the only one to receive a recommendation.**⁸

Health - Children's access to health including mental health **was not addressed by any Country Specific Recommendation.**⁹

The Commission did not identify the impact of the pandemic of children, the impact of climate change on children, children's right to be heard or their safety in the digital space as pressing issues.

2. In-Depth Review of the 2024 Children's Rights Landscape in the EU

The Spring Package Country Specific Recommendations are informed by Country Recommendations, highlighting the state of children's rights in the European Union.

Child poverty or social exclusion

EPSR principle 11 - Childcare and support to children - *Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.*

SDG 1 – No poverty - *End Poverty in all its forms everywhere, by 2030*

SDG 7 – Affordable and clean energy - *By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy for all.*

SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities - *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable - By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations [...]children [...].*

§10 (b) ECG - Adequate Housing - *Guaranteeing effective access to adequate housing for children in need, Member States are recommended to (b) assess and revise, if necessary, national, regional and local housing policies and take action to ensure that the interests of families with children in need are duly taken into account, including addressing energy poverty and preventing the risk of homelessness; such assessment and revision should also include social housing or housing assistance policies and housing benefits and further improve accessibility for children with disabilities.*

⁸ See annex A16-17 and B16

⁹ See annex A18 and B18

EU Member States have pledged to lift 15 million people out at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2030 including 5 million children. To this end, comprehensive reform of the social protection system is necessary to address the needs of the most vulnerable population and their children. Member States must also address the energy poverty of vulnerable households with children. Focused support should be dedicated to children at risk, those living in streets and poor housing conditions, ensuring that they have access to adequate housing. Financial barriers such as expensive transport and school supplies prevent children from their right to education.

Notwithstanding this enterprise, the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) is **not moving towards the 2030 target.**

In truth, the 24.7% average (2022) fails to capture the whole picture of the underlying dynamics, hiding a worrying trend. Indeed, some countries, while remaining under the EU average, **have seen little improvement over the year (AT, BE, HR, CY, EE) to hardly any (CZ, DK, IE, LV, MT, NL, PL, SI, SE), if they have not witnessed an increase in child poverty (FI, DE, LT).** Whereas others, with higher initial poverty rates have made progress, whilst remaining above the EU average (EL, IT).¹⁰ Unfortunately, **Bulgaria remains above the EU average with 33.9%. In comparison France and Slovakia have risen from below EU average to above (respectively 27.1% and 24.7%) and Romania and Spain stagnated at relatively high levels of child poverty (41.5% and 32.2%).**

Regardless of a country's position, a recurring pattern can be observed: **vulnerable groups, such as those from ethnic or migrant backgrounds, face increased risks of poverty and social exclusion (AT, BE, CZ, HU, IT, LU, NL, RO, ES, SE).** For example, Czechia has a relatively low child AROPE rate of 13.4%, but 85% of Roma children fall into this category.

Likewise, **similar factors contribute to or perpetuate household vulnerability** across the EU, namely single parents with children, parents and/or children born outside the EU, large families, and households with low work intensity, low skilled parents, disability of parents or children.

A significant number of countries fell prey to **energy poverty (EL, LT, PT, RO, ES, SE),** including transport poverty (AT, SE), straining heating costs in Finland.

Furthermore, several countries face **difficulties in delivering adequate housing.** Elevated housing costs, which place a heavy burden on households, are a primary factor (HU, IE, NL, ES, BG), disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups and exacerbating homelessness (e.g. IE). Other contributing factors are shortages in available housing (e.g. CZ) and insufficient emergency housing options (e.g. FR, IE).

The **effectiveness of social transfers in alleviating these challenges proves to be limited** in a range of Member States. Planned reductions in social benefits are expected to have a negative impact in Finland and Italy. At the same time, decreases have already been reported in Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, and the Netherlands, particularly affecting migrants

¹⁰ To supplement this overview, see [Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth](#) (UNICEF, Dec 2023)

in the latter. The impact of social benefits are limited in Portugal, Spain, Romania, and now Croatia.

Additionally, contrary to the ambition of cohesion policy, many countries still suffer regional disparities (CY, HU, IT, LU, NL, PT, RO, ES).

