

# Child participation 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 sheds light on how child participation is funded and examines how children's views are integrated into various initiatives. It also explores barriers to meaningful child participation and the right of the most marginalised children to participate. After laying out the information coming from the ground on the state of child participation in Europe, Eurochild offers its recommendations to European governments and European Institutions.*

## Introduction

Recognising children's participatory rights requires a fundamental shift in perception—from viewing children as passive recipients of protection to recognising them as rights holders and active participants in decisions that affect them at all levels of society. **Article 12** of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* mandates that children's right to express their views must be *assured* and that these views must be given *due weight* in accordance with their age and maturity.

General Comment No. 12 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlights the obligation of Member States to ensure that children's views are actively heard and given appropriate consideration in decisions that impact their lives, in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC. Based on General Comment No. 12, nine Principles for meaningful, safe and inclusive of child participation were developed, which are the basis for Eurochild's work in promoting child participation. According to the Committee, child participation should be: transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and accountable.

Child participation is intrinsically linked to children's civil and political rights, including the **right to freedom of expression (Article 13)**, **freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14)**, **freedom of association (Article 15)**, **protection of privacy (Article 16)**, and **access to information (Article 17)**. Additionally, numerous provisions of the CRC directly or indirectly reinforce children's participation, such as the **right to be heard in cases of separation (Article 9(2))**, **the requirement for informed consent in adoption processes (Article 21(a))**, **the right to challenge deprivation of liberty (Article 37)**, and **the right to participate in juvenile justice proceedings (Article 40)**.

Meaningful, safe, and rights-based participation is achieved through partnerships where adults and children collaborate and learn from one another. Particular attention must be given to ensuring the participation of vulnerable, marginalised, and younger children, recognising their unique needs and circumstances.

# Findings from Eurochild Members

## 1. Funding and prioritising child participation

Across Europe, funding and prioritisation for child participation vary significantly, with many countries lacking sustainable mechanisms to ensure children's voices are heard.

While in **Ukraine**, sustainable and adequately funded mechanisms for child participation are lacking, **Moldova** should develop programmes to encourage children's participation in civic life. **England** requires a cross-government mechanism for child participation, particularly for younger children and underrepresented groups.

Few opportunities exist for children to be involved in public decision-making in **Slovakia**, while in **Latvia**, children's participation is sporadic and often driven by EU or foreign funding requirements. In **Serbia**, meaningful child involvement is limited. In **Bulgaria**, institutions and professionals working with children often fail to acknowledge children's views, highlighting the need for a *National Strategy for Child Participation*.

In **Slovenia**, a national strategy is needed to create meaningful spaces for children to participate. Child participation remains a low priority in **Cyprus**, especially for children under 16. **Portugal** has made progress in child participation, but further efforts are needed. **Germany** is recommended to enhance children's involvement in democratic life.

## 2. Child participation mechanisms

Diverse legal frameworks and initiatives exist across Europe to support child participation, but their implementation and effectiveness remain uneven.

**Germany** has enshrined child participation through the *Youth Protection Act* and the *National Action Plan for Child and Youth Participation*, which runs until 2025. **Scotland** has taken significant steps with the *2024 Act*, which mandates consultations with children in certain situations, supported by youth-led advisory groups such as the *Inclusion Ambassadors* and the *Suicide Prevention Youth Advisory Group*. Every year, members of the *Children's Parliament* and *Scottish Youth Parliament* participate in a Cabinet meeting. The **Albanian** *Law on the Rights of the Child* and the *Law on Pre-university Education* covers child participation.

In **Estonia**, multiple mechanisms support child participation, including *youth councils* at the local level and the *Advisory Board of the Ombudsman for Children*, which allows children to express their views on policies and laws. **Ireland's** *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* aims to expand children's involvement in decision-making, with *Comhairle na nÓg* councils in each of the 31 local authorities providing opportunities for children to engage in local policy development. **Romania** also sees initiatives such as the *National Children's Forum*, which brings children together to voice concerns to policymakers. In **Türkiye**, the *Ministry of Family and Social Services* has established a *Children's Advisory Board* in each province and holds regular meetings to receive children's opinions and suggestions.

