2026 European Semester Spring Package

Eurochild Calls for Putting Children at the Heart of the European Semester to Ensure Sustainable Investment in Children's Rights

Eurochild
Putting children at the heart of Europe

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Abbreviations

AROPE: 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
ESF+: European Social Fund Plus
EU: European Union
MFF: Multiannual Financial Framework
RRF: Recovery and Resilience Facility
SCF: Social Convergence Framework
SWD: Staff Working Document

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 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 through a children's rights lens for more than a decade, providing critical insight into how EU economic and social policies affect children. This report presents Eurochild's analysis of **the 2026 Spring Package**, published by the European Commission on 3 June 2026, covering the Country Reports and the Country Specific Recommendations for all 27 Member States.

The 2026 Spring Package arrives at a difficult moment for children in Europe. In 2025, 24.3% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, up from 24.2% in 2024. Five years after the adoption of the European Child Guarantee, the EU is also moving further away from its 2030 target of lifting at least 5 million children out of poverty or social exclusion. Child poverty remains highest in **Spain** (33.8%), **Bulgaria** (33.1%) and **Romania** (32.4%), but the most striking development in 2026 is the deterioration in countries with historically strong welfare systems. In **Austria**, the AROPE rate for children rose by 4.4 percentage points to 25.3%, its highest level in over a decade, and **Ireland**, **Sweden**, **Finland**, **Estonia**, **Germany** and **Greece** all report rising child poverty. In most Member States, children face a higher risk of poverty than the general population; **Cyprus**, **Estonia** and **Lithuania** are among the few exceptions in this year's reporting.

The 2026 Country Specific Recommendations maintain and modestly extend the attention given to children. **France** and **Spain** have once again received dedicated recommendations **on child poverty**, and **Italy** now joins them with a recommendation calling for **improved social protection and access to social services** for people in vulnerable situations, **notably children**. Nine Member States are recommended to improve childcare or early childhood education and care, and most of the Member States receive recommendations on education (19), in line with the Union of Skills. Overall, the European Commission issued **the Anti-Poverty Strategy** related recommendations covering social protection, access to services, availability of social housing and tackle housing exclusion to 20 Member States – BG, CY, CZ, DE, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LV, NL, PL, RO, SK, SL.

At the same time, ECEC continues to be framed primarily as a means of raising women's labour market participation rather than as a right of the child, and children's health including mental health, and the deinstitutionalisation of children's care are absent from the recommendations altogether.

For the second consecutive year, the Country Reports include updates on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, together with allocations from ESF+ and other EU funds, an achievement that reflects years of advocacy by Eurochild and its members. **This practice was not applied consistently in 2026, as the Country Report for the Netherlands for example makes no reference to the ECG.** Across the reports, we find persistent gaps in access to ECEC for children at risk of poverty, declining basic skills, deepening teacher shortages and an ageing teaching workforce, rising school segregation of Roma children in several Member States, and a weakening capacity of social transfers to reduce child poverty. Areas critical to children's well-being, including children in alternative care, mental health, digital rights, impact of climate change on children and the right of children to be heard, receive little or no attention in most reports.

The wider policy context is also shifting. In 2026, nine Member States (**Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania** and **Finland**) were subject to the second-stage analysis under the Social Convergence Framework. The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy has begun to appear in Semester documents, with the reports for **Italy** and **the Netherlands** referring to it. Meanwhile, the negotiations on the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework will determine whether the funds that currently underpin the Child Guarantee, in particular ESF+, remain prioritised for social inclusion, earmarked for child poverty and accessible to those working for children.

We welcome the continued attention to children in the 2026 European Semester; nevertheless, much more needs to be done. Our recommendations include:

- ***Child poverty, the European Child Guarantee, and the use of EU funds, should be systematically prioritised and prominently reflected in both Country Reports and Country-Specific Recommendations.***
- ***Social protection systems and access to quality social services should be strengthened to reduce child poverty and remove barriers preventing families from accessing benefits and services.***
- ***Early childhood education and care (ECEC) should meet high quality standards and be accessible to all children, particularly those in vulnerable situations. ECEC indicators should measure disparities in access and participation between disadvantaged and more advantaged children.***
- ***The quality, inclusiveness and accessibility of education for all children should be a core priority of the European Semester.*** *In addition to academic performance, education systems should promote holistic learning by strengthening children's social, emotional and personal development.*
- ***Promoting children's digital inclusion, digital skills and equitable access to digital technologies should become a stronger priority.***
- ***Children's physical and mental health should be systematically assessed, with dedicated child-specific indicators introduced to better monitor health outcomes and access to services.***
- ***Stakeholder participation should extend beyond the social partners to ensure the meaningful involvement of civil society organisations and children throughout the European Semester process.***

2. What is the European Semester?

The European Semester 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 by the Spring Package, published on 3 June in 2026, which includes Country Reports for all Member States and Country Specific Recommendations based on the evaluation of national plans, contextualised within each Member State’s socio-economic landscape.

The Semester has changed considerably since its creation. It began as a largely economic and fiscal exercise, and social fairness only took on a more prominent role after the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017. The 2021 EPSR Action Plan introduced concrete EU-wide targets, including the commitment to lift at least 5 million children out of poverty or social exclusion by 2030. In the same year, the Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee foresaw that its implementation would be monitored through the Semester. Following sustained advocacy by Eurochild and its members, this commitment materialised in 2025, when every Country Report included for the first time a summary of national ECG implementation. The Semester has thus become one of the few instruments through which the situation of children in every Member State is assessed annually at EU level.

The European Semester links analysis to money and to reform: the Country Reports inform the programming of EU funds, including ESF+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and cohesion policy, while the recommendations guide national reforms and budgets. **Whether and how children appear in these documents therefore influences whether investment and policy attention reach them**. The Semester also connects children's rights to the EU's broader social framework, including the EPSR, the European Child Guarantee, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Union of Skills.

In this context, the European Commission also conducts a second-stage analysis under the Social Convergence Framework, which assesses risks and challenges to upward social convergence in Member States in order to preserve social fairness and ensure a cohesive society. In 2026, nine Member States were covered by this analysis: **Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania** and **Finland**. The framework covers labour markets, education and skills, and social policies.

3. Eurochild's analysis

This report provides an analysis of the 2026 Spring Package, which builds upon Eurochild's reflection on the Autumn Package prognosis for 2026, including the Country Reports and the Country Specific Recommendations for all 27 EU Member States, reviewed 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 and housing conditions. Recognising that children do not live in isolation, we also assessed how children are considered within the digital agendas, and we examined the extent of stakeholder and civil society participation, which is essential for inclusive and effective policymaking.

We took a closer look at seven key areas relevant to children's rights:

- Child poverty and social exclusion, the Child Guarantee and use of ESF+
- Early childhood development and early childhood education and care
- Education
- Children in alternative care and deinstitutionalisation
- Children's access to healthcare, including mental health and well-being
- Children's rights in the digital world, the digital divide and digital literacy
- Children's right to be heard and stakeholder participation

4. 2026 Country Specific Recommendations

The 2026 European Semester demonstrates a stronger integration of children's rights and social investment into both the recitals and Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) than in previous years. Child-related challenges are identified in the recitals of almost all Member States, although they are often framed through labour market participation, skills shortages or demographic challenges rather than children's rights. By contrast, only a smaller number of these challenges progress into concrete Country-Specific Recommendations.

The issue receiving the greatest policy attention is **education**, followed by **early childhood education and care (ECEC)**, **social protection**, and **support for disadvantaged groups**. Most recommendations continue to emphasise improving education systems, tackling teacher shortages and strengthening basic skills, while fewer Member States receive explicit recommendations on reducing child poverty or expanding social support services.

The European Commission issued **Anti-Poverty Strategy**-related recommendations covering social protection, access to services, availability of social housing and tackle housing exclusion to 20 Member States – BG, CY, CZ, DE, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LV, NL, PL, RO, SK, SL.

Child poverty is explicitly recognised as a major challenge in the recitals of **France, Spain, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria** and **Italy**, while poverty among vulnerable families, single-parent households or children is also highlighted in **Estonia, Ireland, Latvia** and **Croatia**. However, only **France** and **Spain** receive **explicit Country-Specific Recommendations to reduce child poverty**. **France** is encouraged to prevent and reduce child poverty by improving parents' access to employment, expanding access to quality ECEC for disadvantaged households and reducing territorial inequalities in access to services. **Spain** receives the strongest child-focused recommendation, calling for measures to tackle child poverty through better social protection, improved adequacy and coverage of social transfers, rebalancing public expenditure towards children and young people, and reducing regional inequalities in access to services. **Italy** and **Romania** receive broader recommendations to strengthen social protection and services for vulnerable groups, although only **Italy's** CSR mention including children.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the most frequently addressed child-specific policy area. The recitals identify insufficient availability, affordability or quality of childcare in **Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania** and **Slovakia**. Several reports also highlight persistent inequalities affecting disadvantaged children or children under the age of three. These concerns translate into explicit recommendations for **Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Romania** and **Slovakia**, while **Italy, the Netherlands** and **Poland** address childcare primarily as a measure to improve women's labour market participation rather than children's development and equal opportunities.

Education is by far the most common issue addressed in the CSRs. Nearly all Member States receive recommendations to improve basic skills, educational outcomes, teacher training or equity in education. Countries including **Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain** and **Sweden** receive recommendations addressing educational quality, inclusion or teacher shortages. Many recommendations specifically refer to **disadvantaged pupils**, children with migrant backgrounds, Roma children or children with special educational needs. **Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Slovakia** and **Sweden** receive recommendations promoting more inclusive education and better support for disadvantaged learners.

Social protection emerges as another important theme. The recitals identify weaknesses in the adequacy of benefits, access to services or support for vulnerable households in a large number of countries. However, only **Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania** and **Spain** receive recommendations to strengthen social protection or improve access to quality services. In most cases these recommendations target vulnerable households or disadvantaged groups rather than children specifically. **Italy, Romania** and **Spain** provide the strongest child-focused references by explicitly mentioning children or child poverty in the operative recommendations.

Social housing appears increasingly in both recitals and recommendations, although generally as a broader social policy issue rather than a child rights concern**. France, Ireland, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia, Cyprus and Hungary** highlight housing affordability or homelessness affecting families and vulnerable groups. Corresponding recommendations call for expanding affordable and social housing, improving housing supply or addressing housing exclusion, but only rarely make an explicit connection with children's well-being.

For next year's Country Specific Recommendations, greater attention should be given to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, with stronger links between the challenges identified in the recitals and the policy actions reflected in the Country-Specific Recommendations.

