

# Civil society organisations working with children 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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Putting children at  
the heart of 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 the environments where children's civil society organisations operate, their cooperation with governments, funding and resource allocations, and instances of violations of the right of peaceful assembly. After laying out the information coming from the ground on the challenges faced by civil society organisations in Europe, Eurochild offers its recommendations to the European governments and the European Union.*

## Introduction

**Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in promoting and protecting children's rights, particularly those of the most disadvantaged.** They deliver essential services, ensuring they meet the needs of children and families on the ground. Civil society ensures that children's voices are heard, their rights are upheld, and communities are empowered to address the challenges they face. **By bridging the gap between governmental action and grassroots needs, CSOs contribute to shaping policies and fostering democratic dialogue.**

**The environment in which they operate - marked by varying degrees of government support, resource availability, and legal restrictions - shapes their capacity to effectively advocate and deliver services.** To sustain and enhance the impact of CSOs, it is crucial to ensure an enabling environment - one where the governments and the EU foster partnerships, provide adequate funding, protect freedom of assembly, and facilitate meaningful engagement. By doing so, CSOs can continue to deliver vital services, promote child participation, and advocate for policies that guarantee the rights of every child, contributing to stronger, more resilient communities and democratic societies.

**While many initiatives are supporting civic dialogue, across Europe, the shrinking space of civil society and an unprecedented backlash against universal human rights have been undermining the freedom, safety, and actions of those defending human rights.** The child rights movement has not been spared. Eurochild's members are witnessing the rise of anti-child rights movements, often disguised under the banners of 'family protection' and 'traditional values,' which view children as objects of protection rather than rights holders. These movements hinder the development and implementation of child rights legislation - such as those related to corporal punishment, sexual rights, and domestic violence. **The most vulnerable children, including racialised, LGBTIQ, girls and boys victims of violence, and those living in poverty, are the hardest hit by these challenges.**

# Findings from Eurochild Members

## 1. The environment where civil society organisations operate

Civil society organisations (CSOs) working on children's rights operate in diverse environments across Europe, with some countries facing significant challenges in maintaining an open and supportive space for their work. Eurochild members from **Bulgaria**, **Hungary**, **Serbia**, and **Türkiye** report that the space for CSOs working on children's rights is shrinking.

In **Bulgaria**, misinformation on children's rights has paralysed political parties' cooperation with civil society, and the sector is constantly subjected to smear campaigns. In **Hungary**, there are restrictions to their operating environment and increasing stigmatisation of LGBT children, children with disabilities, children living in alternative care, children living in poverty and migrant children, among others. Children's rights are heavily politicised, with the government distorting narratives like redefining child protection as shielding children from "LGBT propaganda." Democratic institutions, such as the *Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights*, often fail to adequately address key children's rights issues if these are critical of the government. Eurochild members in **Germany** are also concerned that civil society space is becoming more limited.

Research by the *Civil Society Development Centre* shows that legal regulations in **Türkiye** restrict the registration, operation, and funding of CSOs, with some organisations facing threats and harassment. In **Serbia**, the growing public perception that prioritises parental rights over child rights complicates the advocacy landscape for CSOs. For example, CSOs have been advocating for the prohibition of corporal punishment but face opposition from groups advocating for 'traditional family values' and 'parental autonomy.' *Open Data* found that in 2020, almost 400 CSOs in **Albania** had to de-register due to the lack of an environment that enables them to operate.

Overall, space for CSOs working on children's rights is not shrinking in **Italy**. Nevertheless, sometimes, children's rights are politicised by the right-wing media in relation to issues such as migration and foster care. In these cases, the work of CSOs can be affected. In **Greece**, there is no shrinking space for CSOs working on children's rights, and relevant ministries collaborate with CSOs in the delivery of services. However, there are no regular meetings or institutional mechanisms for children's rights organisations to engage in the development of public policy. In **Slovenia**, over the past year, nonprofit organisations, including organisations working on children's rights, have reported increased pressure from some government representatives.