In **Croatia**, while progress has been made, more is needed to ensure children's voices are considered in legislation and policymaking. Child participation is facilitated by the *Network of Youth Advisers to the Ombudsman for Children*. In **Italy**, the right of children to participate in decision-making is not well coordinated. While youth municipal councils are the most widespread mechanism, no comprehensive legal framework exists. The *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* recommended that **Italy** institutionalise its *Communal Children's Councils*. Inclusion and empowerment of children in decision-making are covered in **Kosovo's Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2019-2023**. Still, the *Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth* in **Kosovo** lacks a clear definition of youth participation.

In **Spain**, the *State Council for Childhood and Adolescence Participation* supports children's involvement in policymaking. However, there are legal gaps, particularly in the right to association for children under 14 and restrictions for those under 12 in school-based student associations. **Catalonia** stands out with its *National Council of Children and Adolescents* and local children's councils, which allow children to participate in decisions affecting them.

In **Türkiye**, while children's councils exist in some municipalities, their effectiveness is unclear, and there is no information on how children's suggestions are implemented. **Serbia** provides mechanisms such as *Youth Councils* and the *Youth Advisory Panel to the Ombudsman*, but children's involvement in decision-making is not widespread. The *National Children's Council to the Chairman of the State Agency for Child Protection* is the only children's advisory body in **Bulgaria**. **Romania** also provides opportunities for child participation through local youth parliaments and children's councils. In **Moldova**, the *Children's Consultative Council* provides spaces for children to express their views.

In 2023, there were no significant national programmes promoting child participation in **Hungary**. **Greece** is fostering active citizenship from the pre-school age and establishing children's councils at local and national levels. Additionally, a *Youth Parliament* allows children from high schools all over **Greece** to participate in the country's political life.

In **Kosovo**, participation mechanisms like the *Local Youth Action Councils* and *Youth Assemblies* face limitations. In **Northern Ireland**, the involvement of children in policymaking is inconsistent and patchy across government departments. In **Poland**, *The Ombudsman for Children* is establishing the *Council for Children and Young People*, which will become an expert body for the Ombudsperson.

**Wales** has established the *Independent Youth Parliament* and *Young Wales*, a national consultation mechanism that works alongside local structures. In the **Netherlands**, the *National Youth Strategy* aims to ensure the participation of young people in public policy, although concrete actions have yet to be implemented.

### 3. Children's contributions to specific initiatives at the national and international level

Children across Europe have contributed to various national and international initiatives.

In **Serbia**, children were involved in public debates when developing the *Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence*, though there is a call for greater efforts to include them in future consultations, such as the forthcoming strategy for social protection. In **Slovakia**, children expressed their views during the preparation of the *National Strategy to Protect Children from Abuse*. Although their opinions were quoted in the final document, children had no direct influence over its adoption.

Children from **Northern Ireland**, **Ukraine**, and **Croatia** contributed to the *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) General Comment 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change*. In the 2023 civil society report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, children from **Scotland** voiced their concerns about children's rights, thus contributing to its periodic review. In **Moldova**, the Children's Council of the *Child Rights Information and Documentation Centre* also operates, in 2016, drafted a Children's Report from **Moldova** to the *CRC*, which the children presented to the Committee.

Efforts to include children in the Child Guarantee's design and monitoring processes remain inconsistent. In **Spain**, the *State Council for the Participation of Children and Adolescents* was consulted during elaborating the *National Action Plan (NAP) of the European Child Guarantee*. In **Italy**, a *Youth Advisory Board* plays a role in the planning and monitoring of the NAP. In **Cyprus**, a planned consultation with children was cancelled, eliminating any opportunity for direct engagement. Similarly, in **Poland**, no children were consulted at any stage of the process. In **Latvia**, a single discussion took place, but it failed to include representatives from the Child Guarantee target groups.

The **Dutch** *NGO Coalition on Children's Rights* calls for stronger measures to ensure the effective participation of children in all stages of the *Child Guarantee* process, including implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. In **Slovenia**, the *NAP* outlines plans to establish a national framework that will also define children's participation and include a financial structure to support the monitoring process. In **Romania**, the *FONPC Youth and Children's Council* has translated parts of the Child Guarantee into child-friendly language, promoting children's involvement and advocating for the participation of the *National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights (ANPDCA)* in monitoring the implementation of the *National Action Plan (NAP)*.

### 4. Participation of children in contact with the law in judicial proceedings

Significant gaps remain in ensuring the voices of children in contact with the justice system are fully heard.