5. 2026 Country Reports

5.1 Child poverty and social exclusion, Child Guarantee, ESF+

Child poverty remains one of the EU's most pressing social challenges. Around one in four children is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with large disparities between Member States. Child poverty rates remain below 15% in countries such as **Slovenia** and **the Netherlands** but exceed 30% in **Bulgaria, Romania** and **Spain.**

Overall, progress towards the 2030 child poverty reduction targets is uneven. **Croatia, Cyprus** and **Romania** are making comparatively strong progress, while **Austria, Czechia, Finland, France, Malta, Poland, Slovakia** and **Spain** face substantial risks of missing their objectives. **Hungary** has not established a specific national child poverty reduction target, limiting political accountability.

Behind national averages lie even greater inequalities. **Roma children** remain the most disadvantaged group, with poverty rates reaching 96% in **Spain**, around 87% in **Slovakia** and over 70% in **Romania** and **Czechia. Children with a migrant background**, **children with disabilities**, those living in **single-parent households** and children whose **parents have low educational attainment** also face significantly higher risks of poverty and social exclusion. Rising housing costs, material deprivation and the limited poverty-reducing effect of social transfers continue to exacerbate these inequalities across many Member States.

A recurring structural weakness is the limited poverty-reducing impact of social transfers. This impact is particularly low in **Spain, Romania, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Bulgaria, Lithuania** and **Italy.** In several countries, family and child-related benefits remain insufficient, poorly targeted, difficult to access or inadequately adjusted to rising living costs. Administrative complexity and non-take-up also reduce effectiveness, as illustrated by the minimum-income and child-support schemes in **Spain**.

The European Child Guarantee has strengthened political attention to child poverty and encouraged reforms in education, nutrition, healthcare and family support. Positive developments include **the introduction or expansion of free school meals**. **Croatia** has introduced free school meals for all primary-school pupils. **Denmark** is piloting school meals and reducing parental childcare contributions while investing in additional childcare staff. **Portugal** has adopted an action plan covering free school activities, meals and health-related services. **Hungary** provides free meals at pre-primary and primary levels, while **Ireland** has expanded its Hot School Meals programme.

On the other hand, **adequate housing** is among the least effectively implemented pillars. **France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg** and **Slovakia** continue to face serious housing-related challenges affecting children. In **Ireland**, a large number of children require social housing, while in **France** homelessness among children has increased sharply.

Implementation is also weakened by **governance and monitoring gaps**. **Belgium** needs stronger cooperation between national, regional and local bodies. **Luxembourg** lacks sufficiently robust data to assess effective access to services. **Sweden** reports major data gaps concerning children with disabilities and children in care. **Greece** has not updated data on ECEC participation since 2019. **Germany's** decentralised system requires stronger implementation at state and municipal levels. In **Latvia** and **Lithuania**, access to services depends heavily on municipal capacity, leading to territorial inequalities.

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) remains the EU's main financial instrument supporting child poverty reduction and social inclusion. Significant investments have been allocated to education, social inclusion, food assistance and Child Guarantee-related measures across Member States.

Some Member States have made substantial and clearly identifiable allocations. **Spain** has allocated more than EUR 1.2 billion to measures supporting the Child Guarantee and families with children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. **Romania** has allocated approximately EUR 1.55 billion to early childhood education and education and EUR 1.76 billion to social inclusion and Child Guarantee-related measures. **Bulgaria** has allocated EUR 700 million to social inclusion and EUR 221 million to food and material deprivation. **Slovakia** has allocated EUR 646 million to inclusive education and EUR 274 million to Roma integration.

Germany has allocated more than EUR 2 billion to social inclusion, although only a relatively small share of its total ESF+ allocation is explicitly dedicated to combating child poverty. **France** has allocated approximately EUR 2.2 billion to social inclusion, but the available information does not clearly identify the share directly benefiting children.

Other Member States use smaller but more specifically targeted allocations. **Austria** dedicates more than one fifth of its ESF+ funding to combating child poverty. **Estonia** allocates funding specifically to child poverty and material deprivation. **Lithuania** supports child poverty reduction, inclusive education, social services and deinstitutionalisation. **Sweden** uses ESF+ funding for dropout prevention and extracurricular activities for vulnerable children. Ireland supports early school leavers through the Youthreach programme.

Nevertheless, links between ESF+ spending and Child Guarantee objectives are often insufficiently visible**, making it difficult to assess how much funding directly benefits children**. In several countries, EU funding compensates for underinvestment in national services rather than supporting sustainable structural reforms. Monitoring continues to focus primarily on expenditure and outputs instead of measuring improvements in children's lives.

Key Takeaways

Overall, the Country Reports show that reducing child poverty requires a stronger combination of adequate income support, accessible quality services and targeted investment in the most vulnerable children. The European Child Guarantee should become a fully integrated part of national social, education, health and housing policies, supported by clear governance, sustainable financing and robust monitoring. ESF+ should more explicitly identify investments contributing to Child Guarantee objectives and focus on measurable outcomes. Better disaggregated data and the meaningful participation of children and families are also essential to ensure that policies effectively reach those most in need.

5.2 Early childhood education and care

Participation in early childhood education and care for children under three averaged 40.5% across the EU in 2025, but disparities between Member States remain vast. **Denmark (67.2%)**, the **Netherlands** (66.5%), **France** (59.7%), **Portugal** (57.9%) and **Luxembourg** (56.4%, with the EU's highest participation from birth to compulsory school age at 82.5%) lead the field. At the other end, participation stands at **1.8% in Slovakia**, the lowest in the EU, 7.9% in **Czechia**, 11.4% in **Romania**, 21% in **Poland** and 21.1% in **Hungary**. In **Italy**, participation fell from 39.4% to 35.5%, reversing recent progress. In **Greece**, enrolment of children from age three to compulsory school age **was last reported for 2019**, when the country ranked last in the EU, and the **lack of more recent data** makes progress difficult to monitor.

Nearly every report invokes the quality of ECEC, but few Member States can point to a binding definition of what quality means. **Poland**, however, introduced **mandatory quality standards** in January 2026. **Bulgaria** is implementing **a new ECEC quality framework** with EU technical support, though fragmented provision and weak monitoring persist. **Czechia** has no unified ECEC standards, with a new framework programme applying to all kindergartens only from 2027. In **Denmark**, a national study found that only a small share of settings for three-to-five-year-olds provide high-quality learning environments, and a revision of the Daycare Act is under way. **Malta** plans to raise qualification requirements at a time when more than one fifth of childcare staff lack relevant pedagogical qualifications, **Romania** is developing quality standards and mentoring through the SU-ETIC project, and **Austria's** report suggests a compulsory quality framework to address uneven local provision. In practice, staff qualifications and monitoring systems are becoming the working definition of quality; a shared understanding anchored in the 2019 Council Recommendation on high-quality ECEC systems and the Child Guarantee is still missing.

Legal entitlements are expanding. Lithuania extended the guaranteed ECEC place to all two-year-olds from September 2025, and participation of children under three rose from 36.9% to 43.8%, overtaking the EU average. **Latvia** entitles all children over 18 months to a place, with participation at 45.1%. **Luxembourg** provides 20 hours of free childcare weekly and plans a place guarantee by 2030. **Germany's** legal right to all-day schooling for primary pupils applies from the 2026/2027 school year, although a quarter of schools signal they will not be able to offer all first-graders a place, and a supply gap of 300,000 childcare and kindergarten places remains. **Slovakia** will make pre-primary education mandatory from age four in 2027 and from age three in 2028, and **Cyprus** is gradually lowering compulsory entry to age four by 2031/2032. **Ireland** remains the outlier: there is no legal entitlement to a public ECEC place, free provision is limited to three hours per day, the lowest in the EU, and over 40,000 children under three are on waiting lists. Investment continues, with **Italy** creating over 150,000 new places through EUR 3.2 billion of RRF funding focused on underserved municipalities, **Poland's** 'Active Toddler' programme targeting 102,500 new places by 2029, **Hungary** expanding capacity from 46,000 places in 2017 to 68,800 in 2025, and **Portugal** expanding free nursery provision under the Creche Feliz programme.

Regional disparities and staff shortages threaten both access and quality. In **Italy**, under-three coverage ranges from 40.4% in the Centre to 19% in the South; in **Spain**, from 64.3% in Galicia to 29.9% in Ceuta; and in **Slovakia**, participation of children over three reaches 88.2% in the west but only 70.4% in the east. In **Poland**, provision ranges from 343 places per 1,000 children in Dolnośląskie to 187 in Warmińsko-Mazurskie. On staffing, western **Germany** may require between 51,200 and 88,400 additional ECEC staff by 2030. In **Sweden**, only 43% of ECEC staff are qualified teachers and 40% plan to leave the profession within five years, with shortages worst in settings serving disadvantaged and migrant-background children. **Ireland** reports exceptionally high work-related stress among ECEC staff, and **Lithuania's** rapid expansion is straining infrastructure and staffing.

The participation gap between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and their peers is the most consistent finding across the reports, and it is often largest in countries with high overall coverage. The **Netherlands** reports one of the largest income-related gaps in the EU, at 40.5 percentage points, and **France** a gap of 36 percentage points against an EU average of 20. In **Malta**, 59.5% of children at risk of poverty did not participate in ECEC at all in 2025, compared with 39.4% of other children, with entitlement anchored to parental employment rather than the needs of the child. In **Belgium**, only 1.9% of children under three in the AROPE group attended ECEC for 25 hours or more per week, against 35.4% of other children. In **Germany**, participation among disadvantaged children (13.8%) is half that of advantaged children (28.3%). In **Poland**, only 3% of children under three at risk of poverty were in formal childcare, in **Hungary** 9.7%, and in **Slovakia** fewer than 1% of Roma children under three attended early childcare.

These gaps represent a lost opportunity and low impact of the tools such as the European Child Guarantee for early intervention precisely where it would matter most. Expanding places without closing the participation gap risks widening inequality, as the countries with the highest overall coverage often show the largest divide between children at risk of poverty and their peers.

Key Takeaways

Access to ECEC is expanding through new legal entitlements and EU-funded investment, but children at risk of poverty remain systematically excluded, and quality standards addressed by a few Member States whereas it still lacks a binding definition in most Member States. Closing the participation gap for disadvantaged children and adopting enforceable quality standards should be the priorities of the next phase of ECEC reform.

