

# Eurochild's 2026 Conference on Child Protection Systems

## #EurochildConf Speakers

### Bios

#### Featured Speakers



**Sandra Aigner-Accardo** is Project Manager at the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), overseeing the “Towards integrated child protection systems” project and co-author of Towards Integrated Child Protection Systems - Challenges, promising practices and ways forward. Previously, she served as Programme Officer providing training and capacity building expertise to FRA’s projects across various areas of work, including on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Her work spans children’s rights, protection and participation, human rights education, professional training and youth participation. She holds an MA in European Economy and Business Management. She trained in children’s rights and protection at the University of Geneva.



**Elizabeth Canavan** is Assistant Secretary General in the Department of the Taoiseach, where she leads the Social Policy and Public Service Reform Division. She serves as Secretary to several Cabinet Sub-Committees, Deputy Chair of the National Economic and Social Council, and is a member of key public service leadership bodies. She has previously served as Assistant Secretary General and Acting Secretary General in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Chief Executive Officer of the Adoption Authority of Ireland, and Deputy Director of the National Children’s Office. She is a native of Galway and a graduate of Dublin City University and the Institute of Directors.



**Anne Kayser** joined the Council of Europe’s Children’s Rights Division in January 2024. As Secretary of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child, she leads the coordination of standard-setting initiatives and the review of national legislation to advance the protection of children’s rights across Council of Europe member states. Anne has over 20 years of experience working for the government of Luxembourg on human rights and international issues, including diplomatic postings in Strasbourg and Brussels. Since joining the Council of Europe in 2020, Anne has focused on protecting the rights of migrants and refugees, including children, before taking on her current role promoting children’s rights.





**Ewa Bożena Kopacz** is a Polish Member and Vice-President of the European Parliament. Formerly Prime Minister of Poland (2014–2015), Minister of Health, and the first woman to serve as Marshal of the Sejm, she has been the European Parliament’s Coordinator on Children’s Rights since 2019 and was reappointed in 2024. Since 2024, she has also chaired the Parliament’s High-level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity. Before entering politics, she worked as a paediatrician and general medical practitioner.



**Dr. Athena Michaelidou** is the Minister of Education, Sport and Youth of Cyprus. A graduate of the Cyprus Pedagogical Academy and the University of Thessaloniki, she holds an M.A. in Education from the University of Manchester and a PhD in Educational Studies from the University of London, specialising in educational research and evaluation. Her distinguished career spans roles as a public-school teacher, professor of pedagogy, Director of the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, and Acting Permanent Secretary in both the Ministry of Education and the Deputy Ministry of Culture.



**Sonia Vila Núñez** is an Expert in the Cabinet of Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu, where she works on the Preparedness Union Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, social inclusion and social protection policies, and the forthcoming Anti-Poverty Strategy. She has worked in the European Commission since 2005 in roles across Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Economic and Financial Affairs, and the Secretariat-General, contributing to the European Pillar of Social Rights and serving in senior coordination and advisory positions, including leading I.D.E.A., the Commission’s internal think tank, from 2021 to 2024.



**Clea Hadjistephanou Papaellina** is Deputy Minister of Social Welfare of the Republic of Cyprus. She previously served as President of the Council “FONI” and has held senior leadership roles in national and international sports and Olympic organisations, including the European Olympic Academies and the Cyprus Sports Organisation. She has served as academic staff at the University of Cyprus and has long-standing experience in Olympism, Olympic education, and sports governance at both national and international levels. She holds degrees in Physical Education from the University of California, Berkeley, California State University, Chico, and a PhD from the University of Athens.

## **Contributors**

**Bruce Adamson** is a human rights lawyer specializing in children's rights, with over 25 years of experience across national, European, and international levels. He has held leadership roles in major children's rights organizations, including as Scotland's Children and Young People's Commissioner (2017-2023) and Chair of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC). He has advised on UN, EU, and Council of Europe projects, focusing on child participation, policy reform, and legal advocacy. His expertise spans governance, strategic litigation, and media engagement, making him a strong advocate for children's rights.