In **Albania**, the *Juvenile Justice Code* guarantees procedural rights for children in criminal legal processes, and children receiving social system support have specific rights to be

heard, as outlined in the *National Children's Act*. In the **Netherlands**, children's participation in family law proceedings is primarily limited to those aged 12 and older, with ongoing research in the *Hear, Hear project* by *Utrecht University* to address this limitation. In the Netherlands, there is a lack of awareness among courts and Child Protection Services about child participation requirements. In **Denmark**, children who receive help through the social system have specific rights to be heard and involved in their case, as outlined in *the National Children's Act*.

In **Ukraine**, children often lack safe and confidential ways to report issues, with their concerns frequently ignored or reported back to those violating their rights, particularly in residential institutions. There is a need to improve access to justice and ensure children's right to be heard. In **Spain**, the lack of specialised courts and child-friendly justice procedures for children, especially those facing trials for sexual violence, is a major concern.

## 5. Child participation in schools

Many countries, including **Denmark**, **Latvia**, **Kosovo**, **Romania**, and **Estonia**, have established school or student councils to enable children to participate in governance and influence decisions related to their education and school life. The *Unified Student Front* and the *Adom Student Movement* (two movements primarily organised by school students) mobilised thousands of school student participants for protests related to the state of the Hungarian education system.

In **Poland**, the *Children and Youth Parliament* has been working to promote parliamentary democracy among young people in primary and secondary schools since 1994. In **Moldova**, educational institutions have created mechanisms to consult children on various issues. In **Portugal**, children engage in decision-making through *Children's Assemblies* or "*Orçamento Participativo*" in schools.

In **Hungary**, after a three-year hiatus, the *National Student Parliament* reconvened to discuss student rights and make recommendations, while students also mobilised for protests about the state of education. In **Kosovo**, although school councils offer opportunities for children's participation, the impact is limited by low awareness and a lack of mechanisms.

## 6. Barriers to meaningful child participation

In **Ukraine**, **Albania** and **Estonia**, child participation is often tokenistic. In **England**, despite progress, many do not take children's views seriously, and government consultations often do not use child-friendly language. In **Ukraine**, children involved in national or local councils are typically high achievers with good grades. Disadvantaged groups, including children with disabilities, minorities, and those from diverse communities, are often excluded. In **Cyprus**, although those aged 16 and over are technically included in the *Youth Strategy*, their voices are often overshadowed by adult perspectives. In **Italy**, while there are some mechanisms for child participation, there is a lack of consistency in laws and accountability, leading to ineffective engagement.

**Serbia** faces significant barriers to effective participation, such as limited awareness among children and adults, traditional attitudes that don't view children as active participants, and a lack of resources for participatory initiatives. In **Bulgaria**, children do not have access to child-friendly information about laws and policies, limiting their ability to engage meaningfully. In **Poland**, youth councils are established by some local authorities, but their real impact remains unclear. In **Slovenia**, children under 18 are generally excluded from public decision-making, and their participation is rare even when individual decision-makers are willing to listen.

In **The Netherlands**, although child participation concerns multiple ministries, there is no data on how children's recommendations are integrated into public policy, and little is known about the impact of their participation. The participation of children in public decision-making is limited and fragmented at both national and local levels. In **Kosovo**, despite the existence of *Children's Municipal Assemblies*, children's views are often ignored or not taken into account. In **Serbia**, the influence of participatory mechanisms on policy-making remains limited due to similar barriers, including lack of awareness and traditional attitudes towards children's roles. In **Türkiye**, there is no data on how many of the suggestions made by children have been implemented by the municipalities and the Ministry, and the extent to which they have been taken into account

## 7. Violations of the right to peaceful assembly

In **Spain**, no specific regulatory framework supports children's right to association, with legal gaps in the right to association for children under 14 and restrictions for children under 12 in student associations in schools. Children in **Albania** have faced oppression by school staff for advocating their rights. In **England**, recent anti-protest legislation and excessive policing threaten children's right to freedom of assembly, with young participants in demonstrations facing intimidation. These include Palestine solidarity and Black-led protests. In **Germany**, young climate activists have been met with repressive measures, including heavy policing and criminalisation.