5.3 Education

Basic skills in both natural sciences and languages are declining across most of the EU. In the **Netherlands**, the share of underachieving students almost doubled between 2012 and 2022 in mathematics and science, and increased two and a half times in reading. In **Slovenia**, underachievement rose from 16.4% to 24.6% in mathematics and from 17.9% to 26.1% in reading between 2018 and 2022. **Belgium** reports worsening performance in all three Communities, **Portugal** a rise of 6.4 percentage points in mathematics underachievement since 2018, and **Sweden** and **Denmark** rising underachievement across subjects. In **Poland**, the decline extends to advantaged students, whose share performing well fell from 72.1% to 64.8%. The most severe outcomes are found in **Cyprus**, where 40.3% of students underachieve simultaneously in all three tested subjects, the highest rate of severe underachievement in the EU, in **Bulgaria**, where around half of 15-year-olds do not reach minimum proficiency, and in **Romania** and **Greece**, where underachievement in mathematics exceeds 40%.

Socio-economic background remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement, which is how the cycle of poverty documented above continues into the next generation. In **Belgium**, only 16.6% of students from a low socio-economic background performed well in PISA 2022, compared with over 60% of advantaged students; in **Hungary** the figures are 12.2% against 60%, and in **Greece** only 7.1% of disadvantaged students perform well, against an EU average of 16.3%. In **Romania**, just

3.7% of disadvantaged students perform well in basic skills. In **Germany**, 46.6% of disadvantaged students failed to reach minimum proficiency in mathematics, up from 29.8% in 2015, in a system that separates educational pathways at around age ten, one of the earliest and most stringent in the EU. In **Czechia**, nearly half of disadvantaged students fail to reach basic proficiency in mathematics, with the report attributing the gap partly to early tracking and to **the segregation of Roma children**. The share of top performers is also falling, from 11.6% to 6.7% in **Portugal** and from 11.4% to 7.4% in **France** in mathematics, and to below 10% in all areas in **Poland**.

Early school leaving averaged 9.1% across the EU in 2025, with deep territorial divides. **Romania** records 15.5%, reaching 23.7% in rural areas against 4.6% in cities. **Spain's** rate fell to 12.8% but ranges from 3.6% in the Basque Country to 20.6% in Murcia, and **Portugal's** low national rate of 6.1% masks a rate of 21.1% in the Azores. **Germany's** rate of 13.1% is among the highest in the EU and rising against a falling EU trend. **Hungary's** rate fell to 9.3%, but young people in rural areas are over four times more likely to leave education early than those in cities. **Denmark's** rate rose to 10.0%, reaching 16.7% in rural areas, and **Latvia's** rose from 6.7% in 2022 to 8.8%. Rural disadvantage extends to performance and access: **Romania** has the largest urban-rural basic skills gap in the EU, urban students in **Lithuania** outperform rural peers by around 70 PISA points in each subject, and in **Cyprus** only 19.9% of children under 15 live within a 15-minute walk of a primary school, against an EU average of 33.7%.

Children with disabilities and special educational needs face some of the starkest gaps. In **Malta**, 42.1% of 18-to-29-year-olds with disabilities left school early and 45.2% of young people with activity limitations were not in employment, education or training in 2024. **Hungary** records an early school leaving rate of 41.2% and a NEET rate of 59.0% among persons with disabilities, both among the highest in the EU. In **Estonia**, pupils with special educational needs are more than twice as likely to leave school early, and 90% of vocational schools were found not to support them adequately. In **Slovakia**, children with special educational needs make up a third of pupils, yet support was provided to only 14% in 2024/2025. In **Poland,** the number of pupils in special primary schools is rising despite falling overall enrolment, and in Ireland the number of special educational settings has doubled since 2020, a trend the report notes **conflicts** with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and international evidence on inclusion.

School segregation of Roma children is rising in several Member States. In **Bulgaria**, the share of Roma children attending segregated schools increased from 64% in 2021 to 70% in 2024. In **Czechia**, 58% of Roma children attended a school where most pupils were Roma in 2024, up from 29% in 2016, with independent research identifying over 130 segregated schools, 78 of them Roma-majority. In **Slovakia**, the share rose to 66%, in Hungary 62% of Roma children aged 6 to 15 attend predominantly Roma schools, and in Romania 43% of Roma students attend segregated schools. **Segregation matters because it entrenches unequal outcomes, normalises exclusion and conflicts with the right to inclusive education; the Czech report itself calls full compliance with the Race Equality Directive essential, particularly in education**. Its consequences are visible in attainment: only 17% of young Roma in **Czechia** completed upper-secondary education in 2024, down from 38% in 2016, against 90% of the general population, while completion stands at 8% among young Roma in **Portugal** and 36% in **Spain**. In **Bulgaria**, 55% of Roma aged 18 to 24 left education or training prematurely, and in **Czechia** 48% of young Roma were not in employment, education or training. Exclusion begins early: Roma children's ECEC participation in **Czechia** is 48% against 85% for children generally, and in **Slovakia** fewer than 1% of Roma children under three attend early childcare, although participation of Roma children aged three to six has risen from 33% in 2020 to around 55%.

Children with a migrant background face several barriers to accessing education and receiving adequate support. In education, 64% of students born abroad in **Germany** underachieve in mathematics, nearly three times the rate of non-immigrant students, with similar gaps in **Denmark** (42.1% against 17.3%) and **Finland**, where underachievement among foreign-born students (57%) is one of the highest in the EU. In **Sweden**, migrant-background students are among the most concentrated in particular schools in the EU, leave school early at twice the rate of native-born peers, and six in ten pupils born abroad fail to reach basic digital proficiency. In Austria, 43.5% of young people with a migrant background attend schools for children with special educational needs, twice the share of their peers. In **Portugal**, the number of foreign-born students has almost tripled in six years to 157,000, around 14% of the total, with dropout rates three times higher than for Portuguese natives. In **Luxembourg**, language background has a greater impact on school results than socio-economic status.

Education system reforms are under way in Member States. Poland is rolling out a comprehensive curriculum reform from September 2026 to 2032, **Slovakia** introduces a new primary curriculum from September 2026, **Slovenia** revises its curricula from 2026/2027, and **Finland's** reformed Basic Education Act enters into force in August 2026 alongside an equality fund for areas with poorer outcomes. **Germany's** Startchancen programme (EUR 20 billion over ten years) targets 4,000 disadvantaged schools, the **Dutch** Masterplan for basic skills (EUR 2 billion) had reached 95% of students by 2025, Ireland established a new DEIS Plus scheme in March 2026 for the most disadvantaged schools, **Italy's** Agenda Sud targets 2,000 schools in the South, and **Spain's** PROA+ programme has been renewed until 2028. **Denmark** issued a national strategy against long-term absenteeism after finding that one in five pupils missed more than 10% of school days. **France** stands out negatively: over 4,000 teacher posts were suppressed in the 2026 budget, yet the 'Collège en progrès' programme has not been implemented, and progress on the education recommendations is rated limited.

Finally, teacher shortages and an ageing teaching workforce have become one of the defining structural risks of this Semester cycle. In **Portugal**, 60% of lower-secondary teachers are aged 50 or over, and an estimated 38,000 new teachers will be needed by 2034 while only around 20,000 graduates are expected to enter the profession. In **Latvia**, 58.8% of lower-secondary teachers are over 50 and 52.9% of teachers under 30 intend to leave within five years. In **Slovenia**, 55.1% of teachers over 50 intend to leave the profession and nearly 80% of basic schools employ at least one teacher without adequate qualifications. **Italy** and **Hungary** report that around half of their lower-secondary teachers are over 50, and in **Estonia** 27.8% of teachers are aged 60 or over, against an EU average of 10.9%. **Germany** projects a shortfall of 49,000 teachers by 2035 and **Denmark** of around 8,500, with only 52.5% of Danish folkeskole teachers fully qualified. In **Sweden,** nearly 30% of school teachers are not qualified and weekly workload is among the highest in the EU. Shortages are consistently worst in disadvantaged, rural and special needs settings, in **Ireland** 51% of secondary schools limited access to subjects, and in **Hungary** the share of unqualified teachers in disadvantaged areas is two to three times higher, which means the children who most need high-quality schooling are least likely to receive it.

Taken together, these findings describe education systems under strain at both ends: pupils' basic skills are declining while the workforce needed to reverse the trend is shrinking and ageing. Because underachievement, early school leaving and unqualified teaching are all concentrated among disadvantaged, rural and minority children, education is currently reinforcing rather than interrupting the cycle of poverty described in the preceding sections.

Key Takeaways

The worsening educational divide across the EU is driven by declining learning outcomes, persistent socio-economic disparities, segregation, and shortages of teachers and other education staff. It requires stronger action to ensure equal access to inclusive, high-quality education for all children and to prevent early school leaving.

5.4 Children in alternative care and deinstitutionalisation

The 2026 European Semester Country Reports demonstrate that the deinstitutionalisation of children in alternative care remains a relatively underdeveloped policy priority across the European Union. Only a minority of Member States explicitly address the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care, while more than half make no reference to children's deinstitutionalisation or discuss it exclusively in relation to older persons or persons with disabilities. This suggests that, despite its importance for implementing the European Child Guarantee and the European Commission Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems, deinstitutionalisation has yet to become a mainstream component of the Semester's assessment of child protection systems.

The most comprehensive approaches are found in **Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania** and **Spain**, where national strategies are accompanied by concrete policy reforms and investment. **Bulgaria** continues to advance the transition from institutional to community- and home-based services through Recovery and Resilience Plan investments, including quality standards for social services, nationwide service mapping and the development of new community-based facilities, although sustained efforts will be required to complete the reform by 2035. **Croatia** adopted an Operational Plan for the Prevention of Institutionalisation and Transformation of Social Service Providers in 2025, while acknowledging that around one fifth of children requiring alternative care still live in institutions. **Romania** is implementing its 2022–2030 National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy with support from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, although community-based services remain insufficiently available and affordable. **Spain** has similarly adopted a National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy for 2024–2030, supported by investments in community-based care and the transformation of residential services.

Several Member States recognise remaining challenges but present only limited reforms. **Finland** identifies the transition towards quality family-based care as an area requiring further progress under the European Child Guarantee and allocates EUR 30 million of ESF+ funding to reform child protection services. **Germany refers to quality alternative care** as one of **the remaining gaps in Child Guarantee implementation** but provides little information on planned reforms. **Greece** similarly highlights deinstitutionalisation as an area requiring further action alongside inclusive education and local anti-poverty plans. **Latvia** reports that progress has slowed because municipalities face financial constraints in expanding community-based services, despite improvements in support for children in non-family care. **Lithuania** and **Estonia** mainly refer to ESF+ funding for family-based care and deinstitutionalisation without discussing wider structural reforms. **Slovenia** draws attention to continuing reliance on institutional care and persistent staff shortages affecting alternative care services. **Austria** also acknowledges that progress in deinstitutionalising children in alternative care remains insufficient.

