

Ensuring an enabling environment for those defending children's rights

**Contribution to the EU
Civil Society Strategy**

Briefing for members



Eurochild
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the heart of Europe

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Introduction

We welcome the development of the EU Civil Society Strategy and encourage Eurochild members to contribute to the consultation, which is open until 5 September. However, we urge you to submit your suggestions as soon as possible. You can use the information in this document for your submission or develop your positions and recommendations. This strategy is an important chance to strengthen the EU's commitment to democratic values, fundamental rights, and civic participation. Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in promoting and protecting children's rights, supporting governments to uphold their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and strengthening democratic systems from the ground up.

CSOs deliver essential services and empower communities to tackle the challenges they face. In many EU Member States, they complement public services or step in to fill critical gaps left by governments. Thanks to their expertise and close ties to communities, they are well placed to support children and families with interventions tailored to local needs.

Beyond service delivery, CSOs are key to shaping and monitoring policy and laws. They assess how these affect children in practice, provide evidence-based recommendations, and hold decision-makers accountable - by challenging unjust laws, driving reforms, and amplifying children's voices. Their sustained engagement ensures policy continuity; tracks progress across electoral cycles and contributes to long-term policy development and monitoring. This expertise is grounded in hands-on experience and enriched by continuous feedback from children, families, communities and professionals.

By bridging the gap between government action and grassroots realities, CSOs help create more inclusive policies and foster democratic dialogue. They uphold accountability by collecting data, documenting rights violations, raising awareness, and submitting alternative reports to international bodies. This builds a comprehensive and independent picture of how states are meeting their obligations under the CRC.

The environment in which CSOs operate greatly affects their ability to play this role. To sustain their impact, an enabling environment is essential—one where governments and the EU actively foster partnerships, ensure accessible and adequate funding, safeguard fundamental freedoms, and enable meaningful participation.

Challenges faced by civil society working with children in Europe

Despite their essential role, CSOs across Europe increasingly face a hostile and restrictive environment. Regressive narratives, limited opportunities to engage, and growing financial and legal obstacles are undermining their ability to function effectively. These trends threaten the realisation of children's rights and the EU's own democratic values, with serious far-reaching consequences for children, especially the most vulnerable.

Across Europe, shrinking space for civil society and backlash against universal human rights are putting at risk the freedom, safety, and effectiveness of human rights defenders, including those working with and for children. The report highlights the increasingly restrictive environment in which CSOs operate. There is a growing presence of anti-child rights movements, often framed under the banners of 'family protection' or 'traditional values,' challenging the recognition of children as rights holders. They obstruct progress on key legislation, particularly on issues like corporal punishment, domestic violence, anti-discrimination, migration, sexual rights and education. This disproportionately harms marginalised children, including those with a migrant background and ethnic origin, living in poverty, LGBTIQ+ children, and victims of violence.

These insights draw on Eurochild's flagship report ["Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps"](#), based on contributions from 57 members across 31 European countries. In Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, and Türkiye, CSOs face tightening restrictions and limited opportunities to participate in public policy-making. In many contexts, there are no regular mechanisms for meaningful engagement with children's rights organisations.

Access to funding is also a significant barrier. In countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, funding is channeled mainly to government bodies or is hard to access. In Slovenia and Germany, existing funding mechanisms are insufficient to meet the needs of child-focused NGOs. CSOs in Serbia and Finland face both financial and human resource constraints, with Finland seeing severe cuts to health and social sector subsidies. In Kosovo, there is an urgent need for sustainable funding for specialised child services.

While positive examples of cooperation exist, overall civil society participation in policy-making has declined. In many contexts, meaningful engagement has been replaced by tokenistic or ineffective consultations, limiting the potential of CSOs to shape child-focused policy and laws.

Funding also remains a persistent barrier. Public subsidies are often directed primarily to state institutions, with limited and inconsistent access for CSOs, especially grassroots and smaller organisations. Rigid eligibility criteria and abrupt cuts in public funding make it more difficult for them to engage in preventive, participatory, and rights-based advocacy work.

Meanwhile, child human rights defenders increasingly face repression. Laws that restrict protest, police intimidation and hostile public discourse, undermine children's right to

peaceful assembly and expression, as guaranteed under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Proposed recommendations for an EU Civil Society Strategy

1. Strengthen support to civil society organisations, including child human rights defenders, and actively counter anti-child rights narratives.

- Explicitly address threats against child rights organisations and defenders, including protection from smear campaigns and intimidation.
- Safeguard the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, with robust EU and national mechanisms to protect civil society actors, especially amid rising anti-rights movements.
- Encourage Member States to adopt measures that shield child human rights defenders.

2. Institutionalise meaningful, transparent and accountable engagement with civil society, including children's rights organisations

- Establish regular, structured consultations that go beyond tokenistic involvement, with clear feedback loops to show how civil society input shapes policy.
- Promote good practices such as Ireland's, Germany's, and Italy's approaches under the European Child Guarantee, which include expert working groups and taskforces with civil society participation.

The proposed Civil Society Platform should be co-created with civil society. Co-creation ensures that the platform truly responds to the needs, expertise, and priorities of civil society actors. By involving civil society in its design, the platform can be made more transparent, inclusive, and effective, guaranteeing that civil society contributions are systematically reflected in EU policy decisions.

3. Ensure inclusive, sustainable and accessible funding for a diverse range of civil society organisations, including those working on children's rights.

- Simplify EU funding application processes and make funding accessible to small and medium-sized organisations, especially those in rural, remote, or marginalised communities.
- Prioritise long-term, flexible, and multi-annual funding, paired with capacity building in project and financial management.
- Ensure child rights organisations are represented in EU funds Monitoring Committees, so they can help shape funding calls on child poverty and civil society capacity.

4. Promote cross-border collaboration, peer learning, and exchange among civil society organisations.

- Support structured opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, cross-border projects, and professional exchange, taking inspiration from Germany's Child and Youth Welfare Congress, which fosters networking and joint dialogue among CSOs, policy-makers, and youth workers.

5. Safeguard the right to peaceful assembly and ensure a safe civic space for children, young people and youth-led organisations.

- Commit to protecting civil society actors, including children and young people, from disproportionate use of force, surveillance, or criminalisation of peaceful protest.
- Explicitly uphold children's right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, as guaranteed under Article 15 of the UN CRC, and ensure safe, inclusive spaces — online and offline — for children, youth-led organisations, and child human rights defenders to participate in civic life.

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