## 8. Right to child participation for marginalised children

In **England**, statutory participation rights are inconsistent and not universally applied to all children in all settings. In **Wales**, the views of younger children and those with additional needs are not consistently heard, as participation often relies on verbal communication methods. In the **Flemish Region of Belgium**, while children can provide input through the *JoKER* process, involvement is limited, and hard-to-reach groups are seldom included. In **Portugal**, the *Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens* is launching a *National Council for Children and Young People*, aimed at fostering social and political participation across diverse backgrounds.

In **Finland**, the *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* recommended strengthening efforts to include marginalised children, namely those in disadvantaged situations, in decision-making at both municipal and national levels. In **Kosovo**, challenges exist in including children from rural areas, marginalised groups, and girls, although efforts like the *Megaphone network* are being developed to amplify these voices. In **Northern Ireland**, good

practices, such as the *Experts by Experience group*, highlight the importance of involving care experienced youth.

In **Scotland**, initiatives like the *Young Carer* and *Young Adult Carer Advisory Group* and *Champions Boards* represent young people's views in care settings, though more work is needed to fully uphold their rights. In **Estonia**, many children, especially those who are not part of representative organisations, struggle to make their voices heard due to local authority size, financial capacity, and geographic barriers. In **Denmark**, children in residential care institutions lack statutory rights to participate in school boards or student councils.

## 9. Implementation of the Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool

The **Scottish** Government has not specifically implemented the *Council of Europe's Child Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT)*, although it was used in research conducted by Children in Scotland in 2018. **Serbia** has taken steps to implement the tool, Slovenia participated in the Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool. In the **Netherlands** and Spain, there is no evidence of the tool's implementation. The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is advocating for a CPAT to provide indicators with which states can measure progress in implementing them.

The German Children's Fund tested its application in **Germany**, finding that while child participation structures exist, they are not equally well-established, and improvements are needed. **Romania** was one of the pilot countries participating in the implementation of the Council of Europe's CPAT. **Finland** also piloted the tool in 2019, noting that while participation is included in legislation, there are no structures for children's involvement in the UNCRC reporting process. **Albania, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece** and **Northern Ireland** have not implemented the tool.

According to additional insights gathered from Eurochild Secretariat, **Ireland** was one of the first countries to pilot the CPAT, alongside **Estonia, Bulgaria, and Italy**. In the more recent *CP4Europe project* by the Council of Europe, which Eurochild was also involved in, additional countries implemented the CPAT, including **Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia**, among others.

## 10. Civil society and child participation

In **Hungary**, seven organisations within the *Child Rights Civil Coalition's Children's Participation Working Group* have implemented activities that enable safe child participation. **Kosovo** also sees engagement from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), such as *CONCORDIA Projecte Sociale*, in child participation initiatives. In **Croatia**, *SOS Children's Villages* is working to improve children's participation in alternative care. **Latvia's** youth organisations, including the *Latvian Youth Council*, promote youth involvement in public and political processes. **Northern Ireland** features good practices, like the *Experts by Experience* group of young people, which played a role in the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services* facilitated by the *Voice of Young People in Care*.



In **Portugal**, *Instituto de Apoio à Criança* and *UNICEF* have been active in promoting child participation. In Romania, The **Government for Children**, formed by 14 CSOs, allows children to envision and shape policy. In 2022, the FONPC Children and Youth Council was established. In **Slovenia**, the *Association of Friends of Youth* leads the *Children's Parliaments* program, where children propose improvements, although their suggestions are often ignored and lack follow-up. The organisation also works on projects to support dialogue between children and decision-makers. Meanwhile, in **Kosovo**, local youth participation is facilitated through mechanisms such as Local Youth Action Councils and Youth Assemblies, which are run by NGOs, allowing young people to engage at the local level. KOMF is setting up *Megaphone*, a children's network that will ensure their voice is heard in all policies and decisions that affect their lives.

## 11. Participation in democratic processes

In **Belgium**, starting in 2024, young people aged 16 and over are required to vote in European elections. In **Estonia**, children aged 16 can participate in municipal elections, offering them a voice in local decision-making. In **Scotland**, the voting age for Scottish elections is already set at 16, while the voting age for UK elections remains 18. However, the new UK Government has pledged to lower the voting age to 16, as stated in their manifesto, despite the issue not being included in the King's Speech.

