

# Child protection systems in Europe

Taken from  
*Children's Realities in Europe:  
Progress & Gaps*  
Eurochild 2024 flagship report  
on children in need across Europe.



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*On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps", which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. This sub-report covers insights on various child protection issues. After laying out the information coming from the ground on the state of child protection in Europe, Eurochild offers its recommendations to the European governments to be implemented with the support and guidance of the European Institutions.*

## Introduction

Child protection systems refer to comprehensive frameworks to protect children who are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm as a result of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation. As highlighted by the European Commission Recommendation to develop and strengthen integrated child protection systems, **rights-based child protection systems include national legal and policy frameworks placing children at the centre**, coordination across sectors, adequate resource allocation, meaningful child participation, and prioritising family- and community-based care. The Commission further **emphasises the need for proactive and systemic prevention and response to all forms of violence against children**, with a focus on ensuring that *"children are always treated without any discrimination and in a manner which protects their dignity"*.

The lack of strong child protection systems hinders the enjoyment of a wide range of rights. The following rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are particularly at risk across Europe:

- **Right to protection from all forms of violence (Article 19), right to protection from economic exploitation (Article 32) and right to physical and psychological recovery of child victims (Article 39)**

The right of the child to be free from *"all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse"* is threatened across Europe. This includes instances of peer violence, domestic violence, and corporal punishment. When violence is not identified and adequate support is not provided, the right of the child victim to physical and psychological recovery is not fulfilled.

- **Right not to be separated from parents (Article 9) and rights concerning children deprived of their family environment (Article 20)**

A lack of focus on preventing family separation threatens children's right to live with their families unless separation is in their best interests. The right of a child deprived of their family environment to receive special protection is also undermined across Europe.

- Right to be heard (Article 12) and rights in the juvenile justice settings (Article 40)**  
 Children in conflict with the law or involved in legal proceedings often lack access to child-friendly procedures and adequate legal representation. This violates their right to be heard and have their views taken into account, as well as their rights to access justice.
- Right to protection for refugee and asylum-seeking children (Article 22) and right to prevention of abduction, sale, and trafficking (Article 35)**  
 Children on the move do not always receive the appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance to which they are entitled. Unaccompanied children do not always have the same protection as any other child deprived of their family environment. Instead, they are subjected to human rights violations and are at heightened risk of trafficking.
- Right to non-discrimination (Article 2)**  
 Children from marginalised groups often face barriers in accessing adequate protection and services, leading to unequal treatment in violation of the right of every child to be protected from all types of discrimination and to enjoy all rights on an equal basis.
- Right to life, survival and development (Article 6), right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24), right to benefit from social security (Article 26) and right to an adequate standard of living (Article 27)**  
 Fragmented child protection systems, poor coordination between the various actors supporting children, insufficient funding, and limited access to basic services undermine children’s rights to the highest attainable standard of health and an adequate standard of living essential for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development.

Online sexual abuse, including the link between online and offline harm, has been explored in a separate sub-report on [children’s rights in the digital environment](#). Similarly, the challenges faced by Roma children, who are among the groups at risk of discrimination, will be addressed in a dedicated sub-report.

## Findings from Eurochild Members

### 1. Recent legislative and policy frameworks and implementation gaps

Several countries have recently introduced or amended legislation on child protection, yet numerous challenges remain in its implementation.

**Kosovo’s 2024 Law on Social and Family Services** aim to strengthen family and community-based services, though it did not result in increased funding. In 2023, **Romania** introduced legislation to support vulnerable families and improve case management, including through a *Child Observatory*. While **Denmark’s 2023 Children’s Act** revised procedural requirements to expedite case processing and provide earlier support to families, it has raised concerns

about procedural certainty. In **Slovakia**, a legislative amendment on child protection has enhanced support for families at risk.

The **Albanian** government approved its new *National Strategy on Social Protection (2024-2030)* to extend social care services and advance deinstitutionalisation. **Scotland** employs the policy framework *Getting it right for every child*, supported by its updated *National Child Protection Guidance (2023)*. **Moldova's** *2022–2026 National Programme for Child Protection* provides a structured plan to strengthen child protection.

Implementation gaps are a common issue. In **Spain**, the *Organic Law 8/2021* on protecting children from violence, including through the creation of a *Central Information Registry*, has yet to be fully operational. In **Croatia**, laws and protocols on child protection are not adequately monitored and evaluated. **Kosovo's** *2019 Child Protection Law* and **Moldova's** *National Programme for Child Protection* require further secondary legislation and clearer operational frameworks. In **Moldova**, it is necessary to implement the *National Programme for Preventing and Tackling Violence against Women and Violence in the Family 2023-2027*.

