Eurochild
Putting children at the heart of Europe

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# The Future of Social Investment in Europe: Children at the Heart of the MFF 2028–2034

*Event report | European Parliament InfoHub, Brussels | 14 October 2026*

Organised by the EU Alliance for Investing in Children (Eurochild and Save the Children, co-chairs), with support from a Tanya's Dream Fund project led by Eurochild. The report synthesises the event transcript and the meeting's objectives.

## Executive summary

The event brought EU policymakers, civil society, the Council of Europe Development Bank, the European Investment Bank and philanthropy into a discussion of how the post-2027 EU budget should reduce child poverty and translate the European Child Guarantee (ECG) into practical, accessible services. A shared theme was that investment must deliver measurable improvements for children, while a central policy difference concerned whether the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) offer sufficient protection for social spending without dedicated funding lines.

Participants recognised progress made through the ECG, ESF+ and national measures, yet emphasised that roughly 19.2 million children remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion. There was considerable support for preserving protected allocations for children, preventing family separation through early and integrated support, strengthening child-rights safeguards, making civil-society partnership meaningful and tracking outcomes rather than only expenditure. The Commission representative emphasised the potential benefits of flexible integrated plans, a required child-poverty investment priority and the role of country-specific recommendations. These perspectives should be read as positions advanced during a policy exchange, not as a unanimous negotiated outcome.

## 1. Purpose and political context

The concept note framed the MFF negotiations as an opportunity to protect the social dimension of EU investment and to shift towards prevention and early intervention, including support that reduces avoidable child–family separation and institutionalisation. It aimed to connect the ECG and ESF+ with the proposed funding architecture, give visibility to lived experience, and explore additional investment partnerships. The final programme was organised around two panels: the budget architecture and the place of children; and the practical route from funding to impact.

The opening remarks presented the seven-year budget as a decision about the childhoods of children growing up now: a child born in 2026 will be eight in 2034. Presentations referred to EU ambitions under the European Pillar of Social Rights to lift at least five million children out of poverty by 2030, contrasting those commitments with the limited change in aggregate child-poverty figures since 2019.

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## 2. Panel 1 — the future of social investment and the next MFF

### 2.1 European institutions: integrated investment versus guaranteed visibility

In a video contribution, **MEP Klára Dobrev** emphasised the human and intergenerational costs of child poverty. She argued for a strong, distinct social fund and at least €20 billion dedicated to the European Child Guarantee.

**Cătălin Gheran, speaking on behalf of the Cabinet of Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu**, argued that budget choices should begin with children's needs and demonstrate results. He described potential advantages of NRPPs in combining capital investment with services, using childcare as an example: a nursery building is ineffective without affordable places, staff and integrated support. He noted that the ECG is among the priority social investment areas and that European Semester country-specific recommendations would be influential in programming. He acknowledged stakeholders' concerns about visibility and spending competition while presenting minimum social investment requirements as a floor that could be exceeded.

**MEP Estelle Ceulemans** warned that the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plan architecture would remove a dedicated budget line for ESF+ and bring employment and social expenditure into a broader envelope alongside other priorities. While recognising the proposed 14% minimum for social spending, she cautioned that this figure covers a wider range of measures than ESF+ and could, in practice, become a ceiling rather than a floor when resources are contested.

She raised concerns about the absence of a dedicated ESF+ budget line in the proposed NRPP structure and about whether the proposed social-spending minimum would genuinely protect investment in children. She highlighted the political challenge of securing support across Parliament's groups and supported a standalone ESF+ with dedicated resources. She referred to the European Parliament's interim position calling for a standalone ESF+ with at least €124 billion, and highlighted parliamentary work to protect a €20 billion allocation for the European Child Guarantee and a 5% child-poverty earmark. She stressed that these demands would require support across political groups, not only from those already advocating stronger social investment.

Linking the budget debate to the EU's ambition to lift five million children out of poverty by 2030, Ceulemans argued that targets and strategies cannot deliver without clear financing, credible implementation pathways and Member State commitments. She acknowledged the value of more flexible, integrated spending but questioned whether child poverty would remain sufficiently protected when competing against more visible investment priorities.

### 2.2 Civil society: protect ESF+, earmarking and rights

**Zuzana Konradova (Eurochild)** recalled that the ECG provided an EU-wide framework linking national action plans, reporting, the European Semester and ESF+ financing. She cited examples of improvements, including free primary-school meals in Croatia and expanded early childhood access in Lithuania. She noted

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that the 5% ESF+ earmark applicable to eleven Member States helped mobilise a traceable €9.6 billion envelope and strengthen national planning and governance. She called for 25% of relevant resources for social inclusion, 5% for child poverty in every Member State, 10% in countries with higher child-poverty rates, and €20 billion dedicated to the ECG. She also stressed UN Convention on the Rights of the Child safeguards, preventing support for segregated provision and institutions, stronger child-focused European Semester Country Specific Recommendations, and adequately resourced civil-society participation.