Several EU countries are implementing **various measures to combat poverty and social exclusion**. Hungary introduced the "Catching-up municipalities" initiative to address the territorial concentration of poverty, while Ireland focuses on engaging migrant families. Luxembourg dedicates 6% of ESF+ funds to combat child poverty and promotes the integration of disadvantaged pupils through quality education. In **response to energy poverty**, Finland is limiting the impact of high electricity and heating costs, and Greece announced emergency heating allowances and special electricity tariffs for large families. **Housing initiatives** include upcoming affordable housing legislation in Czechia, new social housing in Ireland and Lithuania, and projects to increase affordable housing in Luxembourg and the Netherlands. France is renewing its anti-poverty and housing strategies alongside a minimum income reform, and Spain is allocating 10.5% of its ESF+ funds to implement the Child Guarantee.

Moreover, **several countries are seeing encouraging developments in poverty reduction**. Croatia, Portugal, and Luxembourg have notably significantly reduced their rates of child poverty, with Luxembourg moving from above to below the EU average. While the goal is still ahead, many countries report some temporary improvements (AT, BE, HR, CY, DE, EE, CZ, DK, FI, IE, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, SI, SE).

Member States have **undertaken some steps to ensure adequate housing** for the most vulnerable population (e.g. low income families, children with ethnic/migrant background, and families with disabilities), however overburdening housing costs and homelessness have risen in the EU. Consequently, some Member States fail to protect children against poverty despite the commitments set in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. Yet, recent figures are suggesting that Member States are either not taking measures, or not adopting the appropriate steps, ultimately leading to the neglect of children's rights.

Key Takeaways

Despite efforts to reduce child poverty, progress across the EU remains unequal, with **some countries showing little improvement or even rising poverty rates**. Similar factors contribute to or perpetuate household vulnerability across the EU, such as low income, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. These **factors lead to energy and transport poverty and inadequate housing**. The **effectiveness of social transfers in addressing these issues has been challenged in several countries**. However, a **few Member States offer encouraging practices**. To address energy poverty, Finland is curbing high electricity and heating costs, while Greece is providing emergency heating allowances and special tariffs for large families. Housing initiatives include new affordable housing legislation in Czechia, social housing projects in Ireland and Lithuania, and increased affordable housing in Luxembourg and the Netherlands. France is updating its anti-poverty and housing strategies with a minimum income reform, and Spain is dedicating 10.5% of its ESF+ funds to the Child Guarantee.

Education

Pillar 1 – Education, training and life-long learning - Everyone has the right to *quality and inclusive education*, training and life-long learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labour market.

Pillar 3 – Equal opportunities - Regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, *everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education, and access to goods and services* available to the public. *Equal opportunities for under-represented groups shall be fostered*.

SDG 4 – Quality education - *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*.

§7 (b), (d), (e), (g) & (i) - *Guaranteeing effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education (b) take measures to prevent and reduce early school leaving [...] providing personalised guidance and strengthening cooperation with families. (d) provide the most appropriate response to the specific needs of children with special educational needs and children with disabilities [...] ensure that qualified teachers and other professionals are available. (e) measures should be put in place to support inclusive education and avoid segregated classes in early childhood education and care establishments and in educational establishments. (g) ensure the provision of educational materials, including digital educational tools. (i) provide transport to early childhood education and care and education establishments.*

The legal framework confers children the right to equal access to quality and inclusive education, irrespective of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. To foster genuine equal opportunities, appropriate measures must be addressed for children from vulnerable groups, such as guaranteeing effective and free access to education (including transport), reducing early school leaving, ensuring inclusive education and providing educational materials, including digital services, content, equipment and skills.

The EU has established **three educational benchmarks** to be achieved by 2030: first, fewer than 15% of 15-year-olds should be considered low-achievers in reading, mathematics, and science; second, fewer than 15% of eighth-graders should be low-achievers in computer and information literacy; and third, fewer than 9% of students should leave education and training early.

Country Reports show that **Member States continue to lag behind, endangering the 2030 timeframe**. A wide range of Member States are **grappling with school performance issues**, as the proportion of low-achieving students remains significantly above the 15% target. Indeed, whilst certain Member States (such as the Netherlands) perform better, there is a **number of countries that have experienced a decline in performance** (BE, CY, IT, NL, PL, SK), **and some countries are experiencing persistently low performances** (MT, RO), more important in rural areas (RO). Even countries with intermediate performance levels face high repetition rates (e.g. Luxembourg), indicating difficulties with their education systems. Along the same line, quite a few Member States (AT, BE, BG, DE, DK, HR, CY, CZ, FI, FR, EL, SK, SI, ES, SE) **do not elaborate on children's digital literacy**, despite the 2030 deadline drawing close, suggesting objectives are not reached.

