

# **2025 European Semester Spring Package**

**Eurochild calls for the Strategic Role of the  
European Semester in Advancing Children's  
Rights and Securing Child-Centred  
Investments**



**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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# 2025 European Semester Spring Package

## Eurochild calls for the Strategic Role of the European Semester in Advancing Children’s Rights and Securing Child-Centred Investments

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## Abbreviations

AROE: At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion

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

## 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)

# 1. Introduction

The European Semester (ES) is the **European Union’s annual framework for coordinating economic, fiscal, employment, and social policies across Member States**. Eurochild has been analysing the European Semester’s Spring Package through a children’s rights lens for the past 10 years, providing critical insights into how EU economic and social policies impact children.

In 2025, now in the fourth year of **the European Child Guarantee (ECG)** implementation, the European Semester Country Reports for all Member States include, for the first time, updates on progress. Eurochild welcomes that each report now summarises the state of ECG implementation alongside information from biennial reports and EU fund allocations.

**This marks a significant achievement for Eurochild, reflecting years of our advocacy to integrate the ECG into the Semester process.**

The Country-Specific Recommendations have become stronger and more focused on addressing social challenges, alongside priorities such as defence, economic and fiscal stability, and green policies. **Fifteen Member States**—including BG, CZ, HR, EE, EL, FI, HU, IE, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK, and ES—are recommended **to tackle poverty** and energy poverty, improve social protection and social transfers, adjust child-related tax deductions, promote inclusion of disadvantaged groups, support flexible work arrangements, and reform social services. Notably, **France and Spain** have received Country Specific Recommendations aimed at **preventing and addressing child poverty**.

However, most of the Country Specific Recommendations - for 21 Member States (AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, EE, EL, DE, HU, IT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SK, SL, ES, and SE) focus on improving **educational outcomes in line with** the Union of Skills. Overall, all Country-Specific Recommendations place greater emphasis on social fairness, tackling poverty and social exclusion, accessible child care, inclusive education, developing community-based services, and securing affordable housing. As a cross-cutting issue, we also welcome the inclusion of recommendations that call for the systematic involvement of social partners, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to foster ownership and effective implementation.

Furthermore, the Country Reports highlight that, despite some progress, ensuring equitable, high-quality, and universal access to **early childhood education and care** remains a key challenge. They also point to the need for more coordinated action at both national and EU-level action to reverse declining **educational performance**, strengthen equity and resilience in education systems, and ensure that all children are equipped (including digital devices and digital literacy) for a rapidly changing world.

We welcome that the 2025 Semester has begun to address children’s mental health, although only to a limited extent. Some countries, like Austria and Estonia, are moving forward with targeted strategies. The 2025 Country Reports also reveal that while **digital access is improving across the EU**, challenges remain in translating connectivity into

equitable **digital opportunities for children**—particularly those **in rural areas** or from **disadvantaged backgrounds**.

Several countries report rising health burdens linked to **environmental and climate-related changes**, which disproportionately affect children. Austria has flagged climate-driven health costs as a key budgetary risk, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children. At the same time, integration of environmental sustainability into education remains uneven across the EU, though initiatives like Romania’s Green Week offer promising examples.

Furthermore, in 2025, ten Member States — Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, and Romania — are subject to the **Social Convergence Framework**, providing an additional lever to advance the implementation of social and educational policies.

We welcome this positive development in the 2025 European Semester; nevertheless, more needs to be done. Our recommendations include:

- To uphold the European Pillar of Social Rights, all countries should receive **targeted recommendations on children’s rights**. These must be mainstreamed in the European Semester to ensure consistent monitoring and guidance.
- We welcome **the Social Convergence Framework** as a tool to address persistent child poverty, especially in the ten identified Member States, which require close monitoring and follow-up.
- Progress on **the European Child Guarantee** is welcome, including funding via ESF+ and biennial reports. Country Reports should continue to summarise national ECG implementation, highlighting progress, gaps, and EU funding use.
- Despite some child-focused funding, essential services like **ECEC** and **education**, their access remains limited especially for disadvantaged children such as Roma. More targeted, direct investments are needed.
- **Deinstitutionalisation** efforts must be strengthened through better support for prevention and community-based care and sustainable reforms.
- Greater focus is needed on **underrepresented issues** like **child mental health**, which requires early intervention and cross-sectoral action.
- The **digital divide** and **digital literacy** must be addressed. Digital literacy empowers children to learn, communicate safely, and navigate the digital world—essential skills for every child.
- The Semester should include **intergenerational fairness** by assessing long-term policy impacts. Member States must adopt child-friendly, sustainable governance and policy that supports a just climate transition.
- All Member States should be recommended to establish **effective stakeholder** participation mechanisms.

Eurochild remains committed to advocating for children's rights as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving social justice.

## 2. What is the European Semester?

The European Semester (ES) is the **European Union's annual framework for coordinating economic, fiscal, employment, and social policies across Member States**. Introduced in 2010, it enables the alignment of national reforms with EU-wide priorities to promote sustainable growth, resilience, and social cohesion.