**Enrico Tormen (Save the Children)** introduced the policy paper "Protect What Works", arguing that the ESF+ and ECG have generated programmes and institutional attention that should not be lost. He stressed that poverty affects participation and belonging as well as material needs; delayed intervention produces greater future costs. Examples cited included support for Roma children and local centres in Italy, and assistance to vulnerable mothers in Romania. He called for stronger child-poverty earmarks and remarked that a promise of a Child Guarantee must be matched by guaranteed funding.

**Georgi Elenkov (National Network for Children, Bulgaria)** illustrated the gap between formal strategies and outcomes: despite sustained ECG governance and reform, around one third of children in Bulgaria remained at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2025. He advocated binding allocations, outcome-oriented and transparent reporting, enforceable partnership, proportional funding and advance-payment rules for grassroots organisations, and independent ECG monitoring with families and civil society. He noted that administrative rules and limited working capital can prevent trusted local NGOs from accessing funds. He concluded that social cohesion and equal opportunities are fundamental to Europe's long-term security and should not be set against defence spending.

### 2.3 Discussion and audience exchange

The audience reinforced the value of national action plans as accountability instruments, but questioned whether strategies without financing can change children's lives. Participants asked for flexible integrated spending together with binding earmarks, better consultation with children, and simpler access for community organisations. In response, the Commission representative stressed that child poverty would have to be addressed in NRPPs and that some burdensome financing conditions stem from national practice rather than EU rules. The discussion therefore exposed a real design tension: retaining integration and discretion while safeguarding minimum rights-based investment.

## 3. Panel 2 — from funding to impact: partnerships and investments

### 3.1 Why predictable earmarking matters on the ground

**MEP Hristo Petrov** illustrated ESF+ support through practical experiences a child can feel: school meals, after-school activities, childcare and help for parents. In his view, earmarking makes an otherwise vulnerable priority harder to set aside during a crisis. He supported a 5% requirement in every Member State, 10% in countries with higher child poverty, and at least €20 billion for the ECG. He linked investment

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to deinstitutionalisation and to family support, community-based care and joined-up professional services, warning that flexibility should not render effective services disposable.

**3.2 Public development banks as complementary partners**

**Emilia Postolache (Council of Europe Development Bank)** outlined how loans, grants, bridge finance and co-financing can support social services, housing and investments reaching vulnerable children, including in countries beyond the EU. She described work with civil society and public authorities, and examples from Romania, France and Catalonia showing how guarantees and different funding sources can be combined. In particular, bridge financing can respond to cash-flow difficulties when NGOs wait for EU reimbursements.

**Bianca Făragău (European Investment Bank)** described investment and advisory tools that can bring education, housing, healthcare and social services together. Examples included school modernisation in Marseille, neighbourhood-focused affordable housing in Berlin, financing for reintegration of young people from institutional care in Romania, and work on a children's hospital in Burgas. She emphasised long-term lending, EU guarantees, advisory support and the importance of designing projects for real outcomes, not simply infrastructure delivery.

**3.3 National experience and prevention-focused philanthropy**

**Linnéa Plöen Casterud (Save the Children Sweden)** cautioned that children can face growing poverty even in countries with extensive welfare provision. She discussed the cumulative risks of changes to benefits and access conditions, particularly for vulnerable families. As a constructive example, she described the ESF+-supported "My Future" partnership with the City of Stockholm, combining coaching, psychological support and pathways into education and work for young people. Continuity over several programming periods had helped make the programme a sustained partnership.

**Delia Pop (Tanya's Dream Fund)** emphasised the link between poverty reduction, early family support and prevention of unnecessary separation. She described practical efforts in Bulgaria: helping uninsured pregnant women access maternity care through accompaniment, transport and trusted intermediaries; and community-based Sure Start-style family support with the Tulip Foundation and its partners. A recurring insight was that usable services require the less visible "glue" of outreach, staff, safeguarding, flexible access and trust. Philanthropic funding can test and refine approaches, while public investment is needed to sustain and scale them. She called for long-term goals, genuine co-creation, independent monitoring and outcomes defined with families.

In the open discussion, **Desislava Stoyanova (Bankwatch)** argued that **the partnership principle** must be substantive, with adequate representation, technical assistance and influence over spending choices. Different national structures require different arrangements; merely convening a monitoring committee does not by itself create genuine accountability.

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**4. Cross-cutting findings**

- Political visibility and predictability - Integrated programming can connect investments, but children's priorities need identifiable allocations, clear objectives and transparent reporting to withstand competition within a single envelope.
- Prevention and family support - Effective child-poverty policy combines income security, family and community-based services, early intervention and accessible health, education, nutrition and housing. Avoiding family separation is a core outcome, not an incidental benefit.
- Rights and equity - Programming and monitoring should explicitly examine who is excluded, avoid institutionalisation and segregation, and improve access for children facing the greatest barriers.
- Infrastructure is only one component: staff, transport, case coordination, childcare affordability, trusted outreach and community intermediaries must be financed.
- Monitoring and accountability – Output based monitoring, training numbers and facilities opened do not demonstrate improvements in children's lives. Outcomes, service quality and independent feedback should matter.
- Blended finance with public responsibility - Development banks and philanthropy can add expertise, guarantees, bridging tools and catalytic support; they complement rather than replace stable public obligations.