In the same vein, **the early school leavers rates remain above the EU average** in several states (BG, DE, HU, IT, MT, RO, ES), and have increased in several countries (EE, DE, LT, RO), pulling them further away from the 2030 objective. It is noticeable that the **proportion is much higher among children with a migration or ethnic** (e.g. Roma and Travelers) **background** (BG, FI, HU, IE, IT, LU, RO, SK). A possible correlation can be drawn with the higher early school leaver percentage in rural areas in certain countries (HU, RO).

At the same time, it is evident that socio-economic inequalities significantly impact students' educational outcomes (BE, BG, FR, DE, HU, LT, LU, RO, SE), particularly **for children with migration or ethnic backgrounds**, who are up to **twice as likely to underachieve compared to their peers** (AT, BE, BG, CY, FI, FR, DE, HU, IT, NL, PT, RO, SK, SE). There is a **continuous segregation in the education system for Roma children** (CZ, BG, RO, SK) **and Ukrainian children** (PL, SK). Another subsequent obstacle to equality and inclusion at school is the **unequal access and regional disparities**, which a number of countries are facing (CZ, LT, MT, NL, PT, ES, SI, SE). For instance, schools can be unfit for children with disabilities (SI), and the school system (MT, PT) or school governance (CZ) can be fragmented.

In a like manner, an important share of Member States experience a **shortage of teachers** (BE, FI, FR, IE, IT, LT, NL, PL, SI, ES, SE), with a tendency to be higher for professionals working with children with specific needs (FR, NL). Three countries failed to elaborate on education altogether (HR, DK, LV).

This information must be considered in the light of a **post pandemic era**, which greatly affected children's education. In that matter, only the Netherlands and Poland committed to compensating for the loss of learning during the pandemic.

Although Member States are experiencing complications with their educational framework, **good practices have emerged to overcome them**. To curve the negative performance trend, Member States are taking measures to **reform their curricula** (LT, NL, RO, SK, SI), notably towards better digital services and skills (LV, LT, NL, SI) and modernise their vocational education system (HU, LT). Others are adopting **strategies to decrease their early leaver rates**; e.g., Estonia intends to raise the mandatory school age from 17 to 18 years. States also aspire to address socio-economic and territorial disparities (LT), promote greater participation of disadvantaged groups (incl. children with disabilities) in quality education (HU, RO, SK, SI), and reduce social segregation (FR). Finally, **many seek to tackle staff shortages**, whether by improving mentoring programmes for new teachers, providing job stability and continuous training adapted to evolving needs (BE), expanding the available student places for 2024-2025 (FI) or rendering the profession more attractive (FR, HU, NL, PL, SI).

Furthermore, not every Member State is encountering substantial difficulties. Early school leavers levels were already low in some countries (FI, FR, IE, LU, NL) and have decreased in others (BG, MT, ES). The Netherlands has a high-skilled workforce, denoting a strong education system, and Italy has witnessed a progression in learning outcomes.

Ultimately, children's right to education **remains inadequately addressed** **Because many Member States fall short of meeting the EU's educational benchmarks, failing to deliver a quality education that aligns with children's rights to equal and inclusive learning opportunities**. Persistent issues such as low performance and high rates of low-achieving students conditioned by their socio-economic background undermine the right to educational quality and equity. Unresolved socio-economic inequalities and segregation, which often lead to early school leaving, further violate children's rights to equal opportunities and fair treatment. Additionally, there is a notable lack of commitment to inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Key Takeaways

Country Reports reveal that many EU Member States are **struggling to meet the 2030 education targets**, particularly in addressing **low student performance** (reported by PISA) and **high early school leaver rates**, especially among vulnerable groups. In response to these challenges, several **promising practices have surfaced**. For example, several countries are reforming their curricula to enhance digital literacy and modernize vocational education, while for example, Estonia plans to raise the mandatory school age to 18. Efforts are also being made to reduce socio-economic disparities and tackle teacher shortages by improving training and job stability. Notably, some Member States, like the Netherlands and Italy, have shown progress in educational outcomes, highlighting the potential for positive change.