The cycle begins each November with the **Autumn Package**, in which the European Commission sets out economic and social priorities for the year ahead. This is followed in June May by the **Spring Package**, which provides country-specific economic and fiscal guidance, building on the earlier priorities. The Spring Package includes **Country Reports** for all Member states and **Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs)** which are based on the evaluation of national reform and stability programmes, contextualised within each Member State's socio-economic landscape.

Social fairness has taken on a more prominent role in the European Semester since the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017. This focus was further strengthened in 2021 with the launch of the EPSR Action Plan, which introduced concrete EU-wide targets in key areas such as poverty reduction — including child poverty — closing the disability employment gap, and increasing the share of people in employment and training. Specifically, for child poverty, the EU set a target to lift at least 5 million children out of poverty or social exclusion by 2030.

In this context, the European Commission has also been conducting the second stage analysis within the **Social Convergence Framework (SCF)** that assesses risks and challenges to upward social convergence in Member States, in order to preserve social fairness and ensure a cohesive society and an economy that delivers sustainable and inclusive growth. For 2025, these countries are part of the SCF - Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary and Romania. This framework covers: labour markets, education and skills, and social policies.

## 3. Eurochild's analysis

This report provides an analysis of the **2025 Spring Package**, including the **Country Reports** and **CSRs** for all 27 EU Member States. Eurochild has reviewed the 2025 European Semester Spring Package through the lens of **children's rights**.

Every child has the right to access essential services, and poverty must not be a barrier to education, early childhood care, healthcare — including mental health support — adequate nutrition, digital learning tools, and adequate living conditions.

Recognising that children do not live in isolation, we also assessed how children are considered within the context of the green and digital agendas. Furthermore, since many children's rights are realised by civil society organisations, we examined the extent of stakeholder and civil society participation in public consultations, which is essential for inclusive and effective policymaking.

We took a closer look at nine key areas relevant to child rights:

- Child poverty and social exclusion, Child Guarantee, ESF+
- Early childhood development
- Education
- The most vulnerable groups of children such as children with a migrant and ethnic background, including Roma
- Deinstitutionalisation and community-based care services for children
- Access of children to health-care including Children's mental health and their well-being
- Children's rights in the digital world, digital divide, and digital literacy
- Children addressed by environmental policies
- Stakeholders' participation

## 4. 2025 Country Specific Recommendations

While Bulgaria and Romania continue to lead in child poverty rates, **France and Spain** have been singled out in the 2025 European Semester for **prioritising child poverty**, due to their slow progress in addressing the issue.

The France's 2025 Country Specific Recommendations highlight that children face a disproportionately high rate of poverty and social exclusion (26.2% vs 20.5%). 77% of poor families are unable to access childcare in 2023, and gaps in availability, cost, and flexibility especially affect those in precarious or irregular work, ultimately limiting parents' ability to access training or employment and reinforcing cycles of disadvantage for their children. Therefore, **CSR 5 calls France** to prevent and reduce child poverty, by removing barriers that hinder parents' labour market integration and access to quality early childhood education and care for the most disadvantaged households. Similarly, in Spain, **child poverty remains a major structural problem**, affecting over one in three children, particularly those from migrant, Roma, single-parent, and low work-intensity households. Despite existing income support schemes, low take-up rates, administrative barriers, and limited social transfer impacts hamper poverty reduction. Therefore, **the CSR 6 for Spain urges to address child poverty** to enhance social fairness and upward social convergence.

Fifteen Member States including BG, CZ, HR, CZ, EE, EL, FI, HU, IE, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK, and ES are recommended to address poverty and energy poverty, revise social protection measures, efficiency of social transfers, adjust child related tax deduction, inclusion of disadvantaged groups, flexible work-arrangements and reform social services. For example, Slovakia's **CSR 1 highlights the need to target emergency energy support to vulnerable households** and firms, and expanding social housing with attention to regional disparities.

However, in line with the new EU initiative the Union of Skills, most of the Country Specific recommendations - for 21 Member States (AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, EE, EL, DE, HU, IT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SK, SL, ES, and SE) relate to improving **educational performance** and labour market integration of **disadvantaged and migrant-background students** by ensuring equal access to education, tackling teacher shortages, and preventing the early school dropouts. For example **Sweden's Country-Specific Recommendation no 4** urges for the **improvements in education** and labour market integration for disadvantaged and migrant-background students by addressing teacher shortages, ensuring equitable access, and easing transitions to upper secondary school. In **Bulgaria**, social segregation continues to exacerbate learning disadvantages, with 64% of Roma children aged 6–15 attending schools where all or most pupils are Roma. As a result, **Country-Specific Recommendation no 4** emphasises the need to improve the inclusiveness of education and training, particularly for Roma children.

**Child care** related recommendations have dominated in previous ES, in 2025, ten Member States (AT, CZ, FR, DE, EL, IT, PL, RO, SK, and ES) have been recommended to improve **quality and availability of childcare services** including for the most disadvantaged households. To illustrate, **Germany has received CSR 5**, which calls for improving education outcomes by promoting excellence and providing targeted support to disadvantaged groups. It also highlights the need to expand and enhance **the quality of early childhood education, care**, and whole-day schools to support caregivers—often women—in joining the workforce and to ensure equal opportunities for all children.

