



Recent Trends in Child and Family Policy in the EU

European Platform for Investing in
Children: Annual thematic report



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FOREWORD

This second annual trend report outlines and summarises new policy developments in the area of child and family policy in the 28 EU Member States (EU28), and reports on progress with policies and activities initiated in earlier years. It is drafted as part of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) project. The report is aligned thematically with pillars of the 2013 European Commission Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (hereafter the Recommendation). The document is also guided by relevant principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The sections below provide an overview of the direction of and progress with child and family policy developments in the EU28, in line with the three pillars of the Recommendation.

SUMMARY: PROGRESS IN CHILD AND FAMILY POLICY

In 2013, the European Commission Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' set out key recommendations for Member States with regard to supporting positive well-being and outcomes for children and families, along three pillars: access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services, and children's right to participation.

This was followed in 2017 with the introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which set out 20 key principles against which Member States can benchmark their social policies. Notably, principle 11 - *Childcare and support to children* – emphasises particular measures for children. This includes acknowledgement of the growing awareness of the importance of early childhood education and care with better child outcomes in later life, by outlining a right to affordable education and care 'of good quality'. Principle 11 also states the rights of a child to protection from poverty, including the right of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to 'specific measures to enhance equal opportunities' in order to ensure their access to adequate social support and life opportunities. Meanwhile, Pillar 9 stresses the right to a positive work-life balance for parents and people with caring responsibilities, including suitable leave arrangements, flexible working arrangements and access to care services.

The European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC), established in 2013, monitors key and innovative developments in child and family policy in the European Union (EU) and develops resources to support Member States to implement the Recommendation. Below, EPIC provides an overview of key recent developments in child and family policy in the EU.

Access to adequate resources

The Recommendation acknowledges the strong relationship between parents' labour market participation and family living conditions. One of the objectives of the Recommendation is improving access to resources for parents.

One of the most prominent initiatives in this area has been the Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers. The Directive, which was proposed by the European Commission in 2017, was the first legislative proposal to follow the implementation of the Pillar. It sets new standards for leave policy in the EU by proposing a minimum of 10 days of paid paternity leave and introducing two months of non-transferable paid parental leave for each parent. This way, the Directive promotes a more modern

concept of gender roles and families, as well as more equal sharing of professional and caring responsibilities. The Directive was approved by the European Parliament in April 2019, and the EU Member States need to transpose the Directive into their national legislation by 2024.

At MS level, we saw trends towards **enabling take-up of maternity, paternity and parental leave**, including increasing entitlements, reforming leave entitlements to incentivise take-up (for example, by linking payments more closely to previous salaries) and increasing the flexibility of leave, including reducing disincentives for parents who choose to make an early return to work. Notably, a number of countries have taken steps to enable or encourage the take-up of paternity leave by increasing statutory leave entitlement, or otherwise encourage leave-sharing between partners.

The second objective of the Recommendation under this Pillar is to provide adequate living standards through a combination of benefits. While social welfare remains the preserve of Member States, the **preparatory action for establishing a 'Child Guarantee for Vulnerable Children'** is a new EU-level action in this sphere. The European Parliament formulated the Child Guarantee as a new political priority for an implementation framework for EU policies, legislation and programmes to ensure that children get access to essential services. As currently envisaged, the possible Child Guarantee takes an integrated approach to tackling multidimensional aspects of child poverty, ensuring that all children in the EU28 have access to free health care, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition. The phase assessing the feasibility of the Child Guarantee scheme was launched in 2018 and thus far has produced results from the online consultation. The feasibility study will continue until 2020, with a series of stakeholder workshops planned for the autumn months of 2019. A final report summarising evidence for recommendations for the implementation of the scheme is scheduled for the early months of 2020.

At Member State level, initiatives have also been launched to provide financial support to families and children. Notably, a number of countries have launched schemes to provide **financial support for large families**, including the launch of the 'European Large Family Card' and similar schemes in a number of countries to provide discounts for large families; Poland's '500+' initiative to provide monthly payments for every second and subsequent children; and, in Italy, the provision of land parcels to families with over three children.