The implementation of **Poland's** *2011 Act on Family Support and the Alternative Care System* depends on consistent reporting and oversight to address gaps. In **Spain**, the successful implementation of the *Strategy for the Eradication of Violence against Children and Adolescents* is contingent upon securing sufficient financial support.

## 2. Patterns of violence against children in Europe

In **Romania**, there is a rise in domestic violence cases involving children. Alarming, the new law on parental estrangement could potentially harm children by allowing their removal from the non-abusive parent in cases of domestic violence. In **Moldova**, there is the urge to tackle violence against women, including domestic violence. In **Bulgaria**, violence in homes and institutions is on the rise. Child marriage remains a harmful practice, with the country still among the EU states with high rates of adolescent pregnancies. Initiatives to prevent early marriage and early parenting among girls are also needed in **Kosovo**.

In **Serbia**, violence against children frequently occurs within families or among peers. Serbian CSOs have been advocating for the prohibition of corporal punishment but face opposition from groups advocating for 'traditional family values' and 'parental autonomy.' In **Kosovo**, 72% of children reported experiencing corporal punishment, a rise from previous years despite its legal prohibition.

In **England**, the number of potential child victims of exploitation has reached record highs. Child criminal exploitation is a significant concern, with victims often treated as offenders rather than protected. In **Slovenia**, peer violence is evident in the increasing calls to child helplines, accompanied by reports of self-harm among children.

### 3. Funding inadequacy and staffing shortages

Many European countries face significant challenges in funding and staffing their child protection systems.

In **Albania**, the mandate for a *Child Protection Unit* in each municipality remains underfunded. **Latvia**'s limited resources lead to ineffective social work services and a lack of dedicated child protection personnel. Similarly, **the Netherlands** struggles with insufficient funding, long waiting lists and high staff turnover.

Short-term funding undermines long-term service sustainability in **Slovakia**, where there is a lack of immediate and specialised mental health support for children who are victims of sexual violence. Persistent under-investment in the **Flemish Region of Belgium** restricts access to support services. **Moldova**'s 2024 budget allocation for community-based child protection specialists is a positive step but insufficient to meet demands. In **Türkiye**, there is a need for sustainable funding to build an accountable child protection system. The closure of **Kosovo**'s only national community-based shelter for child victims underscores the dire consequences of inadequate funding.

**Bulgaria** and **Croatia** face severe understaffing, affecting service quality. **Estonia** struggles with excessive workloads and inadequate salaries. **Ireland** also faces challenges in recruiting and retaining social workers. In **Romania**, child protection professionals lack continuous professional training and development opportunities. In **Türkiye**, the number of children in need of protection has increased, but the capacity of the system has not kept pace. In **Finland**, recent financial cuts are too severe and too rapid, which will weaken the ability of civil society organisations to carry out preventive work, such as supporting mental health, combating bullying, and addressing domestic violence.

### 4. Discriminatory barriers to child protection

In Europe, discrimination against vulnerable groups of children remains a serious concern.

**Albania** should strengthen its child protection system to ensure that every child, regardless of origin, colour, or social status, has their rights respected and protected. In **Türkiye**, while children from vulnerable groups—such as those involved in crime, refugees, and children with disabilities—are entitled to child protection services, there is no comprehensive legislation specifically targeting these groups.

#### Children on the move and racialised children

In **England**, the *Illegal Migration Act 2023* has been scrapped, but concerns remain about the government's commitment to respecting children's rights and ending negative narratives on asylum. Many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have gone missing. In **Finland**, a law was passed in parliament that would, in certain circumstances, permit border guards to push back migrants at the Finland-Russia border without processing asylum claims, violating international human rights obligations.

Children seeking asylum in **the Netherlands**, immigration detention is also practised, are often placed in unsuitable shelters lacking basic services. The reception and support services

for unaccompanied migrant children in **Spain** are inadequate, with concerns about poor conditions in reception centres and children living on the streets or in adult facilities. In **Greece**, children in EU-funded *Closed Controlled Accessed Centres* on five Aegean islands are living under increased surveillance and repression, with limited access to medical facilities and daily necessities. In **Germany**, children of colour, particularly refugees, face daily discrimination, racism, and attacks. Unaccompanied minors in the country are subjected to accelerated asylum procedures, restrictions on freedom of movement, limited legal support, and shortened appeal periods.