Several recommendations (for Croatia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia) highlight the importance of **deinstitutionalisation** and the development of **quality, adequate, and affordable community-based social services** — including **healthcare reform** and improved accessibility — to reinforce ongoing implementation efforts. For example, **the CSR 5 for Croatia** urges better access to home- and community-based long-term care, more balanced regional distribution of health services, investments in e-health, and stronger intergovernmental coordination on health policy.

We strongly welcome the inclusion of housing affordability in the 2025 Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs). Notably, Cyprus, Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Spain have been advised to implement targeted measures in the housing sector. For instance, **Hungary's CSR 6** calls for improvements in the adequacy of social assistance and unemployment benefits, as well as ensuring access to essential services for all. It also **recommends directing housing support** measures toward low-income households and increasing the overall housing supply, including **the provision of social housing**.

Given that many children's rights interests are represented by **civil society organisations**, we examined the extent of stakeholder and civil society participation in public consultations.



In this regard, Slovakia and Slovenia stand out for their emphasis on systematic involvement of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to ensure broad ownership and effective implementation. Notably, **Slovakia's CSR 3** specifically calls for the integration of impact assessments and stakeholder input into the legislative process.

Several countries also address issues related to the digital divide and digital literacy; however, these topics are mentioned without being reflected in the formal recommendations. Despite its urgency and importance, mental health of children is not mentioned either in the recommendations.

## 5. 2025 Country Reports

### 5.1 Child Poverty and social exclusion, Child Guarantee, ESF+

**Child poverty or social exclusion remain widespread and persistent across the European Union**, despite increased policy attention and funding, particularly through the **European Child Guarantee (ECG)** and the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**. The Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights (2021) set the target to reduce child poverty or social exclusion by **5 million children by 2030**. Subsequently, the Council Recommendation of the European Child Guarantee was adopted to combat child poverty and social exclusion to reach this target.

The child poverty target was informed by Eurostat data from 2019, when **18 million children**, or 22.2%, were growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU. Regrettably, the EU is not on track to meet its 2030 target of reducing by at least 5 million the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. On the contrary, the number of children affected has risen to **19.5 million**, with 24.2% of children living in poverty and social exclusion in 2024.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the progress made in the 2025 European Semester Spring Package, where **every Country Report includes a summary of the European Child Guarantee (ECG) implementation**, along with the biennial report and allocations from the ESF+ and other EU funds. Although this comprehensive analysis was foreseen in the Council Recommendation on the ECG, until now the European Semester has primarily focused on Member States with the highest child poverty rates. While some countries have made progress, many are still falling short of their 2030 child poverty reduction targets.

In 2024, the average share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) across the EU stood at **24.2%**. However, several countries are above the EU average, including **Bulgaria (35.1%), Spain (34.6%), Romania (33.8%), Italy (27.1%), and Malta (25.9%)**. Notably, even in countries with relatively strong welfare systems, such as **Austria** and **Finland**, inflation and rising living costs have contributed to an increase in child poverty. In some cases, such as **Croatia, Sweden, and Malta**, the AROPE rate for children has risen between 2023 and 2024, reversing previous positive trends.

A common challenge identified is the **limited impact of social transfers** in reducing child poverty. For example, in **Cyprus**, social transfers (excluding pensions) reduced poverty by only 30.5%, below the **EU average of 34.4%**. This highlights the need for stronger, more targeted income support and social protection measures for families with children.

There is a consistent link between **family structure, parental education and poverty risk**. Children living in single-parent households or with parents who have not completed secondary education are far more likely to experience poverty. In **Hungary**, nearly **70%** of children whose parents have low educational attainment are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Similar patterns are evident in **Estonia, Luxembourg, and Slovenia**, where the AROPE rate for children with low-educated parents is above the EU average.

Member States are implementing a wide range of **policy interventions under the European Child Guarantee**, many of which are supported by **ESF+ and RRF funding**. Key areas of focus include improving access to early childhood education and care, expanding school meal programmes, investing in community-based services, and tackling housing deprivation. For instance, **Romania** has allocated €1.9 billion in ESF+ funds to support 350,000 children, while **Poland** has committed over €1.3 billion through ESF+ and the RRF to create over 100,000 new childcare places and improve access to services for children with disabilities.

Some countries are demonstrating **notable practices**. **Slovakia** has significantly expanded its **school meal subsidy programme**, reaching nearly half a million children in 2023. **Finland** implements the ECG through universal services such as free school meals and leisure activities. **Portugal** has reported improvements in access to early childhood education, particularly in outermost regions, though challenges remain in inclusive education and healthcare access. **The Netherlands** is investing in early childhood development and social innovation to reduce disparities, although access remains unequal for children in poverty.

Despite these efforts, **significant gaps remain**. Access to childcare is particularly low among disadvantaged children in several countries. In **Poland**, for example, only **1.6%** of children under three at risk of poverty were enrolled in formal childcare in 2024. Moreover, many countries continue to struggle with **structural and regional inequalities, institutional complexity, and data gaps** that undermine the full implementation of the ECG. In **Spain**, despite adopting a national poverty strategy, child poverty remains persistently high, and access to minimum income support is limited by administrative barriers.