Broader anti-poverty initiatives have also been launched, including France's comprehensive anti-poverty plan, intended to focus on children and young people; Ireland's implementation of a *Whole-Of-Government Strategy for Tackling Child Poverty*; and Denmark's '1000 days' programme, to provide funds for various ECEC, family and health support measures for children aged 0-3.

Access to affordable quality services

The Recommendation also recognises the importance of access to high-quality services to reduce inequality and support groups of children who may face particular barriers, such as children without parental care, children with disabilities and migrant children.

The Recommendation acknowledges that investing in **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** is one of the most effective means to address inequality and socio-economic disadvantages. All Member States have made progress towards the 2002 Barcelona targets of 33% of children aged under 3, and 90% of children aged between 3 years and the mandatory school starting age, having access to formal childcare services, although wide variation remains between the proportion of children in formal childcare individual Member States.

Building on the Recommendation's objective and on Principle 11 of the Pillar focusing on the right to affordable quality early childhood education and care provision, in 2018 the **European Commission issued a Proposal for a Council Recommendation of High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems**. By introducing this proposal, childcare quality has been put firmly on the EU- and national-level policy agendas. The Proposal was adopted at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council in May 2019. The work on the Common framework for high-quality ECEC continues, with an objective to modernise the provision of early childhood services in the EU28.

Enabling access to ECEC continues to also be a priority at Member State level, with some Member States increasing the number of places, launching subsidies or benefits for ECEC places for all or disadvantaged children, and in some countries, moving towards mandatory ECEC. The **quality of ECEC provision** was also the subject of initiatives in some countries, including measures to support information-sharing in Denmark and Greece, funding commitments to improve the quality of ECEC provision in Romania and Germany, and initiatives to develop the professional qualifications of ECEC professionals in Austria and Finland.

In addition, Member States have announced different types of support measures to **promote child well-being through positive parenting**. These include the establishment in Germany of the Federal Foundation for Early Childhood Intervention; and the introduction in Malta of a National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting (2016-2024); and the launch of information platforms for parents, including a free telephone helpline in the UK and an online portal in Sweden.

Various actions relating to **promoting family-based care** have also been advanced in recent years by Member States with high numbers of children in institutional care, including the introduction of deinstitutionalisation strategies and policies, and initiatives to promote foster care (including both financial support and awareness campaigns).

Children's right to participate

The third pillar of the Recommendation focuses on children's right to participate in different spheres, including participation in play, recreation, cultural and sport activities; the right for children's views to be heard in justice proceedings, and participation in policy and service planning in a way that is adapted to their age.

While Member States have implemented various initiatives to encourage child participation in public decision-making including children's parliaments, councils and surveys, children's participation has been more limited at European level. However, a prominent action in this sphere is the **Bucharest Declaration**, agreed at a Children's Summit in May 2019 under the auspices of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The Declaration, co-drafted by children, is a political commitment which calls for mechanisms to ensure child participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Recent months have also brought progress with the development and implementation of the **Child Participation Assessment Tool**. The tool, developed by the Council of Europe in 2016, aims to create opportunities for children's participation, representation and empowerment, and to help measure how well children's right to participate is protected in Europe. The tool has been tested in several EU countries and is currently being implemented across other EU Member States.

Meanwhile, a renewed **EU 2019-2027 Youth Strategy** was approved by the EU Council, with an objective to empower and connect young people and foster their engagement in civic and democratic life.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background and objectives

Recent months have brought a number of important legislative and policy changes in the area of child and family policy in the EU28. These developments have been guided by the 2013 European Commission Recommendation 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'¹ and by relevant principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.²

Box 1 Three key pillars of the European Commission's Recommendation 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'

1. Access to adequate resources

- Support parents' participation in the labour market
- Provide for adequate living standards through a combination of benefits

2. Access to affordable quality services

- Reduce inequality at a young age by investing in early childhood education and care
- Improve education systems' impact on equal opportunities
- Improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children
- Provide children with a safe, adequate housing and living environment
- Enhance family support and the quality of alternative care settings

3. Children's right to participate

- Support the participation of all children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities
- Put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision-making that affects their lives

