

Putting Children's Rights at the Heart of the Enlargement Package

**How Eurochild mobilised children's rights
organisations to inform the European
Commission's 2026 Enlargement
Package**



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

September 2026

Putting Children's Rights at the Heart of the Enlargement Package

How Eurochild mobilised national children's rights organisations to inform the European Commission's 2026 Enlargement Package

About this report

The annual Enlargement Package is one of the European Commission's principal tools for assessing progress towards EU accession. Ensuring that children's rights are systematically reflected in these assessments is essential, as the protection of fundamental rights is a core component of the accession process. Since 2017, Eurochild has contributed to the Enlargement Package by bringing together evidence from national children's rights organisations working directly with children and supporting their direct engagement with the European Commission. This sustained engagement helps bring the perspectives and experiences of children and those working with them are reflected throughout the Commission's monitoring process.

This report documents Eurochild's engagement with the 2026 enlargement cycle between January and June 2026. Eurochild works with over 40 members active across the EU enlargement countries, and its role in this process was to mobilise that network: gathering and consolidating national evidence, briefing the Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) on members' findings, submitting written contributions, and facilitating the direct participation of national member organisations in the virtual consultations on fundamental rights. The report sets out how members were involved at each stage, the key topics they raised, and what their input reveals about the role of national civil society organisations (CSOs) in the enlargement countries.

Eurochild gathered the evidence underpinning its contributions through the [2025 Flagship Report](#), *Unequal Childhoods: Rights on paper should be rights in practice*, published in November 2025, which includes dedicated country profiles for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine drafted in partnership with members working directly with children in each country.

How Eurochild informs the European Commission

January 2026: briefing for DG ENEST on members' evidence

On 15 January 2026, Eurochild convened a briefing for DG ENEST on the enlargement country findings of the flagship report. Eurochild identified and prepared member representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine, who presented their national evidence directly to the Coordinator for Gender

Equality, Rights of the Child, Persons with Disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, colleagues working on strategic programming and performance, and staff from the relevant geographic units and EU Delegations. The meeting brought together over 30 participants and created a direct dialogue between national children's rights organisations and the officials drafting the 2026 Enlargement Package, with Commission staff able to put questions to the organisations working on the ground and identify issues for follow-up.

April 2026: written contributions

Following the Commission's invitation of March 2026, Eurochild submitted its written contributions by the deadline of 30 April 2026, covering developments since September 2025. The submission consisted of the *Unequal Childhoods* country profiles for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine. Each profile was developed with the evidence of Eurochild's national member organisations and combines quantitative data on child poverty and demographics with members' analysis of child protection systems, child participation, online safety, mental health, education, early childhood development, housing and the situation of children in vulnerable circumstances, alongside country-specific recommendations.

June 2026: virtual consultations on fundamental rights

Eurochild took part in the virtual consultations on fundamental rights on 1 June 2026 (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and 4 June 2026 (Western Balkans and Türkiye). Rather than speaking on behalf of its network, Eurochild used its participation to facilitate the direct involvement of national members: it coordinated outreach across the network, identified one representative organisation from each country participating in the Flagship Report, communicated their details to DG ENEST in advance, and shared the practical information members needed to prepare their interventions. The Eurochild Secretariat attended both sessions alongside members to provide support and ensure follow-up. The following members represented their countries:

Country	Eurochild member organisation
Albania	Child Rights Centre Albania (CRCA)/ECPAT Albania
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Association Novi Put
Kosovo	Coalition of NGOs on Child Protection (KOMF), also representing CONCORDIA Projekte Sociale
Moldova	CONCORDIA Moldova
Serbia	Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia (MODS)
Türkiye	Hayat Sende Youth Academy Association, also representing the Association for Social Development and Aid Mobilization (ASAM)
Ukraine	Ukrainian Foundation for Public Health

Key topics raised by members

Rights on paper are not yet rights in practice. Across all seven countries, members reported that legal frameworks are broadly in place and alignment with the EU acquis has progressed, but implementation remains partial, uneven and under-resourced. In **Kosovo**, the *2020 Law on Child Protection* has not been fully implemented, leaving a system based on reactive, emergency responses rather than prevention and early intervention. In **Albania**, knowledge of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child among professionals remains low, and there is no systematic national training framework. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, institutional fragmentation across entities undermines coordination, and no national action plan on children's rights has been adopted since 2018.