### Key Takeaways

*While the **European Child Guarantee and ESF+** have stimulated policy development and funding for inclusion of the most vulnerable children, **progress is fragmented and insufficient**. Meeting the EU's 2030 targets will require Member States to reinforce their efforts, strengthen coordination, and ensure that investments are reaching the most vulnerable children. Targeted, child-focused policies—combined with adequate funding, effective monitoring, and inclusive service delivery—are essential to break the cycle of poverty and promote equal opportunities for all children across the EU.*

## 5.2 Early childhood development

Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) remains highly variable, with stark disparities between Member States and between different socio-economic groups. **For children under the age of three, the EU average participation rate stands at 39.2%, yet several countries such as Czechia (7.3%), Slovakia (5.1%), and Romania (7.3%) fall far below this benchmark.** In contrast, **Denmark (62.9%), Slovenia (57.8%), and Luxembourg (60.0%)** are among the highest performers. For children aged three to the start of compulsory education, most countries are approaching or exceeding the **EU average of 94.6%, with Spain (97.7%), Latvia (96.1%), and Portugal (96.3%) standing out, while Romania (75.7%) and Czechia (85.3%) continue to lag behind.**

A pervasive issue across the EU is the **participation gap between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) and their more advantaged peers.** France reports a particularly wide gap of 41.6 percentage points, followed by **Malta (24.2 p.p.)** and the **Netherlands (35.2 p.p. for children aged 0–3).** This disparity reflects structural access barriers such as **affordability, geographic availability, and insufficient outreach to disadvantaged communities.** These gaps are not just statistical—they represent a lost opportunity for early intervention, which is critical for reducing inequality and improving long-term educational outcomes.

A second major challenge is the **widespread shortage of qualified ECEC staff.** **Germany** alone faces an estimated shortfall of up to 367,000 professionals, while **Finland** lacks approximately 6,000 ECEC teachers, with the Helsinki area being especially affected. Similar staffing crises are reported in the **Netherlands, Bulgaria, Italy,** and other Member States. These shortages **limit the availability and quality of ECEC services** and jeopardize the goal of universal access.

**Regional disparities further exacerbate inequalities.** In **Italy,** participation rates in formal childcare for children aged 0–2 vary from over 33% in central and northern regions to just 13.2% in Campania and 13.9% in Sicily. Similar patterns are evident in **Spain, Portugal,** and **Romania,** where rural and poorer areas face persistent under-provision of services. In several countries, low ECEC coverage is also closely linked to low female labour market participation. For example, in **Poland,** 94% of non-working mothers wish to return to work, but 70% cite poor work-life balance due to inadequate childcare.

**Quality of care is another concern.** In **Hungary,** a series of policy changes have lowered qualification requirements for ECEC staff, leading to questions about service quality. In **Luxembourg,** a disconnect between ECEC language instruction (in French and Luxembourgish) and primary education (in German) is creating early learning challenges, particularly for multilingual and migrant families. Even in high-participation countries like **Denmark and Finland,** **municipalities report uneven quality and staffing difficulties.**

On the positive side, **many countries are actively investing in ECEC expansion and reform.** **Estonia** and **Lithuania** are passing legislation to guarantee a legal entitlement to childcare from an early age. Italy has shifted from a decentralised, call-for-tender model to a more direct, top-down approach to target municipalities most in need. **Spain** is investing in 60,000

new ECEC places by 2025, with a particular focus on high-poverty and rural areas. EU-level funding instruments such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) are playing a crucial role in supporting these reforms. In **Greece**, ECEC participation is being supported by EU cohesion policy funds (notably ESF+) and the RRF. **Poland's** government has also taken steps to support families with expanded parental leave entitlements introduced in April 2023, and the **“Active Toddler” and “Active Parent” programmes** aim to improve access to early childhood education and care (ECEC).

#### Key Takeaways

*Despite progress, achieving equitable, high-quality, and universal access to early childhood education and care across the EU remains a major policy challenge. Member States must continue to **address workforce shortages, reduce socio-economic and regional disparities, and improve the inclusiveness and quality of services**. Only then can ECEC fulfil its promise as a key driver of child development, gender equality, and long-term social cohesion.*

### 5.3 Education

**Mixed educational performances can be seen across the EU.** While reforms are underway in many Member States, significant challenges remain — including declining basic skills, widening socio-economic disparities, the influence of social background on educational outcomes, teacher shortages, and rural-urban divides. These factors are undermining educational equity and threatening the EU's long-term goals for competitiveness and social cohesion.

**Underachievement in mathematics, reading, and science is on the rise in a majority of countries.** In **Cyprus**, for example, 60.6% of 15-year-olds underperform in reading, and an **alarming 40.3% underachieve in all three core subjects**. **Bulgaria** reports over 50% of students lacking basic proficiency in every area, and **Romania's** figures are similarly high, with 48.6% of students falling short in mathematics and 45% of rural children outside the formal school system. In **Greece** the share of top-performing students in all three subjects tested by PISA is among the lowest in the EU. These trends represent a **significant departure from the EU's strategic targets** and pose **risks to individual life prospects** and national economic resilience.