**Dr. Stefanos Alevizos**, PhD, M.Ed., is a Psychologist and Postdoctoral Researcher specializing in child protection, mental health, and youth vulnerability. His work operates at the intersection of evidence-based research, frontline practice, and policy-making, with a focus on preventing violence and digital risks. He is a Researcher at the Laboratory of Restorative Justice and Mediation of Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, where he contributes to the study of alternative justice systems and conflict resolution. Parallel to his academic role, he serves as a Senior Researcher at IASIS NGO, leading the design and implementation of large-scale international projects (Horizon Europe, AMIF, Erasmus+) that bridge academic inquiry with real-world social interventions. With extensive clinical and field experience, Dr. Alevizos focuses on child safeguarding, youth delinquency, and trauma-informed care. He also serves as the Scientific Lead of the international conference "Connect to Protect – Children & Youth at Risk" (Athens, 2026). His mission is to develop rights-based, integrated systems that address the complex needs of young people in contemporary digital and social environments.

**Zhaklina Andonova** is a PhD psychologist with over 15 years of experience in social and clinical practice. She currently serves as a Program Manager at Concordia Bulgaria Foundation, where she leads and develops social services for children, youth, and families at risk. She has extensive experience as a psychologist, project expert, and researcher, contributing to national and international initiatives focused on child justice and child protection. Her work includes providing psychological support, counseling, and therapy to vulnerable groups.

**Darren Bird** is an international Children's Rights consultant with over 30 years' experience advancing child participation, safeguarding, and rights-based practice. He works independently with governments, NGOs, and international organisations, including the Council of Europe, Eurochild, UNICEF, Save the Children, and the Learning for Well-being Foundation, delivering training, strategy, and participatory programmes worldwide. Darren has held senior leadership roles such as Executive Director of CATS (Children as Actors Transforming Society) and Programme Director for Peace and Leadership with Initiatives of Change International, leading multicultural teams and globally recognised training programmes. He was also Chief Executive of Funky Dragon, Wales' national children and young people's parliament, working closely with young people and government to embed children's rights in public policy. His work spans Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and he is widely regarded for his expertise in empowering children and young people as active agents of change.

**George Bogdanov** is the Executive Director of the National Network for Children, Bulgaria. He holds a PhD in Sociology, Anthropology, and Art Science from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He has extensive experience working with civil groups, NGOs, the Roma community, and other isolated communities through community-development approaches. George has served as a consultant for Charity Know How (UK), UNICEF, and the World Bank. He served on Eurochild's Management Board from 2010–2017.

**Lena Budach** is a Project Manager in the programme "Education and the Next Generation" at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. Her professional focus lies on issues related to education, participation and young people. Her work therefore aims to strengthen the voices of children and young people and to address their needs.

**Chris Callender** qualified as a solicitor in 1997 and began his career in criminal defence, specialising in representing children and young people. In 2002, he joined the Howard League for Penal Reform to establish a legal service for children in prison, including a free advice line, and led judicial review work on children's rights in care and custody. In 2013, he returned to private practice, focusing on public law, housing, age assessments, and community care, with a strong emphasis on children's rights. He has represented victims of exploitation, pursued compensation claims against local authorities for failures in care, and acted in



inquests involving young people who died in mental health settings. He also speaks at professional events for lawyers and youth justice practitioners on improving access to justice for children and young people.

**Sérgio Costa Araújo** has been a Portuguese Eurochild member since 2009. In 2009 he was invited to write the Portuguese section of the Eurochild Survey on Children in Alternative Care, published in 2010. Since then, he has been an active member of the “Child in Alternative Care” working group. He collaborated intensively with Eurochild through the years in various projects and reports. He is currently Invited Adjunct Professor at the city of Porto Polytechnic School of Education and a Collaborator Researcher at inED – Center for Research and Innovation in Education. He works mostly in socio-educational areas in thematic domains that includes fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion, with particular attention in the links between children's rights, poverty and exclusion. He is an Independent Expert on child Rights and child poverty.