In **Türkiye**, the child protection system struggles with the increasing numbers of displaced children, including those from Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The country's capacity to provide adequate care is insufficient. In **Cyprus**, migrant children continue to face challenges in accessing essential services. In **Malta**, there is a need for integrated support for disadvantaged children, including migrants. In **Poland**, refugee and migrant children, particularly those from Ukraine, face difficulties in accessing social services and education. Unaccompanied minors and asylum-seeking children lack adequate support in **Belgium**. The Government of the **Wallonia-Brussels Federation** plans to prioritise their needs, while the **Flemish Region** is making efforts to adjust its services to various challenges encountered by children.

### **Remote areas**

In **Moldova**, children in rural areas are vulnerable to child labour and exploitation due to insufficient child protection infrastructure. In the country, there is a particular need for prevention and protection initiatives, alongside community-based support mechanisms, for children in rural areas. In **Romania**, regional disparities in the availability and quality of child protection services are stark.

### **The gendered nature of violence**

In **Albania**, girls face heightened risks of violence and exploitation, while boys are often subjected to farm labour. Efforts to tackle violence against women, including domestic violence, are needed in **Moldova**.

## **5. Fragmentation within the child protection systems**

The coordination of various sectors supporting children varies across countries, with many facing challenges related to fragmentation.

**Wales** serves as a strong example, having developed comprehensive safeguarding guidance for schools that addresses violence against children. The *All Wales National Safeguarding Procedures* further enhance child protection by promoting stakeholder cooperation. In **Ireland**, there has been an increase in referrals to child protection services, continuing a four-year rise. **Finland** has made progress with a multidisciplinary social care model, focusing on trust-based approaches in child protection.

In **Bulgaria**, child protection requires better inter-sectoral cooperation, particularly at the local level. **Slovakia** struggles with ineffective multidisciplinary collaboration. In **Greece**, the

fragmented child protection system and poor coordination between key services result in delays and inefficiencies. The centralisation of **Hungary's** child protection system has reduced local autonomy and created inefficiencies in service delivery. **Kosovo** also lacks integration across health, social, and education services, leaving gaps in child protection. In **Albania**, school management issues hinder psychologists from reporting cases to child protection services, resulting in unreported violence.

## 6. Preventive measures and early interventions

The focus on prevention measures, supporting families, and early intervention differs across countries, with several nations addressing gaps in services and resources.

**Finland** has seen increased demand for child welfare services and is undergoing a reform to improve services. **Wales** has programmes like *Families First* to support families and children at risk. **Romania** has implemented various services to support vulnerable families, including financial aid and early intervention programmes. **Malta** has laws and services focused on family reunification and preventing separation. **Scotland** has committed to funding holistic family support but faces delays, while **Northern Ireland** has a well-established early intervention system requiring more resources.

In **Bulgaria**, there is a need to build family support models using a "*one family, one plan*" approach. **Ukraine** faces challenges with the prevention of family separation, with insufficient focus on case management and support for vulnerable families. In **Türkiye**, the child protection system suffers from delayed interventions and a lack of monitoring. **Slovenia** offers counselling but lacks early intervention to prevent family separation, while **Slovakia** has insufficient focus on preventing violence against children.

In **Serbia**, there is a need for community-based services to prevent family separation and exclusion. An ongoing challenge in **Moldova** is ensuring that children can live with their families or in family-based care, as the system tends to react to crises rather than offer preventive support. **Italy** also faces gaps in early intervention. In **Belgium**, more early identification and intervention are needed to prevent family separation, with more staff and financial resources to support families.

**Estonia** struggles with inadequate investment in early intervention and prevention, and **Croatia** lacks early intervention services. **Greece** has little focus on preventing family separation and institutionalisation, while **Belgium** needs more staff and resources for early intervention. **The Flemish Region of Belgium** similarly lacks preventive measures and requires broader social awareness. **Latvia** offers family assistant support but faces shortages, while **Kosovo** is working on incorporating positive discipline and early identification of disabilities. In **Türkiye**, while financial support helps keep children with families, it does not provide adequate psychological support.

## 7. Children in alternative care and deinstitutionalisation

Despite much progress in phasing out institutional care and providing family and community-based care for children, many countries still face challenges in providing adequate care to children deprived of their family environment.