The *Estonian Union for Child Welfare* does not believe there is shrinking space for CSOs working on children's rights in **Estonia**. The CSO sector in **Ukraine** is growing in response to the needs of children and families affected by war and conflict. CSOs are also involved in shaping policies in Ukraine.

## 2. Government and civil society cooperation

While collaboration between governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) is critical for advancing children's rights, the level and quality of cooperation vary widely across Europe.

In **Türkiye**, there are initiatives to involve stakeholders, including children and CSOs, in shaping national policy, but these are not sufficient or comprehensive. Engagement only happens at the government's own initiative. In **Hungary**, NGOs working on human rights issues are often stigmatised or ignored by government bodies. In **Bulgaria**, political instability and snap elections have halted progress and resulted in a lack of sustained cooperation. In **Finland**, the number of legislative drafting working groups in which CSOs have been represented has decreased and been replaced by less efficient forms of participation, such as roundtables.

**Ireland** stands out for its strong government engagement with CSOs, including in the preparation of its revision before the CRC Committee. Regular meetings and summits on children's rights are held, fostering collaboration and inclusion of civil society in policy discussions. Advocacy initiatives in **Romania** are progressing despite some resistance, with CSOs actively engaging with various stakeholders. In **Ukraine**, some ministries and local administrations are consulting CSOs. However, follow-up is often lacking. There are few CSOs working on children's rights in **Albania**. Despite positive rhetoric, the Albanian Government provides very limited support to CSOs and the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet have been very critical of CSOs.

## 3. Funding and resource allocation

Sufficient funding and resources are essential for CSOs to effectively support children's rights and provide key services, but many organisations face financial challenges.

In **Bulgaria**, the majority of ESF+ funding is allocated to government bodies, limiting CSO access. In **Romania**, while substantial European funds are available, absorption capacity remains a significant challenge. CSOs are often not eligible to apply for EU funding, despite their experience. Eligibility for CSOs would enhance project implementation and effectiveness in addressing poverty and social exclusion.

In **Estonia**, cooperation between the state and CSOs has evolved from short-term funding to a multi-annual strategic partnership. This has supported the activities of large organisations, but has left small and new organisations in a difficult position.

In **Germany**, there is a need for increased federal funding for children's rights organisations. In **Slovenia**, NGOs, particularly those focused on children's rights, face challenges with funding mechanisms, especially when it comes to tax-allocated funds, which are not always sufficient to meet their needs. In **Wales**, the main challenge for CSOs is having sufficient capacity to be able to effectively advocate for children's rights and ensure that any violations can be challenged within the parameters of the existing law. In **Serbia**, CSOs also struggle with limited financial and human resources.

In **Finland**, the government has decided to implement significant cuts in subsidies for organisations working on health and social issues. The *Central Union for Child Welfare*, together with others, has stated that the cuts are too severe and too fast and will weaken CSOs' ability to do preventive work, e.g. supporting mental health or combating bullying and domestic violence. In **Bulgaria**, CSOs also struggle with funding, especially for advocacy and campaigns. In **Kosovo**, there is a need for more sustainable funding to provide specialised services for children.

In **Albania**, The opening of EU membership negotiations has given more voice to CSOs to participate in decision-making, but lack of support hinders meaningful engagement for most organisations. Very few sources of funding are directly available for local CSOs as funding goes primarily to large international organisations. *CONCORDIA* recommends that the EU supports smaller CSOs working with children, families and communities and social service providers in **Moldova**, with more accessible funding application procedures. Long-term projects should be more accessible to small CSOs, particularly those working with children in rural areas.

*Hayat Sende* recommends that the EU makes funding available to small and medium-sized NGOs in **Türkiye**, including organisations advocating for change. The EU should enable funding opportunities with smaller budgets from which medium-sized CSOs can benefit directly and also take steps to encourage the government to cooperate with CSOs. It is necessary to ensure that a wider variety of CSOs working on different child rights issues is financially supported.