**Macarena Cespedes** has a Master's Degree in International Cooperation for Development and Humanitarian Aid and advanced training in Strategy Management and Social Leadership. Macarena has worked with organisations like Plan International, EDUCO, and the Spanish Association Against Cancer, leading international advocacy, fundraising, and social action initiatives. Currently, she is the Global Director of Advocacy, mobilisation and social research at EDUCO and Vice-President of the Spanish Children's Platform. She also co-chairs the Advocacy Task Force of the ChildFund Alliance and is part of the Joining Forces Content Group.

**Vasylyna Dybaylo** is a Ukrainian advocate for democracy, citizen participation, and strong civil society. From a young age, she was actively involved in community initiatives, including organising a children's theatre for child care institutions. She pursued Political Science at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and later earned a Master's in Public Administration and Governance. Her career has been dedicated to social development, volunteering, and child protection. She held leadership roles at GURT Resource Centre and later became Director of Partnership for Every Child (P4EC), focusing on child care reforms, social services, and family-based care solutions. She has managed major EU and UNICEF projects and contributed to national child protection strategies.

**Carly Elliott-Scott** is Assistant Director at Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights), leading programmes and participation to turn children's rights commitments into tangible action. She has over a decade of experience working alongside children whose rights are most at risk to shape change in Scotland.

**Aurel Graur** has over 12 years of experience in curriculum development and more than two decades in educational management, with a focus on social inclusion of vulnerable children and human rights in education. He previously worked as an Education Inspector at the Prahova County School Inspectorate in Romania. He is a former Council of Europe expert and trainer in “Media Literacy Based on Human Rights” within the Pestalozzi Programme, and has led international seminars on youth digital practices and online safety. He has also served as National Coordinator for European projects such as “Including Children Affected by Migration” (ICAM) and “Anti-Bullying Strategies in Schools.” Aurel currently contributes to the BECSR (Be Cyber Safe and Responsible) programme, promoting digital resilience and children's online safety, with a focus on protecting young people from cyberbullying, grooming, and online radicalisation while supporting their inclusion and wellbeing.

**Altin Hazizaj** is a distinguished lawyer and journalist hailing from Tirana, Albania, boasting over three decades of experience in the intersecting fields of public relations, media, and the advocacy of child and youth rights. Currently, he serves as the Executive Director of CRCA/ECPAT Albania, an organisation dedicated to advancing the rights and welfare of children. Hazizaj has made significant contributions through his extensive authorship of studies and reports focused on children's rights within the Albanian context. He earned his law degree from the University of Tirana's Law School in 1995 and is currently pursuing his PhD at the same institution, reflecting his ongoing commitment to academic and professional development.

**Diederik van Iwaarden** is an experienced partnership advisor with a strong passion for connecting people, ideas, and institutions around shared societal challenges. As (Inter)national Partnership Advisor for the strategic theme *Dynamics of Youth* at Utrecht University, he works closely with researchers to identify, build, and sustain impactful partnerships at national and international levels. With a background spanning international development, research policy, and funding strategy, Diederik brings extensive experience in partnership brokering, facilitation, networking, and lobbying. His career includes roles at Tilburg University, ICCO, and SOS Children's Villages, as well as supervisory and advisory board positions in European and global initiatives. Driven by curiosity and collaboration, Diederik is deeply committed to strengthening meaningful partnerships that support research, youth, and social change.

Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.



**Zsofia Karetka** is Communications Manager at Terre des hommes and oversees communications for multiple global and European programmes focused on child rights and safeguarding, including the Daphne-CHILD programme in partnership with Eurochild. She has a background in marketing and journalism and is an active volunteer with several civil society initiatives working on social issues.