Early Childhood Development

Pillar 11. Childcare and support to children - *Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.*

Pillar 9 – Work-life balance - Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and *access to care services*. *Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence in order to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way.*

SDG 4.2 – Quality education - By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys *have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education* so that they are ready for primary education

§7(a) & (e) ECG - *Guaranteeing effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities and a healthy meal each school day (a) identify and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in early childhood education and care, education (e) put in place measures to support inclusive education and avoid segregated classes in early childhood education and care establishments and in educational establishments.*

Legal provisions grant every child access affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care. To ensure these services are effectively accessible, it is recommended that vulnerable children be provided with free access, strongly emphasising inclusive education to prevent segregation. Children’s right to ECEC is also assured through their parents, who must have access to care services.

The **EU has set two benchmarks to be reached by 2030**: first, at least 45% of children under the age of three should be enrolled, with additional goals for Member States that have not yet met the 2002 benchmarks; second, at least 96% of children between the ages of three and the start of compulsory primary education should be participating in early childhood education and care.

However, Country Reports reveal that Member States continue to face several challenges in aligning early childhood education services with EU expectations. Indeed, many countries report **ECEC participation rates below the EU average**¹¹ (AT, CT, IE, IT, FI, LV, LT, LU, MT, PL, RO, SK), with particularly low participation observed in Finland, Slovakia, and Austria. Slovakia has the lowest participation rate, with only 1% of the child population under the age of 3 attending formal childcare.

Children from **disadvantaged communities, such as Roma and Travellers, tend to participate less** in ECEC compared to their peers, regardless of whether a country’s overall

¹¹ 57.4% in 2021

participation is below (IE, RO) or above (CZ, FR, SI) the EU average. To illustrate, only 27% of Roma children participate in ECEC in Romania, and 35% of Roma children are estimated not to be participating in preschool education in Slovenia. Similarly, some Member States report lower participation rates in rural areas (LT, RO). While participation rates need to increase, a decrease has been noted in some countries (MT, PL).

Part of this trend can be attributed to a **shortage of professionals and/or infrastructure/facilities**, which can be more acute in rural areas (EE, HU, LT, SK, SE), and **uneven regional coverage** (HU, IT, SE).

Despite these challenges, there are some good practices at the initiative of Member States. Under the RRP or ESF+ fund, most Member States **aim to increase ECEC places, whether by creating new facilities or refurbishing old ones** (AT, DE, EL, HU, IT, PL, PT, SK). Actions were also taken to reduce or grant free access to ECEC (EE, FI, HR), in line with §7(a) ECG. Several measures can be observed; e.g., Ireland intends to professionalise workers, while Lithuania wants to establish compulsory participation for children from disadvantaged families.

What's more, a number of Member States are reporting high ECEC participation rates (BE, DK -highest in the EU-, LV, SI, SE). In contrast, others have seen increased participation (HR, CZ, LT), **making progress towards or nearing the 2030 EU target**.

Essentially, the reports show that effective access to ECEC, whilst guaranteed in legislative instruments, is not upheld. This holds particularly true in the case of vulnerable children, who should receive greater attention from authorities due to the critical importance of these services to their development, but are yet participating less than other children. Plus, when systems fail to adequately reach these children, they **are at risk of missing opportunities for early intervention and support**. Similarly, low participation in ECEC often means that parents, particularly mothers, stay at home to care for their children, although EPSR Pillar 9 mandates that both men and women should have effective access to care services. Beyond **exacerbating gender inequalities**, the lack of accessibility to ECEC could **push low-income families further into vulnerability or sustain their disadvantaged status**. Moreover, staff and facilities shortages, as well as unequal regional coverage, **hinder the quality level of ECEC**, thus forcing children to start their lives on an unequal footing.

Key Takeaways

Country Reports indicate that many EU Member States face **challenges** in aligning ECEC services with the European Union standards, particularly with **lower participation** rates observed in a heterogeneous selection of countries like Finland, Slovakia, and Austria. **Vulnerable groups**, such as Roma,¹ migrant children, and children in rural areas also **show lower ECEC participation** throughout the EU. Despite these challenges, several **good practices have emerged**. For instance, under the RRP or ESF+ funds, many Member States are expanding ECEC facilities and reducing or eliminating fees to increase access. Additionally, countries like Ireland are working to professionalize ECEC workers, while Lithuania plans to mandate participation for children from disadvantaged families. Encouragingly, some Member States, such as Denmark, Belgium, and Slovenia, report high or increasing participation rates, moving closer to the 2030 EU target.