#### **4. Violation of the right to peaceful assembly**

The right to peaceful assembly is a fundamental aspect of democratic societies, yet children and youth advocating for their rights are increasingly facing repression and intimidation.

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. Young participants in demonstrations, including those supporting Palestine solidarity and Black-led movements, have faced intimidation and repression. In **Germany**, organisations and youth associations defending climate protection and the rights of refugees have been attacked by right-wing groups, including with intimidation or appeals for the withdrawal of funding. Young climate activists have been met with repressive measures, including heavy policing and criminalisation.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Governments should actively protect CSOs and tackle the anti-child rights movements** by ensuring freedom from smear campaigns and safeguarding freedom of assembly and expression. **Mechanisms to protect child human rights defenders at risk should be established.** The upcoming *EU Strategy to Support, Protect, and Empower Civil Society* could play a key role in advancing these efforts. Similarly, the forthcoming

*European Migration and Asylum Strategy* and the *Equality Strategies for LGBTIQ and Anti-Racism* could serve as valuable tools for civil society organisations to champion the rights of the most marginalised children.

2. **Governments should institutionalise regular and transparent consultations with CSOs, ensuring that these engagements are not only tokenistic but result in meaningful dialogues. Clear mechanisms for follow-up and accountability should be established.** At the EU level, the *EU Child Participation Platform* and the proposed *EU youth advisory board* and *Civil Society Platform*, should be supported with strengthened feedback loops to demonstrate how their contributions shape outcomes.
3. **Governments, international donors, and the EU should design funding mechanisms accessible to smaller and medium-sized CSOs.** These mechanisms should prioritise long-term, multi-annual grants, and capacity-building opportunities, ensuring that organisations in rural and marginalised areas can access resources needed for delivering services and impacting legislation.
4. **Governments must uphold and protect the right to peaceful assembly and protect the civil society from intimidation, excessive use of force, and criminalisation of demonstrators.** CSOs, youth-led organisations and children’s human rights defenders should be provided a safe space to operate and exercise their right to peaceful assembly.

## Summary

Civil society organisations (CSOs) across Europe operate in an increasingly constrained environment shaped by legal restrictions, limited government support, and shrinking financial resources, which impact their capacity to advocate effectively and deliver services.

**In many countries, CSOs working on children’s rights face challenges.** Anti-child rights movements carrying out misinformation campaigns limit their efforts to uphold children's fundamental rights. In some countries, CSOs face legal restrictions that limit their ability to operate freely, while public sentiment sometimes shifts focus toward parental rights over children’s needs, complicating advocacy efforts.

**The level of engagement between governments and CSOs varies.** In some areas, participation has moved from direct legislative involvement to less effective consultation methods. In contrast, other countries demonstrate stronger collaboration, fostering regular meetings and summits where CSOs can contribute to policy discussions. Yet, political instability in certain places results in sporadic and ineffective partnerships.

**Many CSOs face significant financial barriers.** In certain countries, most funding is allocated to government bodies, leaving little for CSOs to access. Funding often comes with stringent eligibility criteria, limiting smaller organisations. Rapid or severe cuts in subsidies have also weakened their capacity to engage in preventive work.

**Across various areas, child human rights defenders experience repression.** Anti-protest laws, excessive policing, and intimidation tactics target young demonstrators. Climate activists, as well as those involved in social justice causes, face heavy-handed responses, restricting their ability to freely assemble and express their concerns.

**Governments must safeguard CSOs' freedoms, ensure meaningful dialogue, and provide accessible, long-term funding for smaller organisations. Transparent consultations, accountability mechanisms, and safe spaces for peaceful assembly are vital to empowering CSOs, especially those championing the rights of marginalised children.**

As the largest network of organisations and individuals working with and for children, Eurochild would be glad to offer support to governments and EU institutions in implementing these recommendations to support and enable the protection of children's rights and those working to promote these rights.

**For more information, contact:**

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