Socio-economic status continues to be the most powerful predictor of student achievement across the EU. In **Hungary**, 54.9% of disadvantaged students underperform in mathematics, and **58.7% of Roma students drop out of school early**. Educational systems that feature **early academic tracking and school segregation**, such as those in **Belgium, Czechia, and Sweden**, tend to **exacerbate inequalities**. Despite various initiatives, these structural barriers remain deeply embedded.

**While addressing underachievement is a top priority, several countries also face a drop in the share of high-achieving students.** **Finland, Germany, and Portugal** have all seen

declines in top performance levels, while **Spain** and **Sweden** have stagnated since 2012. In **France**, despite average overall scores, the proportion of top-performing students remains below the EU average. This downward trend raises concerns about future innovation capacity and the development of high-level skills in the EU workforce.

Although some Member States have made **progress in reducing early leaving from education and training (ELET)**, the EU average remains too high. **Spain** continues to struggle with a national ELET rate of 13%, with some regions recording between 15% and 26%. **Romania** shows extreme rural disparities, where the ELET rate reaches 26.5%. **Finland's** ELET rate rose to 9.6%, surpassing the EU average for the second consecutive year. **Vulnerable groups**—such as **Roma students** in **Hungary** and foreign-born youth in **Finland**—are **disproportionately affected**.

Across the EU, the **shortage of qualified teachers** is a growing concern. **Germany** projects a shortfall of up to **40,000 teachers by 2035**. In **Slovenia**, 42% of students are enrolled in schools where teaching is affected by staff shortages. **Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Sweden** all report critical gaps in rural areas and in special needs education. These shortages threaten the successful implementation of educational reforms and the maintenance of quality standards.

Children in rural or remote areas continue to face significant educational disadvantages. In **Romania**, the performance gap in mathematics between rural and urban students is 119 points. **Lithuanian** urban students outperform their rural peers by 71 points. **Luxembourg** reports that **only 32.2% of rural children live within 15 minutes of a primary school**, compared to 83.8% in urban areas. These geographical disparities reflect **uneven investment and access**, with long-term implications for equality of opportunity.

Despite challenges, several Member States are **undertaking ambitious reforms, often supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, and other EU instruments. **Portugal's** TEIP and Escola+ programmes focus on inclusive education and learning recovery. **Lithuania's** Millennium Schools initiative aims to close regional gaps through structural reform. **Czechia** and **Spain** are introducing curriculum reforms and tutoring to support low-performing students. **Poland** is preparing a comprehensive curriculum reform for 2026, with a focus on inclusive and transversal skills. **Sweden** has implemented free textbook access and added **AI to the secondary school curriculum**.

The disparities in educational outcomes are stark. In **Hungary**, Roma students have an early school leaving rate of 58.7%. **In Romania, 45% of rural students are not enrolled in school at all**. In **France**, 49.4% of disadvantaged students lack basic skills. In **Finland**, 57.2% of foreign-born students are underachieving. **Latvia** stands out for having the smallest socio-economic performance gap in math among all Member States.



### Key Takeaways

***Education** plays a vital role in children's lives and their future prospects. We welcome the detailed analysis of education in the 2025 Spring Package, which is also aligned with the Union of Skills flagship initiatives. However, Member States should prioritise more coordinated national and EU-level action to reverse declining educational performance, strengthen equity and resilience in education systems, and ensure that all children are equipped (including digital devices and digital literacy) for a rapidly changing world.*

## 5.4 The most vulnerable groups of children such as children with a migrant and ethnic background, including Roma

The 2025 European Semester Spring Package reveals **persistent and widespread inequalities affecting children with migrant and ethnic backgrounds**, particularly Roma children, across the EU. These inequalities are evident in **educational outcomes, access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), and exposure to poverty and segregation**.

In nearly all countries, **children from migrant and disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face significant educational challenges**. In **Austria**, nearly half of children from such backgrounds underachieve, especially in mathematics. The early school leaving rate among foreign-born students stands at 15.2%, more than double the 6.2% rate among native-born students. **Denmark** shows a similar trend: although the overall performance is high by EU standards, underachievement in mathematics reaches 46% among students born abroad. In **France**, socio-economic status and immigrant background remain strong predictors of educational outcomes, with underachievement rates significantly above the EU average for disadvantaged students. In **Spain**, the child poverty rate is **29.2%, well above the EU average of 19.3%**, and children from migrant or Roma backgrounds are among the most affected.

Despite efforts to promote inclusion, **many Roma children remain in segregated or substandard educational settings**. In **Bulgaria**, 64% of Roma children aged 6–15 attend schools where all or most pupils are Roma. In **Czechia**, although 'practical' schools for Roma were formally abolished, **many Roma children continue to be placed in reduced-curriculum classes** intended for children with disabilities. The European Committee of Social Rights ruled in early 2025 that **Czechia violated the European Social Charter** by failing to protect Roma families from discriminatory housing and eviction practices. In **Slovakia**, 65% of Roma children study in highly segregated school environments, and in **Romania**, half of all Roma children attend segregated schools. **Hungary** also reports high rates of early school leaving among Roma and other disadvantaged groups.