Deinstitutionalisation

§10(d) ECG – With a view to guaranteeing effective access to adequate housing for children in need, Member States are recommended to (d) Take into account *the best interests of the child* as well as the *child’s overall situation and individual needs when placing children into institutional or foster care; ensure the transition of children from institutional or foster care to quality community-based or family-based care* and support their independent living and social integration.

The best interest of the child must be the primary concern when a child has to be removed from the custody of their caregivers. It implies providing children with tailored solutions, and preferring community/family-based care to institutional care.

Despite this responsibility, and the knowledge that institutional care is unable to meet children’s essential basic needs¹², **a majority of country reports fail to mention progress on the deinstitutionalisation of children** (AT, BE, BG, CY, DK, EE, FR, DE, HU, IE, IT, LU, MT, NL, PT, SK, SI, ES, SE).

This issue is addressed by countries **facing low, sometimes declining availability and affordability of quality, non-residential, community-based care services** (RO, CZ, HR). This phenomenon is worsened by a shortage of places in long-term care, regional disparities and unequal access to services (CZ, LV, RO).

Among the countries facing these challenges, Romania is notably taking steps to address the situation, by implementing a **guide to deinstitutionalisation**, a **national long-term care**

¹² Florence Koenderink, *Understanding the Trauma of Children from Institutions: A Training Manual for Case Workers*, Family Based Solution, 2023, p. 71

strategy and a **new legal framework** to prevent the separation of children from their families. Along the same lines, Czechia has approved its **deinstitutionalisation action plan**.

In essence, despite the European Child Guarantee's emphasis on prioritising the best interests of the child, **many Member States fall short in implementing policies that ensure this principle is central to decision-making regarding child welfare and care settings**. Firstly, many Country Reports overlook institutional care altogether, pointing inadequate accountability mechanisms. Additionally, efforts toward deinstitutionalisation are not universally adopted or consistently applied across the EU.

Key Takeaways

Most Country Reports **neglect to address the need for deinstitutionalisation and reveal some challenges**, such as declining availability and accessibility to quality community-based services. However, Romania is making notable progress by implementing a guide to deinstitutionalisation and a new legal framework to prevent family separation, while Czechia has approved its deinstitutionalization action plan. **These steps represent positive efforts in addressing the inadequacies of institutional care.**

Health

Pillar 16 – Health Care - Everyone has the right to *timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality*.

SDG 3 – Good health and well-being - Ensure healthy lives and *promote well-being* for all at all ages.

§8(a) ECG – With a view to guaranteeing *effective and free access to quality healthcare for children in need*, Member States are recommended to (a) facilitate early detection and treatment of diseases and developmental problems, including those related to *mental health*.

The legislative framework endows access to affordable, preventive and curative health care, including mental health, of good quality, to safeguard children's well-being. Special attention must be given to vulnerable groups of children, notably through ensuring effective and free access to quality healthcare services.

While some countries, like France, have a functioning healthcare system, **other do not provide accessible and quality healthcare**. A first concern lies with the lack of universal primary health coverage in some States (e.g. IE), as well as the high number of out-of-pocket payments affecting primarily vulnerable populations (RO). Regional disparities (RO) and staff shortages (BE, PT) are other serious preoccupations.

Amid increasing unmet mental health care demands throughout the European Union, a number of Member States **do not mention mental health care** in their respective report (AT, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FR, DE, EL, IE, LT, PL, RO, SA, SI, ES). Among the reports that address the issue, notable challenges are highlighted. In Latvia, high costs and long waiting lists are frequently cited as major barriers to accessing mental health services. In Sweden, long waiting times and delays in diagnosis are reported as significant issues, while in Portugal, staff shortages are identified as a primary obstacle to accessing mental health care.