**Ninetta Kazantzis** is an Educational Psychologist from Cyprus. In 1979, she contributed to national efforts for the International Year of the Child, leading to the creation of child protection committees across Cyprus. She played a key role in establishing the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children, later serving as its President. Since 2000, she has coordinated the Cyprus Children's Parliament, promoting child participation. She initiated the Cyprus Anti-Poverty Network and contributed at European level through EAPN. She is currently serving as Eurochild Treasurer.

**Louise King** has over 20 years' experience in policy and public affairs, specialising in children's rights. She rejoined the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) in 2015 as Director and later oversaw its merger into Just for Kids Law, where she now co-leads and leads policy work, including CRAE's activities. She previously worked at Save the Children, focusing on child rights governance, trafficking, and asylum policy, and has held leadership roles with Euronet – the European Children's Network and the Separated Children in Europe Programme. Earlier in her career, she worked with the British Youth Council and CRAE, campaigning on issues such as lowering the voting age to 16 and establishing a Children's Commissioner for England.

**Bohdan Malyniak**, DSc in Economics, is a Professor in the Department of Finance at S. I. Yuriy West Ukrainian National University in Ukraine. He specialises in public expenditure, with a focus on social budgeting, efficient public spending, and the development of social services and participatory budget management. He has over two decades of experience supporting reforms to the organisation and financing of social services in Ukraine and has contributed to key policy and legal frameworks, including standards and procedures for social service delivery and financing at the national level. Bohdan is a prolific author of academic publications, textbooks, and training materials on local finance and social service financing. He also has extensive experience delivering training for civil servants, experts, and NGOs on social service commissioning, deinstitutionalisation financing, and improving public spending effectiveness.

**Jessica Manjón** is a qualified social worker with 20+ years of experience working in a range of London Local Authorities, first as a child protection social worker, progressing to be an IRO (Independent Reviewing Officer), Child Protection Conference Chair, LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) and Fostering and Adoption Panel member. Ms Manjón is currently the national PSDP Project Coordinator.

**Laura Marchetti** is a lawyer and Research Assistant in the Department of Child Law and Health Law at Leiden University, where she contributes to research on children's rights, access to justice, and child-friendly justice. She has over ten years of experience in legal aid, case management, and children's human rights research. Before joining Leiden University, Laura worked in Chile's child protection system, representing children living in alternative care before family and criminal courts. In 2023, she completed the Master of Laws: Advanced Studies in International Children's Rights (LL.M.) at Leiden University.

**Artem Mazur** is the Founder and CEO of Kids of Ukraine Charitable Foundation. The foundation's mission is to help adolescents affected by the war recover their childhood by improving their emotional and psychological well-being through supportive and restorative programmes. Artem leads the organisation's strategy, partnerships, and programme development, and focuses on turning practice-based experience with adolescents into solutions that can be scaled through cooperation. In the workshop, he will combine a brief framing of current needs and what works with facilitation of co-creation in rotating triads and will synthesise outputs into concrete next steps and options for continued engagement.

**Anouk Moser** is a Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor at Lumos, where she leads European Union advocacy and works particularly closely with the Moldova and Ukraine teams. Her thematic focus is on promoting the rights of children with disabilities.

**Adrian Oros** holds a Master's degree in Children's Rights and has over 20 years of professional experience in child protection reform, with a strong focus on advancing family- and community-based care within social protection systems. He has been directly involved in the reform of the child care system in Romania, contributing to the transition away from institutional care



towards prevention, family support, reunification, and independent living solutions for young people leaving care. Adrian was a member of the Board of Directors of Eurochild, where he contributed to European-level advocacy and policy dialogue on children's rights and social protection systems.

**Mariia Pavlova** is a Project Coordinator at the Imago Foundation in Poland, specializing in support for migrant families. She coordinates projects in early childhood intervention and respite care, supporting parents and guardians of children with disabilities, educationally neglected children, and children in temporary care. She also serves as an advisor on developing accessible services for migrant families through the Service Accessibility Project. Since 2022, the Imago Foundation has collaborated with over 250 specialists and supported more than 2,500 migrant families.