**Language barriers and unequal access to early childhood education further hinder integration and learning**. In **Sweden**, participation in ECEC is significantly lower for children born abroad (75%) compared to native-born children (96%). In **Austria**, schools face challenges in providing adequate language support due to limited resources. Encouragingly, some countries are taking steps to address these issues. **Slovenia** will implement a revised

ECEC curriculum in the 2025/26 academic year, designed to enhance quality, foster inclusion, and promote multilingualism and multiculturalism. The reforms will also improve access for vulnerable groups, including Roma children.

**Several Member States are leveraging EU instruments such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) to implement targeted interventions.** In **Czechia**, RRF funds are supporting the development of a funding index for disadvantaged pupils and the launch of school support programmes. In **Poland**, the AMIF supports a range of integration measures, including language courses, civic education, and housing support through "**one-stop shops**" for migrant families. **Slovakia** has implemented a multidimensional project targeting Roma settlements, involving over **16,000 beneficiaries and providing employment, counselling, and educational support**. **Hungary's** flagship initiative targets the 300 most deprived villages with high Roma populations through integrated education, health, and employment services.

**Some positive developments emerge** from the 2025 Semester. **Czechia** reports relatively successful integration of Ukrainian refugee children, many of whom have quickly gained language skills and enrolled in mainstream schools. In **Slovenia**, measures are being supported to integrate immigrants to the education system through language learning for children and their parents. **Poland's** multi-sectoral integration support for vulnerable groups, especially Ukrainian migrants, provides a promising model for inclusive public services.

#### Key Takeaways

*The Spring Package highlights a clear and concerning trend: **segregation, poverty, and educational disadvantage remain deeply entrenched for many children with migrant and Roma backgrounds across Europe**. While EU funding is enabling several countries to introduce targeted reforms, **implementation remains uneven**. Language acquisition, early education access, and combating school segregation must be prioritized to ensure inclusive early childhood development. Bridging the **gap between policy ambition and practical outcomes** will be essential if Member States are to meet the EU's child rights and social inclusion targets.*

### 5.5 Deinstitutionalisation and community-based care services for children

Member States should **transition away from institutional care models toward more community-and family-based alternatives**, in alignment with EU priorities on deinstitutionalisation and social inclusion. However, progress is uneven - **only six countries reported progress in their 2025 Country Reports**, and structural challenges remain, particularly in legislative reform, infrastructure transformation, and data monitoring.

**Lithuania** demonstrates one of the **most comprehensive approaches to deinstitutionalisation**. With **over €175 million in ESF+ funding**, the country is implementing programmes to support at least 3,300 people with disabilities, provide community services for 5,400 vulnerable children, and offer comprehensive family services to 75,000 people. Recent reforms between 2023 and 2024 have focused on improving disability assessments and promoting labour market inclusion for people with disabilities—illustrating a coordinated and inclusive policy approach.

In **Spain**, the launch of a **national deinstitutionalisation strategy for 2024–2030** marks a significant policy shift. The strategy prioritizes empowerment and the quality of care for vulnerable groups, particularly children and persons with disabilities. Although details of implementation are not yet outlined in the available notes, this development indicates Spain's alignment with the EU's long-term care transformation agenda.

In **Poland**, the situation presents the **urgent needs**. The number of homeless children is rising sharply, with non-Polish-born children making **up 40% of the homeless child population in 2023**, compared to just 9% in 2019. Many of these children are still placed in institutional care or shelters for mothers and children. Nonetheless, €1.3 billion from ESF+ and RRF is being invested to create 100,000 new childcare places, including services tailored to children with disabilities.

**Czechia** faces persistent **challenges in its deinstitutionalisation process**. Legislative reforms have been slow to take effect, and the repurposing of institutional facilities is limited. A significant concern is the lack of comprehensive data collection, which undermines effective policy monitoring and planning. These structural issues risk **delaying the transition from institutional to family and community-based care** and may hinder compliance with country-specific recommendations.

**Croatia and Estonia are investing strategically in integrated care services**. In **Croatia**, €600 million from ESF+ is being directed toward social inclusion and community-based services, with €200 million specifically earmarked for personal assistance and teaching support for people with disabilities. **Estonia**, through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), is focusing on the creation of integrated service and wellbeing centres, blending healthcare and social services. This integrated model is expected to **improve the quality and accessibility of services for vulnerable populations**, including children in or at risk of entering alternative care.

### Key Takeaways

*Overall, these developments show that while **several countries are making headway in deinstitutionalisation and inclusive care reform—particularly through the support of ESF+, RRF, and ERDF funding**—critical gaps remain in prevention services, infrastructure transformation and equitable access.*



## 5.6 Children's mental health and well-being

Increasing concerns around children's mental health and well-being are noticeable across Member States. **A growing number of countries are recognising the complex interplay between environmental, social, and systemic health determinants**—particularly for vulnerable children—though gaps in access and service integration remain persistent challenges.