This lack of will and the existing obstacles are particularly troubling in a post-COVID era, where children's mental health has suffered dramatically. According to Country Reports, **no country appears to have taken adequate steps to mitigate the pandemic's impact on children's health, especially mental health.**

The countries in question have **adopted measures, but they do not appear to be commensurate with the problem.** For instance, Latvia is planning to improve the organisation of mental healthcare; however, this will only begin in 2024 and has been allocated limited funding. Portugal is taking steps for a new mental health law regulating the rights of people with mental illness.

However, Denmark and Finland are leading the way with new measures promoting mental health and psychiatric services, notably for children and young people.

Consequently, **children's right to timely access affordable and good quality healthcare** is not properly insured across the European Union. Indeed, the lack of universal coverage as well as the high costs of certain services infringe on children's right, especially vulnerable groups, to affordable access to healthcare, although guaranteed by the EPSR and the ECG. In turn, it **negatively impacts children's rights** to access healthcare in a timely manner. Similar comments can be made regarding staff shortages and long waiting list. Furthermore, **doubt lingers regarding countries not addressing mental health concerns in their reports, suggesting that they fail to guarantee effective access to quality healthcare for children.** Altogether, it reflects a failure to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, as outlined in SDG 3.

Key Takeaways

Although Country Reports **do not explicitly address children's accessibility to health services tailored to their needs**, these shortcomings will necessarily affect children, even more so when they are in a vulnerable position. Furthermore, **many Member States fail to adequately address mental health in their reports**, despite the growing demand for those services post-COVID. Nevertheless, Denmark and Finland stand out for their proactive measures to enhance mental health and psychiatric services, especially for children and young people.

Crosscutting areas

Other concerns pertaining to children's right are multidimensional, as they simultaneously crosscut multiple fundamental rights.

Children in the digital world

SDG 16.2 – Peace, justice and strong institutions - *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children.*

Member States must be taking steps to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and other forms of violence (including torture) against children. It involves child sexual abuse online. In 2021, Europe was the world's largest host of child sexual abuse imagery.

Yet, **no country reports mention or elaborate upon children's safety online**, although they are by law granted access to digital services, notably for educational purposes.

Children's right to be heard and CSO's consultation

SDG 16.7 – Peace, justice and strong institutions- *Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.*

Children have the right to participate in decision-making that concerns them. It implies an effective participation from the local to the international level, across every thematic approach. Likewise, it involves the inclusion and participation of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Nevertheless, **only Italy** has reported new measures introducing specific arrangements for **child-friendly proceedings**. It could make one **infer that Member States ignore children's right to be heard**. Regarding **CSO involvement, practices differ significantly**. Denmark has pledged for more legislative transparency and Romania adopted a new law aimed at addressing social dialogue deficiencies, while Hungary has a limited functioning social dialogue hindering social partners' involvement in decision-making, and Poland has heavily relied on support from CSO to meet Ukrainian refugee's needs. Others (AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, FI, FR, DE, EL, SK, SI, ES, SE) **did not mention or elaborate on the space for social dialogue in their countries**.

The lack of specific child-friendly measures in most Member States, coupled with varying degrees of CSO engagement, indicates a broader failure to uphold children's and CSOs right to participate. Italy's efforts contrast sharply with the minimal progress elsewhere, suggesting that many countries still neglect the essential principle of active and inclusive participation for both children and CSOs.

Key Takeaways

According to CRs, **only Italy has introduced new measures for child-friendly legal proceedings**, suggesting that many Member States may neglect children's right to be heard. Practices **regarding CSO involvement** also **vary widely**. Denmark has committed to greater legislative transparency, and Romania has enacted a new law to improve social dialogue. In contrast, Hungary's limited social dialogue restricts stakeholder involvement, while Poland has relied heavily on CSOs to support Ukrainian refugees. Many other countries, however, **fail to address the role of social and stakeholder dialogue in their reports**.

Environment

SDG 13 – Climate action - *Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.*

In the face of climate change, Member States are encouraged to take urgent measure to address the escalating climate crisis.

Nonetheless, **many Member States** (AT, BE, BG, HR, CZ, DK, LU, FR, DE, PL, SK, SI, SE) **omit to elaborate on climate change impact on children**, in their Country Report.

Only Spain mentions the environmental inequalities climate change induces, and recognises that air pollution affects more vulnerable groups. Given the limited information provided by States, **it raises concerns about whether they have adequately assessed the situation's severity and its dire impact on the most vulnerable**—namely children, who are not only today's citizens but also tomorrow's.