Chronic underfunding of child protection services. Members consistently identified underfunding as the main barrier to delivery. In **Albania**, child protection services, particularly trauma and recovery services for child victims, are severely underfunded, and the national Social Fund supports public services only, excluding the NGOs that deliver much of the provision. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, government funding for NGO-run victim support services was abruptly cancelled without transparency or justification, at a time when the loss of other international donor funding had already strained services. In **Serbia**, family support, counselling and respite care remain project-based and unstable.

Violence against children, including online exploitation. Members reported rising levels of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** has seen a sharp increase in child sexual abuse material, including AI-generated content, alongside child trafficking and widespread impunity. In **Albania**, reported serious online incidents rose by almost 67 per cent in 2024, and proposed Criminal Code amendments on grooming and the age of sexual consent have not been considered by parliament. In **Moldova**, almost 30,000 abusive materials involving children were removed from the internet in 2024. In **Serbia**, 49 per cent of identified victims of human trafficking in 2024 were children, with an average age of 12.

Deinstitutionalisation and alternative care. Progress is mixed. **Moldova** has reduced the number of children in institutions from 12,000 in 2007 to under 500 in 2024, though community services remain uneven and children with disabilities still rely disproportionately on institutional care. **Ukraine's** better care reform is shifting from residential care towards family- and community-based services, with Eurochild members embedded in its design and delivery at municipal level. By contrast, members reported stalled reforms in **Serbia**, the continued dominance of institutional care in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Türkiye**, and around 700 children remaining in long-term institutional care in **Albania**.

Shrinking civic space and risks to child human rights defenders. In **Serbia**, members described a severe deterioration of children's rights: children participating in peaceful protests have been subjected to intimidation, surveillance, detention and police violence, and partnerships with NGOs were terminated after organisations spoke out. In **Albania**, a growing anti-rights movement targets CSOs and LGBTIQ+ children, while consultation of civil

society is often reduced to box-ticking. In **Türkiye**, professionals defending the rights of children in vulnerable situations face obstacles to their advocacy.

Children in the most vulnerable situations. Members drew attention to the systemic discrimination faced by Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children, children with disabilities, refugee and migrant children, and children affected by war. **Türkiye** hosts the largest refugee child population in Europe, with rising child labour and unmet mental health needs among displaced children. In **Ukraine**, the full-scale war exposes children to violence, displacement, family separation and trauma, while many children fall outside formal protection systems altogether. In **Kosovo**, around 80 per cent of Roma children live in severe material deprivation.

Children's mental health. Members in every country reported major gaps in mental health services. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, 65 per cent of young people surveyed reported symptoms of depression or anxiety in the previous year, while specialised services are almost non-existent in many areas. In **Serbia**, one in five children and adolescents has at least one psychiatric disorder, with only 78 psychologists working in child and youth mental health in primary healthcare nationwide. In **Kosovo**, children's mental health services in public institutions are nearly non-existent.

The European Child Guarantee as an opportunity. Members across the region welcomed the extension of the European Child Guarantee approach to the enlargement countries and are actively supporting its preparatory phases, including through consultations with children. They stressed, however, that without dedicated EU financial support, including through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), the Child Guarantee risks reaching only a limited number of children.

The role of national civil society organisations

Across the enlargement countries, national children's rights organisations are not merely advocacy actors. They are service providers, evidence generators, and trusted partners for public authorities. Without their expertise, the Commission's assessment of children's rights would be significantly weaker.