In **Ireland**, there was a commitment to hold a referendum on reducing the voting age to 16, but no referendum has been planned. **Portugal** continues to favour maintaining the voting age at 18. In **Germany**, most adults are opposed to lowering the voting age to 16.

## Policy-recommendations

1. **Invest in sustainable and adequately funded mechanisms** to support child participation, focusing on ensuring opportunities for younger children and those from underrepresented or vulnerable groups.
2. **Develop and implement national strategies and policies** that provide consistent, legally supported frameworks for child participation across governance levels. Facilitate children's meaningful participation in decision-making processes at local, national and global levels. Provide training and resources to professionals, politicians and EU representatives, and institutions working with children to promote the recognition and integration of children's voices and safeguarding rules.
3. **Actively involve children** in the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of initiatives like the *EU Child Guarantee*, national child rights strategies, and UN mechanisms and monitoring processes. Facilitate direct involvement of children in legislative processes and ensure feedback loops to demonstrate how their contributions shape outcomes. Support training for professionals, politicians and EU representatives on child participation and safeguarding. Partnerships with civil society organisations and child-led initiatives can support this. Share best

practices to show examples of where children have participated in a meaningful and rights-based manner.

4. **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 introduce child-specific legal representation to ensure children's voices are heard and considered in legal proceedings and that their best interests are prioritised.
5. **Strengthen student councils and other platforms** that promote democratic engagement among children, ensuring they have a say and influence decisions related to their education and school life.
6. **Address barriers to meaningful child participation.** Collect data on the outcomes of child participation initiatives and assess their impact on public policies. Organise awareness session on the benefits of involving children in decision-making.
7. **Uphold children's right to peaceful assembly and guarantee safe spaces for the activism of children and young people.** Ensuring they are not subjected to policing or repressive laws that hinder children's and young people activism, especially linked to human rights and climate.
8. **Develop specific strategies to include marginalised children,** ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes. This includes providing resources and platforms that make participation accessible for all children. **Ensure children,** especially those from the most marginalised communities, **are involved in policies,** including within the *EU Child Participation Platform* and the *EU youth advisory board*.
9. **Implement tools like the Council of Europe's Child Participation Assessment Tool** to monitor and assess child participation practices, ensuring continuous improvement in how children's voices are included in public decision-making. Organise training at the national level on how to use the Council of Europe's Child Participation Assessment Tool.
10. **Support the efforts of civil society organisations in facilitating child participation,** including through national and EU funding.
11. **Explore opportunities to actively involve children in democratic processes,** ensuring they are well-informed about political developments and provided with the opportunity to express their views on decisions that affect them.

## Conclusion

**The findings highlight a pressing need for progress in ensuring safe, meaningful, and inclusive participation of children** in decision-making processes across various sectors. In many contexts, mechanisms for involving children are either underdeveloped or inconsistent. **Child participation is often tokenistic or inaccessible for disadvantaged groups.** The lack of coherent and adequately funded national strategies to prioritise child participation exacerbates these challenges.

**While child participation is supported by legal frameworks in certain countries—such as youth councils and participatory bodies—the actual impact often remains limited.** This is frequently due to a lack of resources, awareness, and commitment to genuine involvement. Marginalised children, including those with disabilities, from minority backgrounds, or living in institutional care, continue to face significant barriers to expressing their views and shaping policy. **Additionally, the right of the child in contact with the law to be heard and to have their views taken into account is not always ensured.**

Across Europe, children are participating and contributing to key initiatives. **These include strategies on the rights of the child at the national level or the UNCRC review process. Civil society organisations are crucial in facilitating these efforts,** creating platforms for children to voice their opinions. Still, considerable work is needed to overcome structural barriers, establish comprehensive legal frameworks, and ensure that child participation goes beyond being a formality to become a transformative tool for upholding children's rights and advancing democratic processes.

**Eurochild aims to implement children's participation based on the nine Principles for meaningful, safe and inclusive:** transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and accountable. **Eurochild recommends that European governments invest in sustainable, inclusive mechanisms and national strategies, prioritising younger and marginalised children.** Ensuring child-friendly justice systems for children in contact with the law is essential. Barriers such as cultural attitudes must be overcome, the right to peaceful assembly should be upheld. **Civil society and monitoring tools are key in ensuring children's voices shape governance and democratic processes effectively.**

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