**Desislava Petkova** is a MEAL and Safeguarding Expert at CONCORDIA Bulgaria Foundation with over 20 years of experience in child protection, safeguarding, monitoring and evaluation, and NGO project management. She leads the development and implementation of safeguarding mechanisms, child protection policies and MEAL systems, including data management, staff training, performance monitoring and organisational learning. Desislava previously worked as Projects Manager and Safeguarding Expert at Caritas Sofia and has held senior HR and coordination roles in international and national organisations. She is also an experienced trainer and facilitator at the national and international level.

**Rima Pušić** founded in 2022 the Association "Youth Club for Social Entrepreneurship," which engages young people in cultural, educational, and social activities. Her passions include travelling, reading, and music. She grew up in a warm and loving family alongside her brother and sister. Her family was a foster family that provided a strong example of solidarity, care, and meaningful values. Thanks to this experience, she deeply understands both the emotional and material needs of foster families. She is also aware of the urgent need for more foster families in Moldova, as there are still many children separated from their biological families who need the warmth, protection, and support of a caring home.

**Finn Reinhart** is a student from Germany currently pursuing a degree in education with the goal of becoming a teacher. As a former member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Young Experts Team, he actively advocated for stronger youth participation and representation. In addition, he is engaged in student representation as a member of the sports faculty's student council.

**Helen Saarnik** is the Head of Advocacy at the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, where she leads national and international advocacy on children's rights, child participation and child protection system development. Alongside her professional work, she is a PhD student in Social Work at Tallinn University, focusing on children's participation rights, and serves as the Curator of the Master's Curriculum in Child Welfare. She also delivers interdisciplinary seminars on children's rights and child welfare policies.

**Ulla Siimes** is Executive Director of the Central Union for Child Welfare (an NPN and a Founder member organisation of Eurochild). She is an experienced leader with over 10 years of experience in leading NGO's in Finland (CUCW, Finnish Parents' League, Teacher Student Union of Finland). She is a strong defender of children's rights and has done advocacy work and policy influencing related to children and families for over 10 years. She is a music teacher by background, but has worked almost her entire career in non-governmental organizations (NGO activities, development) and educated herself as a leader.

**Ann Skelton** is a former Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. She is a Professor of Law and holds the Chair on Children's Rights in a Sustainable World at the University of Leiden, and the UNESCO Chair in Education Law at the University of Pretoria. She established the strategic litigation work at the Centre for Child Law, and appeared as counsel in numerous landmark cases in the South African Constitutional Court. She is an internationally recognised child right expert and has won several awards, including the Honorary World's Children's Prize.

**Iskra Stoykova** is a human rights expert with over 20 years of experience in social inclusion, child wellbeing, and policy advocacy, specialising in the design and management of complex multi-partner initiatives. She has led national campaigns and EU- and donor-funded programmes addressing poverty and inequality. She coordinates the We Care Network, a national platform improving access to services for young children and families and advancing policy reform in Bulgaria. Her work has contributed to key policy changes, including free prenatal care for vulnerable women, free medicines for children aged 0–7, and



legal reforms enabling people in informal housing to obtain official addresses. She currently leads efforts to pilot municipal coordination mechanisms for preventing family separation and supports the integration of evidence-based home visiting services for vulnerable families with young children.

**Francesca Stuer** has over 25 years of international experience in social and health sector development, specialising in child protection, social welfare systems strengthening, workforce development, alternative care, family strengthening, and evidence-based parenting programmes. She is known for her consultative approach, working closely with governments and civil society to translate policy into effective, evidence-informed programmes. She has led and contributed to research, evaluations, and system assessments across multiple regions, including Europe, Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and Africa, covering areas such as child protection, violence prevention, and social protection systems strengthening. Francesca has supported the development of national and global policy frameworks for UNICEF and WHO and has extensive experience leading multidisciplinary, multinational teams. She holds a Master's degree in Commercial Sciences and a nursing diploma, is fluent in English, French, and Dutch, and is based in Belgium.