The lack of comprehensive reporting on the impact of climate change on children by many Member States indicates a possible **breach of their obligations**. By failing to address how environmental changes affect the most vulnerable, particularly children, these States are **not aligning with their legal responsibilities to protect children's rights and ensure their well-being amidst the climate crisis**. Only Spain has addressed these concerns, highlighting a significant gap in compliance with legal mandates to safeguard children from environmental harm.

Final Word

To sum up, progress remains uneven. While some countries have implemented promising measures, challenges are still notable. Early childhood development, education, and deinstitutionalisation remain critical areas, with varying degrees of progress. Mental health services for children, in particular, require greater attention. Furthermore, issues such as children's digital safety, climate change, and their right to be heard are largely neglected in Member States' reports.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite efforts to tackle child poverty across the EU, progress remains uneven. European instruments can only be realised if ambitions are met with political will. **Ensuring a more consistent focus on children's rights, is essential for breaking cycles of poverty and fostering long-term societal cohesion.**

Eurochild strives to **eradicate child poverty**. It advocates **for systemic reforms** that address structural inequalities and calls for prioritising public investment in **education, healthcare, housing, family support, and early childhood**. Its work is based on evidence provided by its members; a comprehensive network of around 5000 professionals, adhering to the need to put children at the heart of Europe.

Eurochild hopes to see a more active inclusion of children and their rights in the next European Semester.

Addendum

On 30 August 2024, [data on child poverty were updated](#) for the year 2023, unveiling an upward trend.

In 2023, the child poverty rate raised from 24.7% to 24.8%.

While in 2022, seven Member States were above the EU average, by 2023, this number had risen to nine Member States surpassing the EU average. Overall, sixteen countries have seen an increase in child poverty.

Thus, the European Commission's approach demonstrates a balanced yet incomplete commitment to addressing children's rights across Member States. With poverty rates rising in a majority of countries in 2023, it is evident that the EC must adopt a more robust stance to effectively combat these challenges.

Annex

Overview of the 2024 Council Recommendations on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies and its implication for children ¹³			
		A	B
Topics		Mention of children in the <u>introduction</u>	Mention of children in the <u>recommendations</u>
Poverty	1	Continue measures to combat poverty HU, NL	Improve efficiencies of public spending HU, PL
	2	Address needs for social housings RO, FR, EL	Address regional disparities HU
	3	Address regional disparities HU, PL	Better address the needs regarding social housing RO
	4	Effectiveness of the social protection system PL, RO, ES	Improve child protection system FI
	5	Implement the ECG EL, ES	
Education	6	Improving basic skills BE, HU, FR, MT, SI	Raise the levels of basic skills AT, NL, HR, SI
	7	Addressing shortage of teachers and/or increasing attractiveness of the teaching profession BE, MT, NL, SI	Improve educational outcomes and/or levels DE, HU, IE, MT, SI
	8	Access to quality, adaptive, and inclusive education BG, CY, HU, NL, RO	Improve de performance and equity BE, FR, LU
	9	Early school leavers DE, MT	Address staff shortage MT, NL
	10	Implementation of the ECG BG, CY, LT, LU	Enhance the teaching profession BE, BG, LU, MT
	11	Influence of socio-economic and migrant backgrounds, adding to inequalities DE, FR, LU, NL	Strengthen the teaching of basic skills SK
	12		Support to disadvantaged schools NL
	ECEC	13	Limited availability to ECEC HR
14		Improving access to ECEC AT, HG, IT, SK	
15		Low participation EL	

¹³ This table presents a simplified view of the Council Recommendations, to emphasise the alignment between the recognised challenges and the recommendations made by the EC.

DI	16	limited availability of adequate deinstitutionalised long-term care HR	Improving access to formal home- and community-based long-term care HR
	17	Promote quality and affordable long-term care services EL	
Health	18		
Crosscutting elements	19	Boost education and training systems in close cooperation with the social partners MT	Ensure effective social dialogue HU
	20	Fragmented social dialogue HU	
		<u>No</u> mention of children in the <u>introduction</u>	<u>No</u> mention of children in the <u>recommendation</u>
	21	DK, IE, LV, PT, SE	CY, DK , EE, EL, IE , IT, LV , LT , PT , ES, SE

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