Hungary presents one of the clearest examples of systemic challenges. The report notes that increasing numbers of children are entering institutional care due to a shortage of foster families and that the social protection system does not sufficiently support children in foster care or young people leaving care. It also highlights evidence that many young homeless people have previously experienced institutional care, underlining the long-term consequences of inadequate family-based alternatives and aftercare support.

By contrast, **Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia** and **Sweden** do not address children's deinstitutionalisation in their Country Reports. In **Cyprus** and **Czechia**, deinstitutionalisation is discussed only in the context of long-term care, disability or older persons, without reference to children or the reform of alternative care systems.

Where deinstitutionalisation is addressed, Country Reports point to adopted strategies or allocated funding rather than to actual progress in moving children from institutions into family- and community-based care. Since no Member State receives a recommendation on it, the Semester places no pressure on governments to act.

Key Takeaways

Overall, the analysis suggests that children's deinstitutionalisation remains unevenly reflected in the European Semester. While several Member States are pursuing ambitious reforms supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility and ESF+, reporting often focuses on funding rather than outcomes for children. Common challenges include shortages of foster carers, insufficient community-based services, weak local implementation capacity and workforce shortages. More systematic monitoring of the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care, together with stronger links to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, would strengthen the Semester's contribution to child protection reform across the EU.

5.5 Digital inclusion and children's digital skills

The 2026 European Semester Country Reports demonstrate that digital inclusion and children's digital rights remain relatively marginal within national policy assessments. While digital skills are increasingly recognised as important for education and labour market participation, only a limited number of Member States discuss children's digital inclusion explicitly, and very few adopt a child-rights perspective. Most references focus on digital education, school infrastructure or AI literacy rather than ensuring that all children have equitable access to digital technologies, the necessary skills to use them safely and effectively, or protection from digital exclusion.

Only a small group of Member States report comprehensive measures to strengthen children's digital competences. **Austria** has implemented a more developed approach, providing around **400,000 digital devices** to schools, introducing the School Digitalisation Act, strengthening teachers' digital competences and investing in digital infrastructure. **Germany** is implementing the **DigitalPakt Schule 2.0**, providing EUR 5 billion for digital education between 2026 and 2030, complemented by investments under the Recovery and Resilience Facility. **Malta** has adopted a Digital Education Strategy (2025–2030), introduced early digital skills initiatives and continues to address low digital literacy among pupils. **Poland** is implementing the Digital Transformation of Education Policy to 2035, alongside the Digital Student programme and significant investments in digital equipment for schools through the Recovery and Resilience Facility. **Slovenia** plans to introduce a compulsory subject on informatics and digital technologies from the seventh grade, while **Spain** has joined the Erasmus+ DigiCLASS initiative to improve pupils' digital competences.

Several Member States address digital inclusion more narrowly through targeted measures or funding. **Estonia** launched the AI Leap initiative to strengthen AI skills among upper-secondary students and teachers. **Finland** combined investment in digital skills through ESF+ with legislation restricting smartphone use during school lessons. **Luxembourg** introduced the KI Kompass framework to guide age-appropriate use of artificial intelligence in schools. **Sweden** has taken a different approach by limiting screen use in early childhood education from July 2025 while recognising that children from migrant and disadvantaged backgrounds experience significantly lower levels of digital proficiency. **Portugal** incorporates digital and financial literacy into school curricula, although more than one-third of eighth-grade students still lack basic digital literacy.

The reports also reveal persistent inequalities in digital skills across Europe. More than 40% of eighth-grade students fail to reach basic digital proficiency in **France, Germany, Malta, Slovenia** and **Spain**, while **Hungary** reports particularly poor performance, with 37% of pupils lacking basic digital skills and overall digital skills remaining well below the EU target.

By contrast, **Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Italy, Latvia** and **Lithuania** do not address children's digital inclusion or digital skills in their Country Reports. In **Czechia, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands** and **Romania**, references are limited to general population indicators or education statistics, without discussing children's digital rights, digital inclusion or targeted measures for vulnerable children. Overall, only a handful of Member States explicitly recognise digital exclusion as a challenge affecting children, and even fewer consider disparities linked to poverty, disability, migration background or rural residence.

Key Takeaways

Overall, the analysis suggests that digital inclusion has not yet become a systematic component of child poverty and social inclusion policies within the European Semester. Although many Member States invest in school digitalisation and digital competences, few adopt a comprehensive child-centred approach that combines access to digital devices, affordable connectivity, digital literacy, online safety and targeted support for children facing multiple disadvantages. As digital participation becomes increasingly essential for education, access to services and future employment, addressing the digital divide should become an integral part of implementing the European Child Guarantee and broader child poverty strategies.

5.6 Children's participation and engagement with civil society

The 2026 European Semester Country Reports show that children's participation rights receive very limited attention across the European Union. Despite the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child emphasising the importance of involving children in decisions affecting them, only a handful of Member States refer to measures that strengthen children's participation, youth engagement or cooperation with civil society. In most countries, participation is not addressed as a distinct policy area, and there is little evidence of systematic mechanisms enabling children or child rights organisations to contribute to policymaking.

Among the few positive examples, **Austria** promotes children's participation through education. The *Empowering Every Child* programme supports schools in implementing the new curriculum by strengthening entrepreneurship education in primary schools, while the Youth Entrepreneurship Week encourages upper secondary students to develop creativity, initiative and entrepreneurial skills. Although primarily focused on entrepreneurship, these initiatives also promote children's agency and active participation.

Denmark highlights a collaborative governance approach through the *Youth Commitment (Ungeløftet)* initiative. Implemented since 2025, it brings together municipalities, businesses and civil society organisations to provide tailored pathways into education and employment for young people aged 15–29.

In **Ireland**, the establishment of the first National Traveller and Roma Forum under the 2024–2028 Inclusion Strategy provides a platform for stakeholder engagement on issues affecting Traveller and Roma communities, supported by dedicated funding. Although the report does not specifically refer to children's participation, it demonstrates recognition of participatory governance involving communities most affected by social exclusion.

A number of reports acknowledge the importance of civil society more broadly. **Finland** expresses concern that **significant reductions in public funding** for **social and healthcare NGOs** may weaken the capacity of organisations supporting vulnerable groups, including children. **Poland** identifies stronger cooperation between public authorities and civil society organisations as beneficial, particularly in the area of affordable housing. **Slovenia** refers to Eurochild's monitoring of the European Child Guarantee, recognising the contribution of civil society to policy monitoring.

Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and **Sweden** contain no dedicated discussion of children's participation rights or consultation with child-focused civil society organisations. **Hungary** notes generally limited stakeholder involvement in policymaking but does not refer specifically to children or child rights organisations.

Key Takeaways

Overall, the findings indicate that children's participation remains one of the least developed dimensions of child rights within the European Semester. The Country Reports rarely assess whether children are consulted in policymaking, whether governments maintain structured dialogue with child rights organisations, or whether children with lived experience of poverty, disability, migration or alternative care contribute to the implementation and monitoring of public policies. This represents a missed opportunity to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and improve the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

5.7 Children’s mental health and well-being

The mention of children’s mental health and well-being remains marginal in the European Semester. It is absent from every 2026 recommendation, and many Country Reports, including those for **Austria, Cyprus, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia** and **Spain**, contain no substantive analysis of children’s mental health at all.

Finland’s statutory therapy guarantee entered into force in May 2025, providing free access to short-term psychotherapy or psychosocial support for those under 23 within one month of a needs assessment. Finland's RRP allocates EUR 44 million for mental health services and Ohjaamo one-stop shops for young people. **Lithuania** has expanded access to mental healthcare for children and adolescents with additional funding since mid-2025 and adopted an action plan for mental health promotion and suicide prevention covering 2025-2027; its suicide rate has halved since 2013 but remains among the highest in the EU. **Estonia** is implementing its first Suicide Prevention Action Plan (2025-2028) alongside a Mental Health Action Plan, although neither is framed around children specifically. **Sweden** commissioned a national coordination hub for youth mental health in April 2025, **Denmark's** Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People issued 35 recommendations, **Romania** flags growing concerns over children's mental health as a monitoring priority under the Child Guarantee, and **Hungary** identifies children's mental health as an area where there is scope for reform, noting also that institutional care placement harms children's mental health.

Adjacent health trends receive more attention than mental health services. E-cigarette use among 15-to-16-year-olds in **Italy** surged from 13% to 23% between 2019 and 2022, and 33% of **Hungarian** adolescents reported vaping in the past month, one of the highest rates in the EU. **Adolescent overweight and obesity** affect 28% of 15-year-olds in **Greece,** which has opened a European Centre for Obesity, while Italy adopted a law in October 2025 recognising obesity as a chronic disease and **Malta** reports rising childhood obesity. **Croatia** is building a new National Children's Hospital in Zagreb, planned as the first carbon-neutral hospital in Europe.

A small group of Member States is building dedicated services and prevention plans, but in most, children's mental health enters the Semester only indirectly. Without any presence in the recommendations, it risks remaining a national afterthought rather than a shared European priority.

Key Takeaways

Children's mental health is still missing from the Semester's recommendations and from most Country Reports, despite pioneering national measures such as Finland's therapy guarantee. Early intervention and prevention require cross-sectoral action and deserve explicit treatment in every Country Report and in the recommendations.

6. Concluding remarks

The 2026 Spring Package confirms both the progress made and the distance still to travel. Children, social priorities and non-discrimination and equal opportunities are increasingly more visible in the European Semester. For the second consecutive year, the Country Reports assess the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, **France** and **Spain** again receive dedicated recommendations on child poverty with **Italy** now naming children in its recommendation on social protection, and education and early childhood education and care feature prominently across the recommendations. This visibility reflects the monitoring commitment secured in the Child Guarantee, the targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, and years of advocacy by Eurochild and its members.

As the European Semester will continue to play a key role in shaping funding priorities under **the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034),** it is essential that it prioritises **investments in children**, including access to quality essential services, adequate social protection, and measures that prevent and reduce child poverty.

Italy provides a telling example. As the Member State with the lowest birth rate in the EU, it illustrates how demographic challenges are closely linked to social and economic conditions. Investing in affordable housing, high-quality childcare, and family support services would not only help reduce child poverty but also create the conditions that enable young people to start and raise families. This demonstrates why the European Semester should place a stronger emphasis on child poverty prevention, family support, and social investment through more ambitious Country Reports and Country-Specific Recommendations.