Several countries report **increasing health burdens linked to environmental and climate-related changes**, which disproportionately affect children. **Austria** is one of the countries sounding the alarm on this trend. The government has identified climate-driven health costs as a key budgetary risk, especially for vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women. In response, **Austria** is investing in early intervention and health promotion measures. Notably, it has **expanded the 'Early Aid' programme** targeting disadvantaged pregnant women and young families, and is developing a digital mother-child health platform to improve access to information and services. These efforts are backed by EU funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

In **Malta**, although unmet medical needs are nearly non-existent (0.1% in 2023), the **rising trend in childhood obesity** and declining healthy life expectancy are worrying signals. Environmental stressors such as air and noise pollution, combined with **Malta's** high car density, negatively affect children's well-being by limiting their access to safe open spaces and reducing autonomy, especially for vulnerable groups.

**Mental health issues remain critical**, particularly in countries with high suicide rates or limited mental health services such as **Estonia** which stands out for taking decisive action. In 2025, it launched its **first-ever Suicide Prevention Action Plan (2025–2028)** in response to having one of the **highest suicide rates in the EU**.

**Czechia** has implemented a targeted preventive initiative with the “Be Fit 24” programme, which supports children aged 6–11 who are overweight, with full financial coverage by health insurance funds. This signals a broader awareness of the connection between physical and mental health, particularly in early childhood.

In **Hungary**, youth mental health concerns tied to digital behavior—such as online gaming and gambling—have prompted EU-supported technical assistance. Through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), **Hungary** is receiving expert input for policy reforms targeting emerging digital-age mental health challenges among children and adolescents.

**Ireland** presents a cautionary example of systemic fragmentation. Despite public awareness and political commitments, **universal healthcare for children is still not fully implemented**. Free GP visits are limited to children under eight, with no defined timeline for extending access to older children. Children with complex health needs continue to face difficulties accessing quality care due to poor inter-agency coordination and fragmented services. Furthermore, delays in completing the new national children's hospital are further hampering progress toward integrated, child-centered healthcare services.

The 2025 Semester points to **an evolving but uneven landscape in children's mental health and well-being** across the EU. While some Member States are moving forward with structured plans and targeted investments—such as **Austria's** integrated early health strategy or **Estonia's** pioneering suicide prevention plan—others continue to struggle with fragmented systems and slow reform processes.

#### Key Takeaways

*Climate change, digital influences, and urban environmental stressors are emerging as significant health determinants for children, yet they are still insufficiently integrated into broader child health strategies in many countries. Comprehensive, cross-sectoral policies—focused on early intervention, prevention, and inclusive access—will be essential to improving children's mental health and overall well-being in the years ahead.*

### 5.7 Children's rights in the digital world, digital divide & environmental policies

Member States have shown growing efforts to ensure children's rights are upheld in an **increasingly digital and environmentally challenged world**. While progress is evident in digital infrastructure and skills development, substantial gaps remain—especially for vulnerable children in **rural areas or low-income households**. Similarly, **integrating sustainability into education systems remains uneven across the EU**.

Efforts to expand **digital access and bridge the urban-rural divide** remain a common priority, though results vary significantly by country. **Austria**, for instance, is investing in rural broadband connectivity through its Broadband Austria 2030 initiative, seeking to address digital exclusion driven by geographic barriers. **Poland** has achieved a 93% household internet connectivity rate as of 2023—up from 70% in 2012—yet significant disparities persist between urban and rural regions. **Sweden** matches the EU average for broadband coverage (90%), but **northern regions such as Övre Norrland lag behind at 83%**.

**Spain** is taking proactive steps to equip **240,000 classrooms with connected digital devices** by the end of 2025. This is a promising development in narrowing the digital divide in public and publicly subsidised schools. **Slovenia** has embedded digital literacy development into its 10-year national education programme (2023–2033), with a focus on reaching vulnerable groups.

Despite infrastructure improvements, **basic and digital skills acquisition among children remains a major issue, particularly in Eastern and Southern Europe**. In **Romania**, 74% of 14-year-olds lacked essential computer and information literacy skills in 2023, compared to an **EU average of 43%**. This is a serious concern for children's future educational and labour market outcomes. While reforms under **Romania's** 2023 education law and Recovery and

Resilience Plan (RRP) aim to address this gap—including investments in school digital infrastructure and teacher training—delays in implementation have weakened their impact

Similarly, **Hungary** reports that 37% of 8th graders perform poorly in digital literacy, and the country faces challenges in attracting students to STEM fields due to inadequate school curricula, outdated infrastructure, and low digital capacity among educators. EU funds are being used to equip schools and train teachers to address these structural weaknesses.

**Luxembourg**, despite progress in skills-based and digital education reforms, still struggles with inequality across school systems, highlighting the need for more equitable access to high-quality digital education.

**Progress on integrating environmental education into school curricula is mixed.** Latvia provides a stark example: while 61% of teachers have been trained on environmental sustainability, less than a third of schools offer 8th graders regular sustainability-related activities—well below the **EU-17 average of 48%**. Latvian students also rank among the lowest in sustainability knowledge within the EU.

**Poland** faces significant child-specific environmental risks such as air pollution and climate-related health threats, yet lacks a coordinated national preparedness strategy. The digital and environmental dimensions intersect here, as **vulnerable groups—particularly children—require both connectivity and clean, safe environments to thrive.**

In **Denmark**, a positive narrative emerges, where authorities are actively integrating green transition goals into national planning, ensuring children and youth benefit from sustainability reforms.