A consistent message across both consultations was that national CSOs are indispensable to children's rights in the enlargement countries yet remain structurally excluded from resources and decision-making. Eurochild members are often licensed providers of specialised, multidisciplinary services that the state does not deliver, from trauma-informed care, legal assistance, and reintegration support for victims of trafficking, to inclusive early childhood education, helplines and community-based prevention. They also generate much of the evidence on which monitoring depends.

At the same time, members described consultations at national level that are largely tokenistic, with limited or no access to EU and national public funding, and, in some countries, retaliation for speaking out. The withdrawal of international donors has left many

organisations financially fragile precisely when demand for their services is growing. Members therefore called on the Commission to treat the meaningful involvement and sustainable financing of national civil society, particularly at local level, as a cornerstone of the fundamental rights assessment in the enlargement process, and to ensure that EU funding instruments are accessible to the national and local organisations working directly with children.

Recommendations to the European Commission

1. Continue systematic consultation with national children's rights organisations throughout the enlargement cycle both at EU and national levels.
2. Continue assessing the impact of the implementation of legislation on children's rights alongside legal alignment, based on the perspective of members on the ground.
3. Recognise sustainable financing of national CSOs as a component of the fundamentals assessment.
4. Ensure that child-rights concerns identified in the Enlargement Reports are followed up through accession dialogue, technical assistance and EU funding, including IPA III.
5. Support the rollout of the European Child Guarantee through dedicated Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) and Global Europe Instrument in 2028-2034 EU funding framework.
6. Strengthen monitoring of civic space and its impact on organisations working with and for children.

Conclusions and next steps

The 2026 enlargement cycle demonstrated the value of structured engagement between the European Commission and national children's rights organisations. By mobilising its network throughout the process, Eurochild ensured that the Commission's monitoring was informed by first-hand evidence from organisations working directly with children.

Eurochild's added value lay in combining comparable, evidence-based analysis through its *Unequal Childhoods* Flagship Report with the direct participation of national members at every stage of the cycle: presenting findings during the January briefing, contributing written evidence in April, and engaging directly with Commission officials during the June consultations.

The evidence gathered across the seven enlargement countries highlights a consistent gap between legislative commitments and children's lived realities. While progress has been made in aligning legal and policy frameworks with EU standards, implementation remains uneven, under-resourced and, in some cases, undermined by shrinking civic space. Members consistently identified underfunded child protection systems, limited access to

quality services, growing risks in the digital environment, persistent discrimination against children in vulnerable situations, and inadequate investment in children's mental health as common challenges across the region. These findings reinforce the importance of assessing not only legislative alignment, but also the effectiveness and impact of reforms on children's rights.

The consultations also underlined the indispensable role of national civil society organisations in the enlargement process. Beyond their advocacy role, these organisations provide essential services, generate evidence, monitor implementation and ensure that children's experiences are reflected in policy discussions. Their meaningful participation is therefore critical to ensuring that the enlargement process accurately reflects the realities facing children and supports sustainable, rights-based reforms. It also illustrates the value of European networks in bridging national expertise and EU decision-making: helping local evidence reach the officials responsible for monitoring accession while ensuring that national organisations retain their own voice.

Looking ahead, Eurochild will continue to contribute to the 2027 Enlargement Package by coordinating evidence from its members and facilitating their direct engagement with the European Commission throughout the monitoring cycle. Eurochild will also continue to advocate for children's rights to be recognised as an integral element of the accession process, including through stronger monitoring of implementation, the effective roll-out of the European Child Guarantee in the enlargement countries, improved access to EU funding for children and child rights organisations, and the protection of the civic space that enables national organisations to carry out their work.

Sustaining this structured dialogue between the European Commission and national children's rights organisations will be essential to ensure that children's rights remain a visible component of the accession process and that reforms are assessed not only on legislative alignment, but also on their implementation and impact on children's lives.

For more information, contact:

Zuzana Konradova

EU Affairs Coordinator, Eurochild

Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org

Brisa Wiklund

Policy, Advocacy and Communication Intern, Eurochild

Brisa.Wiklund@eurochild.org

Eurochild AISBL

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels

Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83

info@eurochild.org – www.eurochild.org

© Eurochild 2026