ANNEX 1

Table: Child-related issues covered in the 2026 Country-Specific Recommendations

Issue	Countries receiving a CSR
Child poverty	France, Spain
Early childhood education and care (ECEC)/childcare	Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Romania, Slovakia
Basic skills / education quality	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden
Teacher shortages / teacher training	Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden
Inclusive education / disadvantaged pupils	Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden
Roma children / disadvantaged groups	Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain
Children with disabilities / special educational needs	Cyprus, Estonia, Malta, Poland
Early school leaving	Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Romania, Spain
Social protection / adequacy of benefits	Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, **Italy (children are specified)**, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Spain
Access to quality social services	Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania
Affordable and social housing / housing exclusion	Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain
Women's labour market participation through childcare	Austria, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Romania, Slovakia
Health / access to healthcare	France, Greece, Romania, Spain
Long-term care / community care	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Poland, Romania

ANNEX 2

Table: Country summaries of the 2026 Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
Austria	Austria's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation, education and children with a migrant background, but not children's mental health or child participation as standalone themes. The AROPE rate for children rose sharply by 4.4 pps to 25.3% in 2025 (EU: 24.3%), the highest level in over a decade and now above the adult rate (17.7%); risk is starkly stratified by parental education (18.9% for highly educated parents vs 72.5% for low-educated parents). Austria is implementing the European Child Guarantee, aiming to halve child AROPE to 11% by 2030, but compliance is uneven: strong on housing access, weak on under-3 ECEC and deinstitutionalisation of alternative care. Indexing of family benefits has been suspended for 2026-2027. ECEC participation is improving but remains regionally fragmented; a second compulsory ECEC year is planned for 2027. Early school leaving is rising among migrant-background and disadvantaged pupils, who are also markedly over-represented in special-needs schools (43.5% vs 21.8% EU-wide for non-migrant peers). Digital device rollout to schools and the 'Empowering every child' entrepreneurship programme are the main digital/participation-adjacent measures. Austria's CSRs note uneven ECEC access and quality across federal states, driven by governance and financing fragmentation, and calls for a compulsory quality framework in the recitals. CSR 5 recommends improving childcare quality and availability to boost women's full-time employment, alongside addressing skills mismatches (including recognition of migrants' qualifications) and raising basic skills from an early age. The child poverty and deinstitutionalisation gaps documented in the Country Report are not carried into the operative recommendation text.
Belgium	Belgium's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, education and homelessness, but does not cover deinstitutionalisation, migrant/Roma children, mental health, or digital rights as standalone themes. Belgium reached its overall 2030 poverty reduction target in 2025 (344,000 fewer people at risk, including 86,000 fewer children, against a target of 279,000/93,000), though 68.3% of children in very-low-work-intensity households remain at risk of poverty, and the ESF+ has channelled EUR 50.6 million to material deprivation, reaching over 148,000 children. ECEC participation for under-3s (48.0%) exceeds the EU average but sits below Belgium's own Barcelona target (53.9%), with a stark gap in intensive childcare use between AROPE and non-AROPE children (1.9% vs 35.4%); for over-3s, participation is high at 98.1%. Basic skills have worsened across all three Communities, with only 16.6% of disadvantaged students performing well in PISA 2022 against over 60% of advantaged peers.

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
	Homelessness affects an estimated 49,500 people, including 1,678 children in Brussels alone, where the total has risen 24.5% since 2022. Belgium's CSRs do not name children directly. The introduction flags the long-term decline in basic skills performance across all three Communities as a key structural challenge. CSR 5 calls to improve the performance and equity of the education and training systems and to strengthen the teaching profession through more flexible career paths. Child poverty, ECEC and homelessness, all substantively covered in the Country Report, do not feature in the operative recommendation.
Bulgaria	The child AROPE rate reached 33.1% in 2025 (EU: 24.3%), with progress toward the voluntary 2030 target (reducing child poverty by 196,750) limited. The European Child Guarantee remains the main policy vehicle, with EUR 700 million allocated to social inclusion for vulnerable groups including children and Roma, and EUR 221 million for food and material deprivation, though gaps persist in nutrition, affordable housing and ECEC access. ECEC participation for children aged 3+ rose only modestly (87.6% to 89.3%, 2019-2024), with under-3 participation 22 percentage points below the Barcelona target; Roma enrolment, while rising (58% to 68%), remains well behind the general population. Deinstitutionalisation is advancing gradually via a shift to community- and home-based services, targeted for completion by 2035. School segregation of Roma children is worsening (64% to 70% of Roma children in segregated schools, 2021-2024), alongside high early school leaving (55% of Roma aged 18-24) and very low Roma tertiary attainment (3%). Bulgaria's CSR references Roma children and the elevated child AROPE rate in its introduction, alongside Bulgaria's progress shifting from institutional to community- and home-based social services. CSR 5 calls for improved teaching quality through needs-based teacher training and for strengthened social inclusion via better social services, community-based long-term care and more effective minimum income support. As with most CSRs reviewed, these recommendations address the underlying system rather than naming children or the Child Guarantee directly.
Croatia	Croatia's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation and education, including SEN provision, but does not cover children with a migrant/Roma background, digital rights, or child participation as standalone themes. Child poverty is improving: the AROPE rate for children fell to 15.7% in 2025 (EU: 24.3%), a reduction of 25,000 children year-on-year, putting Croatia broadly on track for its 2030 target (94,000 from a 2019 baseline of 134,000). The European Child Guarantee is being implemented under the 2023 action plan, with progress on free school meals and ECEC, though gaps remain in healthcare and integration of vulnerable, minority and non-EU national children. ECEC participation (88.7%) remains below the EU average (95.0%), compounded by teacher shortages. A deinstitutionalisation operational plan was adopted in 2025, though around 20% of children in need still live in institutional care. Shortages of specialists (educational rehabilitators, speech therapists,

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
	psychologists) constrain support for children with special educational needs, who make up 8.5% of pupils; 28.6% of teachers report needing more SEN training, above the EU average. The new Zagreb children's hospital is planned as Europe's first carbon-neutral hospital, and the April 2026 Affordable Housing Act explicitly includes families with children among target groups. Croatia's CSR does not name children directly. The introduction stresses that fully implementing the education system reform, including full-day teaching, is essential to raise ECEC participation and strengthen basic skills, though infrastructure delays are slowing progress. CSR 5 calls for reducing poverty and income inequality through better-targeted social benefits, improving access to home- and community-based long-term care, balancing the geographical distribution of health workers, and increasing affordable and social housing supply, all of which are essential conditions for reducing child poverty.
Cyprus	Cyprus's Country Report presents a comparatively positive picture on child poverty (child AROPE below the total-population rate, and the child poverty reduction target already exceeded) but persistent gaps in ECEC access and education quality, particularly for SEN pupils, rural children, and non-EU citizens, whose school leaving rate gap with EU citizens is roughly double the EU average. Alternative care/deinstitutionalisation, children's mental health, child participation and children's digital rights receive no dedicated treatment. Cyprus's CSR engages with child-adjacent policy only through "early childhood education and care" and "young learners with disabilities," in recitals 31-32 and CSR 5 that calls to further increase participation in early childhood education and care. Improve social protection for vulnerable groups by providing targeted support to energy-poor households and increasing the availability of affordable and social housing are also critical for child social protection.
Czechia	Czechia's 2026 Country Report is one of the most substantively developed documents reviewed on children, driven almost entirely by the Roma dimension. The child AROPE rate (15.4%) is unusually higher than the total-population rate (11.5%), even though Czechia's overall poverty risk is among the EU's lowest; the number of children at risk rose by 63,000 between 2019 and 2024, and Czechia's 2030 target specifically includes cutting child poverty by 50,000. Roma children face by far the sharpest risk in the document, 70% at risk of poverty against 14% of children generally, and Roma ECEC participation (48%) lags far behind the general child population (85%), a rate that has declined slightly since 2021. Formal childcare for under-3s overall is among the lowest in the EU at 7.9%, linked explicitly to Czechia's fifth-highest gender employment gap in the EU. Roma school segregation is worsening sharply: 58% of Roma children attended a majority-Roma school in 2024 (up from 29% in 2016), and only 17% of young Roma completed upper-secondary education (down from 38% in 2016), against 90% of the general population. Single-parent households have deteriorated to the point of underperforming the EU average on both AROPE and in-work poverty. The European Child Guarantee is implemented via EUR 434 million in

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
	ESF+ funding, and the Country Report calls full compliance with the Race Equality Directive "essential." Czechia's CSR is unusually explicit for the countries reviewed: recital 37 names "parents of young children, Roma and persons with disabilities" as underemployed groups and repeats the Roma employment and NEET statistics; recital 38 states the tax and benefit system "dissuades parents, in particular young mothers, from going back to work" and cites the 7.9% under-3 childcare rate; recital 44 attributes Czechia's large socio-economic education gap partly to "the segregation of Roma children." Recommendation 6 calls to lower disincentives for parents to return to work, improve childcare supply, and support disadvantaged schools and pupils, including Roma, making Czechia's CSR the clearest operative link between children's welfare and recommended reform among the countries reviewed.
Denmark	Denmark's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, education and environmental/green-transition references to children and young people, but not deinstitutionalisation, migrant/Roma children, digital rights or a standalone mental health section. Denmark presents a comparatively favourable picture: the child AROPE rate reached 15.9% in 2024, its highest since 2020, before falling to 14.8% in 2025, well below the EU average, though severe material deprivation among children has risen against the broader EU trend, albeit from a very low base. Denmark is implementing the European Child Guarantee, with a 2025 school meals pilot (DKK 854 million) examining effects on children's health, learning and wellbeing, and a 2026 Finance Act lowering parental childcare contributions by DKK 400 million a year. ECEC participation is among the EU's highest (67.2% for under-3s, though down from 74.7% in 2022; 96.3% for over-3s), but quality is uneven: only a small share of ECEC settings for 3-5-year-olds provide high-quality learning environments, and over half of ECEC leaders cite staff absences or shortages as hindering quality. School absenteeism has risen sharply since the pandemic, early school leaving (10.0%) now exceeds the EU average with pronounced rural-urban and regional gaps, and Denmark's 2025 Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People issued 35 recommendations on wellbeing. Migrant-background students underachieve in maths at more than double the rate of non-migrant peers. Denmark's CSR contains no reference to children or families at any level, the introduction, the numbered recommendations, or the operative text. The nearest points of contact are recital 28's framing of "very young workers" and early school leavers as a labour-supply issue, and recommendation 5's call to tackle teacher shortages and early school leaving, addressed purely as competitiveness and skills concerns.
Estonia	Estonia's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, education and (briefly) children's mental health, but ECEC, deinstitutionalisation, migrant/Roma children and digital rights receive little or no dedicated treatment. The AROPE rate for children rose sharply to 19.4% in 2025, approaching pre-pandemic levels though still below the EU average, while the total population rate fell slightly. Child