This second annual thematic report, drafted as part of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC)³ project, outlines and summarises new policy developments and report on progress with activities initiated in previous years. The information used in this report comes from the EPIC national profiles.⁴

Thematic coverage

This document covers themes related to the pillars of the Recommendation and principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, focusing on EU-level developments and on responses at the national level. It reports on common themes, trends and changes relevant in a number of EU Member States. First, it covers key aspects related to all children and policies addressing the socio-economic disadvantage (e.g. provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, leave provisions for parents). Second, it gives particular attention to the situation of vulnerable children (e.g. migrant children, children with disabilities, children residing in institutions).

Report structure

Each chapter is structured in a similar way. Each chapter first provides background information about policy area and developments at the EU level. This is followed by a short overview of key policy challenges and how these are being addressed at the EU Member States level. A final conclusion summarises the main findings and outlines remaining challenges and potential next steps.

CHAPTER 2: EU-LEVEL ACTION: PROGRESS ON THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN CHILD AND FAMILY POLICY

This chapter provides an overview of progress and recent initiatives relating to the well-being of children and their families at EU level.

European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights aims to modernise the EU legal framework to give effective social rights to EU citizens. Following a public consultation and a Recommendation by the European Commission (EC), it was officially proclaimed by the Commission, Parliament and Council at the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017. The Pillar sets out 20 key principles essential to achieving fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems across the EU. The principles are structured around the following three categories:

- Equal opportunities and access to the labour market
- Fair working conditions
- Social protection and inclusion

Among the principles, some are directly relevant to child and family policy. These include the **right to quality and inclusive education** (Principle 1), **work-life balance** (Principle 9) and **the right to affordable quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)** (Principle 11).

The Pillar's social scoreboard records progress by thematic area, by country and by year.⁵ Moreover, on the first anniversary of the Pillar, the EC published a factsheet summarising EU-level initiatives, achieved or in progress, related to each principle since its implementation.⁶

Table 1 EU-level initiatives related to principles of the Pillar relevant for child and family policies

Principles	EU-level initiatives	Status
1. Quality and inclusive education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills agenda for Europe • European Solidarity Corps • European Education Area • European Social Fund + • Erasmus + 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In progress • Achieved • In progress • In progress • Achieved
9. Work-life balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive on Work-Life Balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved
11. Childcare and support to children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive on Work-Life Balance • Common framework for high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) • Preparatory Action on a Child Guarantee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved • In progress • In progress

Source: European Commission, *One year: European Pillar of Social Rights*, 2018. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/european_pillar_one_year_on.pdf.

Work-life balance

A key deliverable of the Pillar is to achieve better work-life balance for EU citizens by providing mechanisms for balancing professional and family responsibilities and for encouraging equal sharing of caring responsibilities between genders. As of January 2019, caring responsibilities are still a barrier for many women to entering the labour

market, with the overall employment rate of women 11.5 percentage points lower than that of men.⁷

In 2017, the EC proposed the Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers as part of the Pillar.⁸ In January 2019, following five months of negotiations, the Parliament and the Council reached a provisional agreement on the details of the Directive,⁹ and the European Parliament backed it on 4 April 2019.¹⁰ It is the first legislative proposal to follow the implementation of the Pillar. The Directive set several minimum standards for EU Member States, as detailed in the table below.