**Romania** is also working to mainstream sustainability into education through new strategies and programmes like Green Week, though knowledge levels among students remain low.

### Key Takeaways

*The 2025 Semester reveals that while **digital access is improving across the EU**, major challenges persist in translating connectivity into equitable **digital opportunities for children**—particularly those **in rural areas** or from **disadvantaged backgrounds**. Basic **digital literacy remains unacceptably low** in several Member States, putting at risk children's ability to participate fully in education and society. Similarly, although climate change and environmental degradation's impact on children are gradually recognised, the **integration of environmental sustainability into national education systems is inconsistent** and often insufficient. Addressing these gaps requires not only investment in infrastructure but also coherent strategies for upskilling teachers, modernising curricula, and ensuring no child is left behind in the digital and green transitions.*

## 6. Eurochild's Recommendations for 2026 European Semester

- **Mainstream children's rights within the European Semester**

To uphold the commitments of the European Pillar of Social Rights, we call for **every country to receive targeted recommendations on children's rights**. The European Semester provides a crucial mechanism to monitor and offer guidance to Member States, making it essential to integrate a strong focus on children's rights throughout the process.

- **Support the Social Convergence Framework with a child lens**

We welcome **the Social Convergence Framework** as a deeper, second-stage analysis of the countries to assess the risks and challenges to upward social convergence, preserve social fairness and ensure a cohesive society. Special attention should be given to ten Member States included in this framework—Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, and Romania—where child poverty and other child-related inequalities remain high. These cases require closer monitoring and dedicated follow-up action.

- **Continue comprehensive reporting on the European Child Guarantee (ECG)**

We welcome the strengthened analysis through the biennial reports and tracking of EU funding allocations, particularly through ESF+, across all Member States. In line with the Council Recommendation on the ECG, every Country Report should continue to include a summary of national implementation, highlighting progress achieved, detailing challenges, and an overview of allocations from ESF+ and other relevant EU funds.

- **Adopt a more targeted approach to investing in essential services for children**

While there are promising examples of **child-centred funding**, many Member States still face persistent challenges in education, such as limited ECEC capacity and shortages of qualified professionals. These gaps reduce participation, —particularly among disadvantaged children and negatively impact long-term outcomes. Although support for parents is important, more direct, child-focused investments are essential. Targeted funding to meet the specific needs of vulnerable children—such as Roma—will improve access to key services.

- **Address rural disparities in education**

Children living in rural areas often face unequal access to essential services, including education, leading to poorer educational outcomes. We welcome the inclusion of the “distance of residence from school” indicator, which offers valuable insights into rural children's access to schooling. We call for its systematic and expanded use across Member States to better inform policy and promote more equitable access to education.

- **Accelerate deinstitutionalisation and strengthen community-based care**

Some Member States have made progress in transitioning from institutional to community and family-based care. However, significant gaps remain, particularly in preventive support, accessible services, infrastructure, and sustainable funding. Stronger political commitment is needed to advance care reforms and ensure that new care models are sustainable.

- **Broaden the focus on under-addressed areas critical to children's well-being**

We urge a stronger emphasis on areas still underrepresented in the 2025 EU Semester Spring Package, **general health** and, in particular, **mental health** require more in-depth attention. Mental health challenges are increasing across EU Member States and have clear cross-sectoral impacts, yet early intervention and prevention often receive insufficient focus.

- **Tackle the digital divide and promote digital literacy**

The **digital divide** is widening and **digital literacy** is increasingly essential. Internet access is a fundamental right for children, and lack of access deepens educational inequalities. Digital literacy equips children to use technology safely and effectively for learning and communication, find reliable information online, think critically, and protect their privacy-skills that are essential for every child.

- **Embed intergenerational fairness in the European Semester**

The Semester should systematically assess **the long-term social and environmental impacts of national policies** to ensure intergenerational fairness. Member States should be encouraged to adopt governance models and policies that protect future generations, ensuring that climate mitigation efforts do not shift burdens onto children and young people, but instead advance a just and sustainable transition.

- **Strengthen stakeholder participation as a cross-cutting principle**

We welcome recommendations that call for **the systematic involvement of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders** to ensure broad ownership and effective implementation. All Member States should be advised to establish meaningful and effective structured mechanisms for stakeholder participation.

## Annex

Mentioned areas by country in the 2025 European Semester Spring Package's Country Specific Recommendations	
Areas	Mentioned by country
Child poverty	ES, FR
Poverty, social protection, energy poverty, child related tax deduction, efficiency of child benefits EE, reform of social services, inclusion of disadvantaged groups (persons with disabilities and single parents) work life balance and flexible work arrangements	BG, CZ, HR, CZ, EE, EL, FI, HU, IE, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK, ES
Child care	AT, CZ, FR, DE, EL, IT, PL, RO, SK, ES
Inclusiveness of education minorities and migrants, prevention of early school dropouts	AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, HU, IT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SK, SL, ES, SE
Community-based care and health care	HR, FI, LT, LV, PL, SL
Stakeholders' involvement	SK, SL
Affordability of housing	CY, DK, HU, IE, LV, LT, ES

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