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
	poverty risk is strongly determined by parental education (13.1% for higher-educated parents vs 47.6% for lower-educated) and household type: single-parent AROPE reached 42% (up 6.7 pps), with over a quarter spending more than 40% of disposable income on housing. Estonia is implementing the Child Guarantee, including automatic data exchange between authorities, strengthened family benefits, and increased funding for family-based alternative care; ESF+ figures for child poverty spending are reported inconsistently across the document (EUR 24.9 million in one section, EUR 33 million in another). ECEC receives no dedicated section beyond a single Social Scoreboard data point (34.8% under-3 formal childcare). Education content is more developed: early school leaving (10.2%) exceeds the EU average, pupils with special educational needs leave school early at more than twice the rate of others, and a February 2026 law expanding minors' working hours in family businesses is flagged by the Commission itself as needing monitoring for its educational impact. Estonia's suicide rate is among the EU's highest, addressed through a 2025-2028 Suicide Prevention Action Plan, though not framed around children specifically. Estonia's CSR contains a single explicit reference to families: recital 33 notes that "single-parent households are also particularly exposed to poverty and housing cost pressures." No recital or recommendation names children. Recommendation 5 addresses reducing early school leaving and supporting learners with special needs, and separately calls to strengthen social protection for vulnerable groups.
Finland	Finland's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation of child protection, education and children's mental health in meaningful depth, though migrant/Roma children beyond education outcomes and digital rights receive less attention. The child AROPE rate stands at 17.1%, below the EU average but up 3.3 pps since 2023, with 26,000 more children at risk since 2019; 41% of at-risk children are from single-parent families. Critically, Finland's ongoing social security reform is projected by national authorities to raise child poverty by a further 3 percentage points. The European Child Guarantee is well implemented overall, but the Country Report flags the transition of children from institutional to family-based care as the area most needing improvement, backed by EUR 30 million of dedicated ESF+ funding. Under-3 ECEC participation (43.2%) is above the EU average. Education outcomes are deteriorating: early school leaving (9.9%) is rated "To watch," underachievement among foreign-born students (57%) is among the EU's highest, and tertiary attainment (38.2%) sits well below both the EU average and Finland's own 2030 target. A notable positive is the May 2025 statutory therapy guarantee giving under-23s free access to psychotherapy within one month, alongside legislation restricting smartphone use in schools and deep cuts (around 29% since 2024) to NGO funding for social and healthcare services. Finland's CSR contains no reference to children. The nearest points of contact are generic references to "vulnerable groups" and "vulnerable households" in the context of energy prices and social security spending reviews, and youth

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	unemployment/NEET data. This stands in sharp contrast to the CR, where child poverty, the deinstitutionalisation gap, and the therapy guarantee are substantively developed.
France	France's 2026 Country Report documents sustained deterioration in child poverty and is one of the most detailed reviewed. The child AROPE rate reached 27.5% in 2025, with 3.6 million children now at risk, an increase of 370,000 since 2019 that moves France further from its 2030 sub-target; the poverty-reducing impact of social transfers fell to a decade low of 38.5%. Since March 2026 the child top-up benefit has been reduced in duration and coverage, with no new income-support measures adopted. Single-parent families face the highest in-work poverty rate in the document (22%) and an AROPE rate of 48.6%, up from 46.3% in 2023; 46.5% of children with a non-EU-born parent are at risk of poverty. Child street homelessness more than doubled in five years, from 927 in 2020 to 2,159 in 2025, including 503 children under three. ECEC access is the central tension: France has one of the EU's highest under-3 participation rates (59.7%) yet one of the largest advantaged-disadvantaged participation gaps (36 pps, EU: 20 pps), with a fifth of demand unmet and France off track on its 2030 target of 200,000 new places. In education, up to 29% of 15-year-olds fail basic proficiency, rising to 85.6% underachievement among the most disadvantaged, and over 4,000 teacher posts were cut in the 2026 budget. Progress on the 2025 child poverty and ECEC CSRs is rated limited. France stands out as a country with an operative recommendation naming child poverty and ECEC access explicitly. Recital 26 lists "in-work and child poverty" among France's structural challenges, and recital 46 provides an unusually detailed child poverty analysis (AROPE, jobless households, homelessness, ECEC gaps). CSR 5 calls to "prevent and reduce in-work poverty and child poverty, by removing barriers to gainful and sustainable employment, notably for parents, by improving access to quality early childhood education and care for the most disadvantaged households."
Germany	Germany's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation (briefly), education and children with a migrant background, but not mental health or digital rights as standalone themes. Nearly a quarter of children (23.4%, up from 22.9% in 2024) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, disproportionately those with a migrant background or disadvantaged socio-economic status; the number of children in very low work-intensity households remains higher than in 2020. Germany aims to cut this by 300,000 relative to 2020 by 2030, with 5.8% of ESF+ funding (EUR 2.16 billion for social inclusion overall) dedicated to child poverty under the 2023 Child Guarantee action plan. The defining structural gap is ECEC supply: 300,000 missing childcare/kindergarten places and 150,000 missing all-day school places by 2029, with participation for advantaged children (28.3%) more than double that of disadvantaged children (13.8%), and a projected shortfall of up to 88,400 ECEC staff in western Germany by 2030. In education, 13.1% of 18-24-year-olds left with low or no qualifications, one of the EU's highest and rising rates, and

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	two-thirds of foreign-born students underachieve in maths. A notable risk flagged is that the planned reform of social assistance (Bürgergeld to Grundsicherung) could disproportionately harm dependent children through income- and housing-related measures. Germany's CSR engages with children through ECEC and all-day-schools approach. Recital 38 details the ECEC and all-day school supply gaps and the near-doubling of participation for wealthier children versus poorer ones, framed around enabling carers' (mostly women's) full-time employment rather than as a children's rights objective. CSR 5 calls to "improve the availability and quality of early childhood education and care and all-day schools" alongside promoting excellence and targeted support for disadvantaged groups.
Greece	Greece's 2026 Country Report documents a clear deterioration in child poverty and is substantively developed on ECEC, education and children with a migrant/Roma background, though deinstitutionalisation, digital rights and children's mental health receive only passing mention. The child AROPE rate rose 1.7 pps to 29.6%, among the EU's highest, reversing progress toward the 2030 target; severe material deprivation among children reached 15.9% (double the EU average) and a third of children faced child-specific material deprivation. The Social Scoreboard rates both child AROPE and under-3 formal childcare as "Critical situation." ECEC participation under age three remains critically low at 28.8%, against a 42.8% Barcelona target, even lower for children at risk of poverty (19.8%); Greece's broader enrolment data (68.8% for over-3s) is outdated, last reported in 2019. The Commission recommends accelerating Child Guarantee implementation through school meals, housing, inclusive education, deinstitutionalisation and local anti-poverty plans, framed as recommendations rather than reported progress. In education, underachievement among 15-year-olds is among the EU's highest (47.2% in maths), disadvantaged students perform well at a fraction of the EU rate, and 60% of eighth graders fail basic digital skills. Students with a migrant background, Roma pupils and students with disabilities face compounding disadvantage. Greece's CSR contains no direct recommendation on child poverty or the European Child Guarantee. The most substantive engagement is recital 39, addressing the outdated 2019 enrolment data and the Barcelona target, and CSR 5's call to "expand formal early childhood education and care," framed primarily as a labour market measure to lift women's and vulnerable groups' employment, alongside expanding affordable housing and healthcare access. The structural child poverty increase, deinstitutionalisation gap, and educational disadvantage facing migrant and Roma children documented in the Country Report do not translate into dedicated recommendations.
Hungary	Hungary's 2026 Country Report is one of the most substantively developed reviewed on children, addressing poverty, alternative care, ECEC, education, Roma children and (briefly) mental health. The child AROPE rate stood at 23.0% in 2025, just below the EU average, but reaches 78% among children of low-educated parents and 58% among Roma children. The impact of social transfers

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	on poverty reduction has halved since 2018 (48.8% to 23.1%), among the lowest in the EU, and Hungary has set no national child poverty reduction target. Compliance with the Child Guarantee is described as strong on nutrition and vaccination but weak on health, alternative care and ECEC access for the poorest: under-3 ECEC participation for at-risk children is just 9.7%, against a national average of 21.1%. The most distinctive finding is rising institutional placement of children driven by a shortage and decline of foster families, which the Country Report links to worse educational, employment and mental health outcomes; half of homeless people under 30 had previously been in institutional foster care. Roma face severe disadvantage across every dimension: 62% of Roma children attend predominantly Roma schools, and new 2025 "local identity protection" decrees risk further marginalisation. Early school leaving is at the EU average nationally but four times higher in rural areas, and Hungary has one of the highest ESL and NEET rates among persons with disabilities in the EU. Children appear substantively in Hungary's CSR introduction: recitals 42 and 44 note that children, Roma and persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable, that rising poverty is pushing more children into state child protection amid a shortage of foster families, and that Roma residential and educational segregation remains high. CSR 5 (education, teacher attractiveness, Roma participation) and CSR 6 (social assistance adequacy, essential services in disadvantaged municipalities, housing) implicitly cover child-relevant services.
Ireland	Ireland's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, education and Roma/Traveller children in substantial depth, though deinstitutionalisation, mental health and digital rights receive little dedicated treatment. The child AROPE rate rose sharply from 20.9% to 23.7% in 2025, approaching the EU average; after housing costs, child poverty rises to 30.5%. Single-parent household AROPE stands at 52.4%, nearly three times the general Irish rate, with over half of homeless families in emergency accommodation being one-parent families; over 90% of Roma and Traveller respondents live below the poverty threshold, with children even more affected. Ireland is the only EU country without earnings-linked maternity leave, and a second-tier child benefit remains under consultation rather than implemented. ECEC access is critically constrained: under-3 participation (27.0%) is well below the EU average, there is no legal entitlement to a public place, free provision is limited to three hours a day (the EU's lowest), and over 40,000 children under three are on waiting lists. In education, Irish students' basic skills and tertiary attainment are among the EU's best, but the rapid doubling of special educational settings since 2020 is flagged as in tension with the UNCRPD and inclusive education principles, and Traveller and Roma children face acute educational and housing barriers addressed under the 2024-2030 Traveller and Roma Education Strategy. Ireland's CSRs contain inly indirect recommendation on children through vulnerable groups. Recital 35, the primary child-specific reference, cites that homelessness has doubled to 17,500 people in emergency accommodation, over 5,500 of them children, and recital 38 identifies single parents' disproportionate