Table 2 New minimum standards set by the agreed Directive on Work-Life Balance

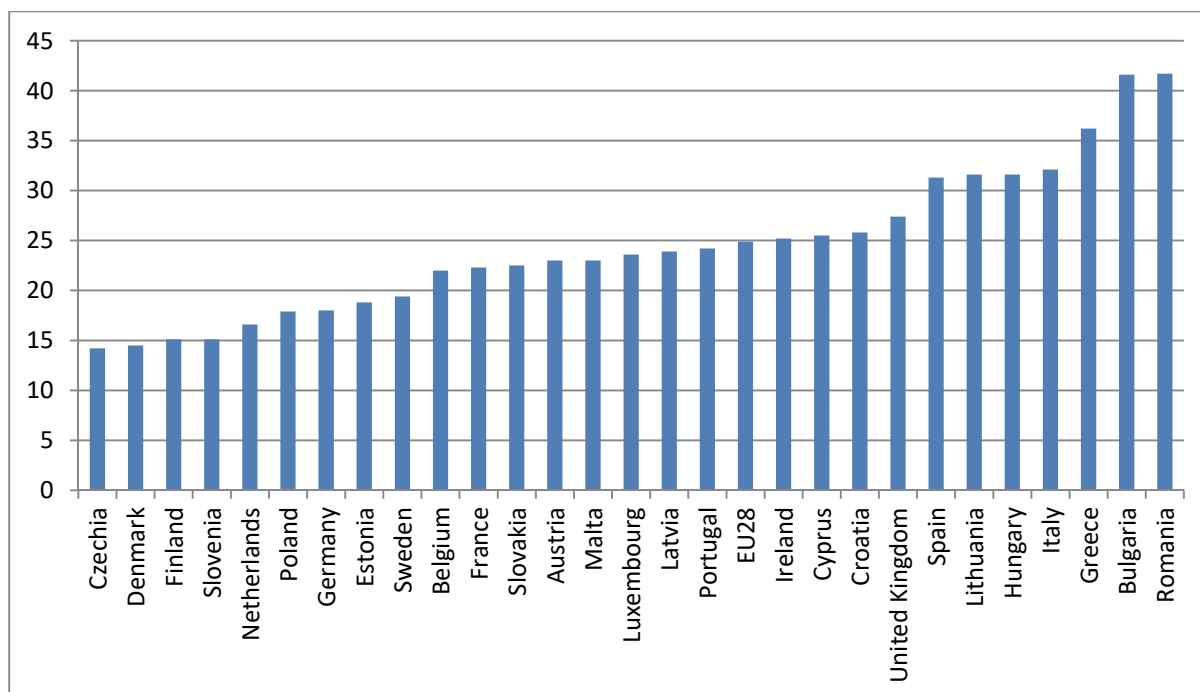
	Current EU law	Agreed Directive
Paternity leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No minimum standard for paternity leave across EU Member States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimum of 10 days of paid paternity leave Payment at sick-leave level
Parental leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimum of 4 months per parent, transferable between parents No rule on allowance or payment of leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimum of 4 months per parent, including 2 months which are non-transferable between parents The 2 months of non-transferable leave are to be compensated at a level set by Member States Leave can be flexible (full-time, part-time or in fragmented periods)
Carer’s leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No minimum standard for carers’ leave (except so-called <i>force majeure</i>, which allows a short time of leave for unexpected family reasons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimum of 5 days of carers’ leave per employee per year
Flexible working arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents returning from parental leave have the right to request reduced and flexible working hours All workers have the right to request part-time work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Right for all working parents of children up to at least eight years old and for all carers to request flexible working arrangements (reduced or flexible working hours and flexibility on the place of work)

Source: European Commission, *A new start to support work-life balance for parents and carers*, 2019. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17583&langId=en>

Steps towards a child guarantee

It is estimated that, as of 2017, a quarter of children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion.¹¹ Current efforts to establish a Child Guarantee at EU level aim to ensure that every child in every EU Member State has access to critical services, such as healthcare, education, ECEC, decent housing and adequate nutrition.¹²

Figure 1 Share of children below 18 years old at risk of poverty or social exclusion, EU28, 2017



Source: Eurostat, People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex (online data code: ilc_peps010).¹³

In 2015, the European Parliament (EP) called for Member States to introduce a Child Guarantee. This proposal followed the 2014 implementation of the Youth Guarantee, a commitment by Member States to provide all young people under the age of 25 with a good-quality offer of employment or continuing education within four months of entering the labour market.¹⁴ As currently envisaged, a Child Guarantee would aim to tackle child poverty and social exclusion by encouraging countries to invest in services and initiatives to support positive child development and well-being.