Many countries, such as **Albania**, face gaps in their foster care systems, with children placed in residential care for reasons including poverty. In **Slovenia**, foster care is disappearing, and amendments to improve foster care legislation are under development. Other countries, such as **Croatia**, **Poland**, and **Serbia**, report insufficient foster care placements and challenges in recruitment and retention. **Greece**, **Hungary** and **Ireland** need to better support for foster parents, while **Latvia** and **Estonia** should focus on improving family-based care and support services. The proportion of church-affiliated foster care organisations in **Hungary** has grown significantly, from 7% in 2010 to 50% by 2019, reaching 91% by the end of 2022.

Despite efforts to reduce institutional care, **Türkiye** continues to place children in institutions rather than family-based care, and new institutions are being built to increase capacity as a response to the earthquake and the wars in Syria and Ukraine. **Portugal**'s care system still heavily relies on institutions, and a greater push towards deinstitutionalisation is needed. **Spain** has committed to ending residential care for children under six by 2025, although this goal seems challenging. **Poland** is under pressure from the UN to end institutionalisation and faces challenges in providing adequate services for children with disabilities in alternative care.

**Poland** should give more attention to youth in alternative care who are transitioning into adulthood. **Italy** needs to improve data collection on child protection and welfare, specifically for children in alternative care.

## 8. Children and the justice systems

Access to child-friendly justice systems remains a critical issue across various European countries. In **Ukraine**, there is a pressing need to improve access to justice and ensure children's right to be heard. **Portugal** needs better coordination between the justice and child protection systems, while **Latvia** requires more specialised professionals in investigation and decision-making processes.

In **Spain**, child-friendly justice procedures are a major concern, particularly for children involved in trials related to sexual violence. **Slovenia** struggles with long court proceedings and prioritising the child's best interest. In **Slovakia**, there are episodes of secondary victimisation of children due to the child protection system, with repeated interrogations and long waits for mental health support.

In **Italy**, it is necessary to reduce the duration of court proceedings. In **Kosovo**, the justice system is focused on security while largely neglecting the rehabilitation, education and reintegration of children. Often, children are placed in correctional centres despite court decisions mandating their placement in educational centres, and girls are placed in centres with adult female detainees. In **Malta**, the Juvenile Court deals with children up to 16 years old, leading to harsher penalties and less age-appropriate interventions for children from 16 to 18.



## 9. Additional challenges in child protection

Children in conflict zones in **Ukraine** face severe rights violations, with children being killed and displaced. In **Türkiye**, the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake resulted in an urgent need for education and psychosocial support for children.

In **Latvia**, rising addiction among children is unmet with adequate treatment. In **Scotland**, awareness initiatives are addressing the growing vaping issue among youth. **Kosovo** faces an increasing number of children affected by drug abuse, with a lack of rehabilitation and reintegration services.

## 10. Examples of the use of EU initiatives and funding in strengthening child protection systems

Some EU countries are leveraging EU funds and initiatives to improve child protection and support family-based care. For instance, in **Estonia**, nearly €1.2 million will be allocated from 2024 to enhance family-based alternative care services. **Italy** has launched a programme to prevent family separation, funded under the *Next Generation EU initiative*, focusing on parenting skills and vulnerable families. In **Greece**, the project *Immediate and holistic support of refugee families from Ukraine*, funded by *European Economic Area Grants*, provided holistic support to refugee families with children from Ukraine, including providing support to potential victims of trafficking or domestic violence.

**Moldova** has included child protection in its *2023 Enlargement Package*, outlining progress and plans. In **Poland**, the *Child Guarantee National Action Plan* includes a digital register for alternative care vacancies, but it lacks indicators for improving care quality or addressing foster care shortages. **Poland's** 2024 Child Guarantee report also falls short in critical reflection and innovative practices.

## Recommendations

### 1. Address implementation gaps

**Ensure effective implementation of legislation and strategies**, including ensuring sufficient funding, secondary legislation and action plans. **Collaborate with local authorities** to enhance implementation and consistency across regions and establish robust monitoring mechanisms.

### 2. Protect children from all forms of violence

**Strengthen the enforcement of existing laws**, enhance reporting mechanisms, and ensure the recovery of child victims. Special attention should be given to preventing and addressing corporal punishment and supporting children who have been victims of exploitation, domestic violence or trafficking. **Invest in data collection systems to monitor patterns of violence** and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

### 3. Invest in child protection

**Invest in child protection systems** by allocating sufficient and sustainable funding at the local and national levels. **Focus on increasing staffing levels** in social work and child protection services and providing competitive salaries and professional development opportunities to recruit and retain skilled professionals. Ensure EU funding and initiatives are used to protect children at risk.