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	poverty and labour-market barriers. CSR 6, the most relevant, calls to increase affordable and social housing supply and strengthen labour-market and social inclusion for disadvantaged groups including single parents, but does not name children. The structural issues around ECEC entitlement, the Child Guarantee and Traveller/Roma child poverty documented in the Country Report do not translate into dedicated recommendations.
Italy	Italy's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC and education in depth, with brief Roma content but no substantive treatment of deinstitutionalisation, mental health, digital rights or child participation. Child poverty is among the EU's highest and unchanged for a second year at 27.1% AROPE, rising steeply with family size (39.3% for couples with three or more children) and reaching 44.4% for single-parent households; people in households with children face a poverty risk gap versus those without that is more than twice the EU average, pointing to weak family allowances. Social benefits reduce poverty by only 30.6%, below the EU average, and the reformed minimum income scheme (Assegno di Inclusione) has cut both adequacy and coverage. Positive measures include extended parental leave to age 14, doubled unpaid leave for children's illness, and RRF-funded socio-educational interventions preventing dropout in the South. Under-3 ECEC participation fell from 39.4% to 35.5% in 2025, reversing recent progress, with coverage ranging from 40.4% in the Centre to 19% in the South; EUR 3.2 billion of RRF investment targets 150,000 new places. Early school leaving met the EU 2030 target nationally (8.2%) but reaches 13.7% on the Islands, and basic skills underperformance in the South is severe (46% fail basic maths proficiency). Italy receives one of the most explicitly child-focused CSRs. Recital 37 links Italy's lowest EU fertility rate and regional childcare gaps to the need for expanded, affordable childcare; recital 42, the most direct, states that tackling child poverty (13.8% of children in absolute poverty, single parents at 44.4% AROPE) would benefit from expanding full-time schooling and sustainable school-canteen funding in line with the Child Guarantee. CSR 6 explicitly names children: it calls to "continue to improve the coverage and adequacy of social protection as well as access to social services for people in vulnerable situations, notably children" alongside improving educational outcomes and care-service access. Italy is among the few Member States with direct child-focused operative language in the 2026 cycle.
Latvia	Latvia's 2026 Country Report covers child poverty, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation and education, but Roma children, mental health, digital rights and child participation receive little or no attention. Child poverty remains low and continues to improve, with the child AROPE rate falling from 20.3% (2023) to 17.6% (2025), well below the EU average, though the European Child Guarantee's support schemes remain largely universal and untargeted, administered at municipal level. Single-parent households face a markedly higher poverty risk of 28.7%, and Latvia neither recognises a specific legal status for single parents nor offers them targeted support. The 2026 budget prioritises demographic support,

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	raising the childbirth allowance and childcare allowance for under-1.5s, benefiting all young families rather than targeting need. ECEC access is strong, with under-3 participation (45.1%) exceeding both the EU average and Latvia's Barcelona target, and a legal entitlement to a place from 18 months. Deinstitutionalisation is described as slow and stalling, with several municipalities showing reduced interest in community-based services due to financial constraints. Education shows good basic skills outcomes overall but pronounced urban-rural PISA gaps (up to 68 points), a rapidly ageing teaching workforce, and rising early school leaving amid the transition to Latvian-only instruction. Latvia does not receive a dedicated child-focused CSR. Children appear only via recital 36's note that poverty risk is especially high for single-parent households, reflecting low benefit coverage and underdeveloped social services. CSR 5 calls to strengthen social protection to reduce inequality and to increase the availability and quality of affordable, energy-efficient housing, particularly outside the capital region, without naming children. Education does not feature in this cycle's recommendations at all.
Lithuania	Lithuania's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, education and (unusually) children's mental health, though deinstitutionalisation and Roma/migrant children receive minimal treatment. In contrast to the worsening overall poverty picture (AROPE rose to 26.3%, well above the EU average), the child AROPE rate fell to 19.9% in 2025, substantially below the EU average, aided by ESF+ funding of EUR 99 million for child poverty, EUR 188 million for inclusive education, and EUR 175 million for social services and de-institutionalisation. ECEC is expanding rapidly through new legal entitlements: all three-year-olds have been guaranteed a place since September 2024, extended to two-year-olds from September 2025, with under-3 participation rising from 36.9% to 43.8% and a 2027 target of 70% rural participation, though rural enrolment and staff shortages remain persistent challenges. The defining education challenge is an extreme urban-rural divide, a 71-point PISA gap in maths (EU average: 46), among the starkest in the EU, alongside sharply rising early school leaving among persons with disabilities (25.3% vs EU 19.1%). Notably, access to mental healthcare for children and adolescents has been expanded with additional funding since mid-2025, backed by a 2025-2027 mental health and suicide prevention action plan, even as national suicide rates remain among the EU's highest despite halving since 2013. Lithuania's CSRs addressed children though recital 37 that highlights lower rural ECEC participation and risks from relaxed rural class-size rules, recital 38 covers teacher shortages, and recital 35 covers social housing access for large families. CSR 6 calls to improve the quality, equity and efficiency of general education, particularly the urban-rural achievement gap, while CSR 5 addresses poverty and social housing more broadly through the social protection system. Child poverty, ECEC and the Child Guarantee, substantially developed in the Country Report, do not feature in the operative recommendations.

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Luxembourg	Luxembourg's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty and ECEC in depth, with education content centred on its distinctive linguistic challenge, but deinstitutionalisation, Roma children, mental health and children's right to be heard receive no substantive attention. Child poverty is markedly higher than the overall population rate: 25.2% AROPE for children versus 18.2% overall, driven mainly by income polarisation linked to the financial sector, high housing costs and a relatively weak redistributive effect of taxes and transfers; single-parent households face a 40.5% poverty risk. Under the Child Guarantee, Luxembourg provides free meals and health screenings for children in need, though data-monitoring gaps limit assessment of effective access; a December 2025 national anti-poverty plan (around EUR 1 billion, 100+ measures) includes increased family benefits and a one-stop welfare shop. ECEC coverage from birth to compulsory age is the highest in the EU (82.5%), with 20 free weekly hours for 1-4-year-olds and a childcare place guarantee planned by 2030. The defining education challenge is linguistic: nearly 70% of children are not exposed to Luxembourgish at home, language background affects outcomes more than socio-economic status (an unusual pattern), and a literacy reform allowing German-or-French literacy instruction rolls out from 2027/2028. Boys drop out at 50% higher rates than girls, and mobile phones are banned in primary schools to support screen-life balance. Children are addressed through education. Recital 35 covers education disparities linked to linguistic background, achievement gaps reinforced by socio-economic status and early streaming, and higher early school leaving and NEET rates among disadvantaged and non-native students. CSR 5 calls to improve school performance and ensure equal opportunities by adapting teaching to disadvantaged students and those from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Child poverty, ECEC and the Child Guarantee, all substantially covered in the Country Report, do not appear anywhere in the operative recommendation text.
Malta	Malta's 2026 Country Report gives children unusually substantial attention across poverty, ECEC and education, though Roma/migrant children, alternative care, mental health and child participation receive little coverage. The child AROPE rate stands at 23.3%, just below the EU average but flagged as a situation to watch, putting Malta's national target (a 6.1 pp reduction from 2019) at risk; 46.1% of single parents with dependent children and 39.7% of children with low-educated parents are at risk of poverty. The Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 and Social Plan for the Family 2025-2030 target vulnerable families, and the 2026 budget introduced new tax deductions and increased child allowances, though social transfers reduce poverty by only 24.9%, well below the EU average. The striking finding is the ECEC poverty gap: 59.5% of AROPE children did not participate in ECEC in 2025 versus 39.4% of other children, and entitlement is tied to parental employment rather than universal or poverty-based criteria. In education, around a third of 15-year-olds lack minimum proficiency, disadvantaged students underperform severely, and outcomes for young people with disabilities are deteriorating rapidly: early school leaving reaches 42.1%

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	among 18-29-year-olds with disabilities and their NEET rate (45.2%) is rising fast. Housing costs are identified as a structural driver of child poverty. Malta receives one of the more child-relevant CSRs in this cycle. The introduction states plainly that limited inclusiveness in education, starting in early childhood, hampers vulnerable groups, and that teacher shortages mean the system "insufficiently caters for all children, including pupils with a disability." CSR 6 explicitly calls to "strengthen the inclusiveness of education and training, including by enhancing access to high quality early childhood education and care," a direct child-focused recommendation rather than a purely labour-market framing, alongside fostering basic skills and teacher training. Child poverty itself, however, does not feature in the operative text despite its prominence in the Country Report.
Netherlands	The Netherlands' 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC and education, including specific data on children with a migrant background, but deinstitutionalisation, mental health and digital rights as standalone themes receive no dedicated coverage. The Netherlands performs comparatively well on headline indicators, with a child AROPE rate of 12.7%, but children with foreign-born parents face a rate of 24.4%, nearly four times the 6.2% rate for children with native-born parents. Progress toward the 2030 poverty reduction target has weakened substantially, after a net reduction of 86,000 people in 2024, the 2025 figure was only 3,000 below the 2019 baseline. This is the only Country Report that does not mention the European Child Guarantee. ECEC participation for under-3s (66.5%) is well above the EU average, but access is highly unequal, with one of the largest income-related disparities in the EU (a 40.5 pp gap between children in poverty and others); a scheme to make childcare nearly free is in preparation. Basic skills are declining sharply, the share of PISA underachievers nearly doubled between 2012 and 2022 in maths and science, and almost half of foreign-born students underachieve in maths (48.5%) against 37.9% for native-born children of foreign parents. The EUR 2 billion Masterplan for basic skills has reached 95% of students by 2025. Children are referenced in CSRs in the recital 34 that notes that affordable childcare could raise women's working hours, recital 35 flags declining basic skills and widening underachievement among disadvantaged, foreign-born and migrant-background students, and recital 36 notes their under-representation in STEM. CSR 5 calls to "improve students' basic skills, including by making the profession of teacher more attractive and by providing tailored support to disadvantaged schools" and to boost STEM participation; childcare appears only in the CSR implementation table, not the operative recommendation itself. Child poverty and the Child Guarantee do not feature in any operative recommendation.
Poland	Poland's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC and education, including inclusive education and Ukrainian pupils, but Roma children, deinstitutionalisation, mental health, digital rights and child participation receive little or no dedicated attention. The child AROPE rate fell 0.8 pps to 16.1% in 2024