**Anna Tilli** works as a Senior Advisor at the Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), an umbrella organisation that advocates for children's rights and develops child welfare systems at national and international level. Her expertise is in child protection and alternative care, and she contributes to the organisation's advocacy work and the development of child welfare. She holds a Master of Social Sciences, is a licensed social worker, and has a specialisation degree in structural social work.

**Evgeniya Toneva** is a PhD candidate in Social Work and Social Policy. Ms. Toneva possesses over a decade of professional experience in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and interventions focused on alternative care, children's rights, and social work with families at risk. Since 2017, she has served as a researcher at the Know-How Centre for Alternative Care for Children (KHC) at the New Bulgarian University, where she coordinates the research efforts for two major national studies on Bulgaria's deinstitutionalisation reform. Furthermore, she has led numerous evaluations of models and programs aimed at supporting vulnerable children and families. Her most recent contributions include the 2024 study on the drivers of family separation in Bulgaria, and she is currently engaged in ongoing research identifying promising practices for the prevention of child-family separation.

**Anneli Valner** works at the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, where she coordinates trainings, seminars and professional exchange for child protection practitioners. She has a background in frontline child protection work and actively collaborates with member organisations, including the Estonian Association of Child Protection Workers. She is also a co-author of *Implementation of the Child's Right to Participate - a Guide for Meaningful Involvement of Children* (Saarnik & Valner, 2024). In the guide, Anneli contributed a practitioner-focused chapter supporting meaningful child participation in child protection casework, drawing on best practices of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

**Julien Vangeertsom** dedicated his career to building a better world, working as a teacher, trade unionist, and later a civil servant. He promoted strong dialogue, notably as chair of Belgium's federal administration for social integration. During the 2010 Belgian Presidency of the EU, he focused on combating child poverty and improving child wellbeing, organizing the "Who CARE's?" conference with King Baudouin Foundation and Eurochild. After retiring in 2018, he became a consultant and remained active in Eurochild.

**Lucija Vejmelka** is an expert in child and youth safety, digital rights, alternative care, and child participation, with 20 years of experience. As an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, she combines academic research with policy development to enhance child well-being. She has authored numerous scientific publications and serves as Editor-in-Chief of Annual of Social Work. Her leadership extends to European Commission-supported projects, consultancy in foster care and child safety, and collaboration with the Croatian Safer Internet Center. She has contributed to child care policy development in Southeastern Europe through expert missions, including projects in Kazakhstan and North Macedonia. She was a founding member and President of FICE Croatia, and is now President of the Steering Committee.

**Bogomila Veleva** is a 21-year-old young person from Bulgaria with lived experience of child poverty and the social care system. She spent seven years in a crisis centre and family-type residential care together with her sisters, and, with the NGO support, has continued her education and employment. Today, Bogomila actively contributes to improving social services and opportunities for young people leaving care.



**Yaryna Volosko** is a Fundraising Manager at Kids of Ukraine with experience in international grant projects, fundraising, and coordination of social initiatives.

**Tanya Ward** is the Chief Executive of the Children's Rights Alliance in Ireland since 2012, with extensive experience in human rights, social justice, and policy advocacy. She has previously worked with the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, the Irish Refugee Council, and academic institutions, lecturing on international human rights. With multiple qualifications, including an LLM in Human Rights and executive education from Harvard Business Online, she has led major campaigns in Ireland on children's rights, education, and social inclusion. She has also served on several national and international boards, including as Vice President of Eurochild since 2022.

**Diana Yovcheva-Koparanova** is an international development and advocacy expert with over 15 years of experience in child rights, child protection and social inclusion across Europe and humanitarian settings. As International Advocacy Expert at CONCORDIA Social Projects International, she leads the organisation's international advocacy strategy and represents CONCORDIA in EU and UN processes. Diana previously worked with UNICEF and UNHCR, leading and contributing to child protection responses for refugee and migrant children and coordinating emergency support during the Ukraine and Syria-related refugee crises.

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