### 4. Eliminate discrimination

**Guarantee equal access to child protection services** for marginalised groups, including racialised children, those on the move, those with disabilities, and those living in rural areas. **Ensure fair asylum procedures and reception. Policies must address discrimination** faced by marginalised children. The forthcoming *European Migration and Asylum Strategy* and the *Equality Strategies for LGBTIQ and Anti-Racism* could play a key role in supporting the rights of children facing discrimination. Special programs should be developed to protect the most disadvantaged children and provide adequate services, particularly in regions with high poverty rates and rural areas.

### 5. Develop integrated child protection systems

**Develop integrated child protection systems** that ensure close collaboration between the health, education, social protection, and justice sectors. **These systems should provide holistic support for children through integrated case management**, effective cooperation, and robust information-sharing and referral mechanisms.

### 6. Ensure prevention and early intervention

**Create proactive child protection systems focusing on prevention** rather than reaction. **Early intervention programs to support families and prevent unnecessary separation of children** from their families should be prioritised. Resources should strengthen case management services, ensuring timely support for vulnerable families.

### 7. Support the reform of the child care and protection system

**Prioritise the reform of the child care and protection systems**, including the transition from institutional to family and community-based care. **Legislative frameworks and funding should support foster care**, including for children with disabilities. Clear transition plans for children leaving alternative care are necessary. During crises and emergencies, priority should be given to family-based care environments to meet children's needs.

### 8. Uphold the rights of children in the justice system, including their right to be heard

**Ensure that the justice system is child-friendly** by developing age-appropriate procedures and ensuring children's rights are upheld whenever children come into contact with the justice system. Specialist training should be provided to legal professionals. Governments should strengthen child-specific legal representation to ensure children's voices are

effectively heard in legal proceedings and their best interests are consistently given due consideration.

## Summary

Many countries have introduced new child protection laws and strategies. However, **implementation gaps remain due to insufficient funding and a lack of secondary legislation.**

Violence against children, particularly domestic violence, corporal punishment, peer violence and exploitation, remains a significant concern across Europe.

**Inadequate funding allocation across Europe affects child protection services' quality and sustainability.** Staffing shortages, high turnover, and insufficient training for child protection professionals exacerbate these issues, delaying critical interventions and support for vulnerable children.

**Vulnerable groups, including children from marginalised communities and those facing discrimination due to ethnicity, gender, or disability, encounter significant barriers.**

Children on the move are particularly at risk, facing challenges such as lack of support, poor living conditions, and difficulties accessing services. Unaccompanied children face numerous human rights violations.

**Child protection systems are often fragmented,** with insufficient cooperation between sectors such as justice, health, education, and social protection. This lack of coordination results in inefficiencies, affecting the quality of care and support provided to children.

**There is a need for stronger preventive measures and early intervention systems to strengthen families and prevent child separation.** While some countries have made strides in developing family support models, many still face gaps in resources and coordination.

**While efforts to reduce institutional care and promote family-based care are ongoing, many countries still face challenges in developing effective foster care systems.** There is a critical need for more support for foster parents, better planning for children transitioning out of care, and services tailored to children with disabilities.

**Access to justice for children remains a significant issue,** particularly in ensuring child-friendly procedures and ensuring children's voices are heard in legal proceedings. Many countries face challenges in providing adequate legal representation and ensuring that children's rights are protected within the justice system. Children in conflict zones and those impacted by natural disasters face numerous rights violations.

**The European Union plays a crucial role in supporting and guiding countries in implementing these recommendations through funding and monitoring mechanisms.** These include guiding Member States in implementing the *European Commission's Recommendation to develop and strengthen integrated child protection systems*. Such

efforts are vital to creating a safe environment where children can thrive and ensuring that child protection systems have the child's best interest at their core.

Eurochild urges the European countries to address implementation gaps, strengthen protection laws, invest in child protection systems, eliminate discrimination, and foster sector cooperation. Recommendations include prioritising prevention, early intervention, reforming the child care and protection systems, and ensuring child-friendly justice.

**For more information, contact:**

Francesca Pisanu,  
EU Advocacy Officer, Eurochild,  
[francesca.pisanu@eurochild.org](mailto:francesca.pisanu@eurochild.org)

**Eurochild AISBL**

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels  
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83  
[info@eurochild.org](mailto:info@eurochild.org) – [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org)

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