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	(Social Scoreboard: 15.6% in 2025), well below the EU average, but progress toward the 2030 target (reducing child poverty by at least 300,000) is severely off-track, with only 19,000 children lifted out between 2019 and 2024; many family benefits remain untargeted and not means-tested. ECEC for under-threes stands at just 21%, up 6 pps but still well below the EU average, with AROPE children particularly excluded (3% participation vs 24% EU average for at-risk children); the 'Active Parent' and 'Active Toddler' programmes target 102,500 new places by 2029. Inclusive education is a growing concern: enrolment in special primary schools rose despite falling overall enrolment, students with disabilities leave school early at more than six times the rate of peers without disabilities, and Ukrainian students are often taught in segregated classes. Basic skills are declining across both disadvantaged and advantaged students, with top performance falling below 10% in all PISA domains, and teacher shortages and low salary satisfaction persist across all school types. Poland's CSRs point out to unequal access to childcare in disadvantaged regions, and need for a stronger inclusive education strategy for pupils with special educational needs, and childcare progress under ESF+/RRF alongside persistently low women's labour market participation linked to regional childcare gaps. CSR 5 calls for quality and inclusive education, addressing teacher shortages and VET effectiveness, and increasing labour market participation of persons with disabilities, framing ECEC as a women's employment issue rather than a child welfare concern.
Portugal	Portugal's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, healthcare access and education, including Roma and foreign-born children, but deinstitutionalisation, digital rights and children's right to be heard receive no dedicated treatment. Child poverty is declining: the AROPE rate for children fell to 19.2% in 2025, with around 57,000 children lifted out of poverty over two years, more than a third of the progress needed to meet the 2030 target of 161,000 fewer children, following a period of near-stagnation. Health gaps persist, with only 48.5% of at-risk children reporting very good health against an EU average of 57.4%, and Portugal adopted a 2025-2030 action plan guaranteeing free school activities, meals and health services for all children. Social transfers reduce poverty by just 25.9%, below the EU average of 33.2%. ECEC participation for under-3s (57.9%) is well above the EU average, but coverage for at-risk children (29.5%) lags, particularly in Lisbon, Setúbal and Porto; the Creche Feliz free-nursery programme and extension of guaranteed pre-primary entitlement to age three are notable reforms. Basic skills are declining, especially in mathematics (29.7% underachievement, up 6.4 pps since 2018), and early school leaving (6.1%) masks severe disparities: only 8% of young Roma complete upper-secondary education, and dropout rates are three times higher for children of foreign-born parents, whose numbers in schools nearly tripled between 2018/19 and 2024/25. Portugal's CSR focus mainly on education. Recital 38 notes that ECEC participation remains above the EU average and early school leaving meets the

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	2030 target, but flags worsening basic skills since 2018, growing socio-economic inequalities, and lower outcomes for foreign-background students. CSR 5 calls to "promote better educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students," alongside addressing skills mismatches and adult learning, without a dedicated child poverty analysis or reference to the Child Guarantee, Roma children, or ECEC gaps documented in the Country Report.
Romania	Romania's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, education, deinstitutionalisation and Roma children in substantial depth, with mental health briefly flagged and digital rights and child participation not covered. Child AROPE reached 32.4% in 2025, among the highest in the EU, with children of low-educated parents, large families and Roma children (75% poverty risk) most exposed; Romania has already achieved 263,000 of its 500,000-child 2030 reduction target. Social transfers reduce poverty by just 21.7% against an EU average of 33.2%, and social protection spending (13.6% of GDP) is among the lowest in the EU. ESF+ allocates EUR 1.55 billion to ECEC and education, EUR 1.76 billion to social inclusion and Child Guarantee support, and over EUR 1 billion for material support reaching 1.8 million deprived people. Under-3 ECEC participation (11.4%) is among the EU's lowest, particularly in rural areas, though a unitary ECEC system and new teacher training programme are being rolled out. A 2022-2030 deinstitutionalisation strategy is under implementation, though community-based services remain scarce. Early school leaving (15.5%) reaches 23.7% in rural areas, Romania has the EU's largest urban-rural basic skills gap, and school segregation is critical: 43% of Roma students attend segregated schools and only 31% of children with disabilities attend mainstream education. Declining vaccination rates (down from 86-95% in 2015 to 78-79%) are flagged as a monitoring priority. Romania receives child-relevant recommendations across two CSRs. The introduction explicitly names child poverty and social exclusion as especially high (32.8% vs EU 24.2%). CSR 5 directly addresses ECEC participation and reducing early school leaving, while CSR 6 calls to reduce poverty and social exclusion by extending social protection and improving access to quality services, including for disadvantaged groups. This makes Romania one of the more child-relevant CSRs of the cycle, though it stops short of explicitly naming children or the Child Guarantee in the operative recommendation text.
Slovakia	Slovakia's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC and Roma children in substantial depth, though alternative care, mental health, digital rights and children's right to be heard receive no dedicated treatment. The child AROPE rate rose slightly to 22.7% in 2025, below the EU average but following a 2020-2022 increase that puts Slovakia's 2030 target (21,000 fewer children at risk) at risk; Roma children face an AROPE rate of around 87%. The social benefits subsistence minimum covers only 26.4% of the national poverty threshold, well below the EU average of 56.3%, particularly affecting single-parent families. ESF+ allocates EUR 646 million to inclusive education and EUR 274 million to Roma integration. ECEC participation for children aged 3 to school entry (80.8%) sits well below the EU

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	average, with stark regional variation (88.2% in the west vs 70.4% in the east); under-3 participation fell back to just 1.8% in 2025, the lowest in the EU, with under 1% of Roma children under three in early childcare. Mandatory pre-primary from age four (2027) and age three (2028) is planned, alongside a transfer of kindergarten funding from municipalities to the state. Roma school segregation is rising (66% of Roma children in majority-Roma schools), and around a third of 15-year-olds lack minimum proficiency in all three PISA domains, among the EU's highest underachievement rates. CSR 6 directly and substantively addresses children, calling to "increase the availability of affordable high-quality early childhood education and care for children under the age of 3" and to "ensure equal and inclusive access to quality education at all levels," with an explicit focus on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The introduction highlights persistent ECEC access gaps, particularly for children under three, and insufficient support for pupils with special educational needs. Together with Italy and France, Slovakia is among the countries whose CSR most directly translates the Country Report's child-poverty and ECEC findings into operative recommendation language.
Slovenia	Slovenia's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, alternative care and education, including Roma and migrant children, but mental health and digital rights as standalone themes, along with children's right to be heard, receive minimal or no coverage. Slovenia has the lowest child AROPE rate in the EU, though it rose 0.7 pps to 12.5% in 2025; vulnerable groups, including Roma children, children in single-parent families and migrant children, face significantly higher risks. Family support remains fragmented across child benefits, the large family benefit and tax allowances, where harmonisation should be prioritised. Staff shortages in social services continue to hamper support for single parents and children in alternative, especially institutional, care, even as the new long-term care act establishes a dedicated social rights pillar. ECEC is well developed: under-3 participation (57.8%) is well above the EU average, following a 20-point rise since 2015, and an updated kindergarten curriculum from 2025/2026 aims to strengthen inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds. Basic skills are declining sharply (maths underachievement nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022), and digital literacy underachievement (51%) is well above the EU average, though early school leaving remains low and stable at 5.5%. Teacher shortages are severe, with over half of teachers aged 50+ intending to leave the profession. Slovenia's CSRs flag the fragmented family support system and calls for harmonisation, while recitals 32 and 35 reference declining PISA results and teacher shortages. CSR 5 calls for enhancing basic skills among pupils and improving working conditions in care and teaching, addressing children only indirectly; CSR 1's call for spending reviews implicitly touches the fragmented family benefit system. No reference is made to child poverty, the Child Guarantee, alternative care, or Roma children in the operative recommendations, despite their substantial coverage in the Country Report.

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
Spain	Spain's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC, deinstitutionalisation, education and children with a migrant/Roma background in depth, though children's mental health, digital rights as a standalone theme and child participation receive no dedicated coverage. Child poverty is Spain's most pressing social challenge: 33.8% of children were at AROPE in 2025 (down from 34.6% in 2024, but still among the EU's highest), with 77,000 more children at risk than in 2019, and Spain is not on track to meet its 2030 sub-target. Social transfers reduce child poverty by just 18.7%, against an EU average of 40.1%. A universal child benefit has been announced but not implemented, and the IMV minimum-income scheme and its child supplement (CAPI) face high non-take-up due to administrative burden; ESF+ allocates over EUR 1.2 billion to Child Guarantee measures. ECEC enrolment for ages 3-6 is near-universal (98%), and under-3 participation (56.8%) is well above the EU average, though a stark poverty-related gap persists (45.8% vs 62.4%) alongside wide regional variation (29.9% to 64.3%). A 2024-2030 national deinstitutionalisation strategy is in place. Basic skills underachievement affects around a quarter of 15-year-olds, and early school leaving (12.8%) remains above the EU average with sharp regional disparities. Roma children face an extreme 96% AROPE rate and very low upper-secondary completion (36%); foreign-born youth leave school early at nearly three times the rate of native-born peers. Spain is one of the few Member States to receive a dedicated child poverty CSR. The introduction explicitly identifies child poverty as a structural challenge, naming single-parent and large households, low-educated parents, Roma and migrant backgrounds as most exposed, and flags the IMV/CAPI's low take-up. CSR 6 calls to "address child poverty, including by rebalancing social expenditures across generations and improving the coverage and adequacy of social transfers and social assistance and their link to activation," alongside improving basic skills, reducing early school leaving, and addressing regional disparities in access to services, one of the clearest direct child-poverty mandates among the countries reviewed.
Sweden	Sweden's 2026 Country Report addresses child poverty, ECEC and education, including specific analysis of children and students from migrant and disadvantaged backgrounds, and briefly references youth mental health and children's digital skills, but deinstitutionalisation and a standalone children's mental health theme are not covered. The AROPE rate for children rose 2.5 pps to 23.4% in 2025, though Sweden has already met its modest 2030 reduction target of 5,000 fewer at-risk children; risk remains much higher for children of low-educated parents (70.6% vs EU: 62.5%). Sweden is implementing the European Child Guarantee through its 2022 action plan, with progress in ECEC access and services for children with disabilities, though national data on children with disabilities and in care remain insufficient for effective monitoring. ECEC participation for ages 3 to compulsory school (96.3%) exceeds the EU target, and the curriculum became mostly screen-free from July 2025, but only 43% of ECEC staff are qualified teachers, and 40% plan to leave the profession within five years, with shortages worst in areas with high concentrations of migrant-

Country	Summary of the 2026 Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations
	background children. Education outcomes are above EU averages but declining since 2018: migrant-background students face one of the EU's highest school-concentration indices (PISA isolation index 0.22), underachieve at higher rates across all subjects and in digital skills, and leave school early at twice the rate of native-born peers. Sweden's CSR addresses children primarily through educational equity. The introduction explicitly identifies declining basic skills, the concentration of disadvantaged and migrant-background students in certain schools, grading disparities between school types, and teacher shortages in ECEC and disadvantaged schools as key challenges, alongside the limited labour-market integration of vulnerable groups. CSR 5 calls to "improve educational outcomes, particularly of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic and migrant backgrounds, address the shortage of qualified teachers, ensure equity in the schooling system," making Sweden's CSR one of the more substantively student-focused recommendations in this cycle.

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