In October 2018, the EC launched a feasibility study on the Child Guarantee proposal. The study aims to assess the feasibility, implementation options and added value of a Child Guarantee, focusing on four specific groups of vulnerable or disadvantaged children: children residing in institutions, children with disabilities and special needs, children of recent migrants and refugees, and children living in precarious family situations.¹⁵ Based on an online consultation, which closed in February 2019, and a series of stakeholder workshops planned for September and October 2019, the study will develop recommendations for the implementation of a Child Guarantee.¹⁶

Additionally, in January 2019, the EP voted a draft regulation on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the period 2021-2027. It stipulates that Member States will have to allocate at least 5% of ESF+ resources to the envisaged European Child Guarantee scheme.¹⁷ It is now up to the European Council to support these regulations in the future EU budget.

EU Youth Strategy

In January 2019, the EU Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027 came into force. It is the result of a dialogue process which took place in 2017 and 2018 and which involved young people from all EU Member States. This dialogue served to identify 11 goals for EU youth policy:¹⁸

1. Connecting EU with Youth
2. Equality of All Genders
3. Inclusive Societies
4. Information & Constructive Dialogue
5. Mental Health & Wellbeing
6. Moving Rural Youth Forward
7. Quality Employment for All

8. Quality Learning
9. Space and Participation for All
10. Sustainable Green Europe
11. Youth Organisations & European Programme

Approved by the Council of the EU in November 2018, the new strategy focuses on three areas of action: Engage, Connect and Empower. The strategy aims to foster young people's participation in democratic life; to connect young people across Europe through voluntary engagement, learning mobility and intercultural understanding; and to support youth empowerment.¹⁹ The strategy will develop a cross-sectoral approach to address the needs of young people in various policy areas, including the establishment of a new EU Youth Coordinator.

In sum

Since the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017, the European Union has launched a number of initiatives in order to support and encourage Member States in strengthening social rights for European citizens, and in particular the well-being of children and families.

The Directive on Work-Life Balance, agreed on in April 2019, the first legislative proposal since the implementation of the Pillar, shows how EU-level action can provide minimum standards for supporting parents in the labour market. Similarly, current steps towards the development of a Child Guarantee could ensure access to critical services for all children across the EU. Finally, the EU Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027 resulted from direct dialogue with young people across Member States and shows the EU's commitment to encourage further participation and inclusion of young people in decision-making.

CHAPTER 3: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was published in 1989²⁰ and has been ratified in all European Union (EU) countries.²¹ In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on actively examining progress with regards to the advancements of the implementation of the Convention.

Box 2 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Four core principles:

- Non-discrimination
- Devotion to the best interests of the child
- The right to life, survival and development
- Respect for the views of the child

Source: Unicef, 'About the Convention'. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from https://www.unicef.org/rightsite/237_202.htm.

In order to ensure that children's rights are upheld, the Council of Europe's 1996 European Strategy for Children included a proposal that each Member State appoint a commissioner, ombudsperson, or similarly functioning institution with the independence and resources to monitor and advise policymakers on the extent to which their political and legislative decisions adhere to the aims set out in the UNCRC.²² The majority of EU Member States have established an ombudsperson or commissioner to focus exclusively on children's rights, with Romania becoming the most recent addition, following the establishment of a dedicated Children's Advocate in 2018.^{23,24} In that same year, the Czech Republic's Committee for the Rights of Children also began discussing the introduction of its own ombudsperson for children.²⁵

Box 3 What is a children's ombudsperson?

A children's ombudsperson, also sometimes referred to as a children's or youth's commissioner, is an authority responsible for protecting and promoting the rights of children and young people.

Although the role of ombudspersons will vary from country to country, their functions generally include:

- Monitoring, collecting and publishing data on children's health, economic and social conditions
- Receiving, responding to, and (where possible) resolving complaints from individual children or their representatives
- Influencing law, policy and practice to reflect the best interests of children

In order to achieve their aims successfully, ombudspersons must:

- Be independent of the national government, but in close enough contact to monitor and influence government activities
- Have sufficient autonomy to set their own priorities, processes and overall agenda
- Have the right to publish their research and opinions without censorship

Sources: European Network of Ombudspersons for Children, 'Organization of ENOC', http://enoc.eu/?page_id=8; United Nations, *National human rights institutions: a handbook on the establishment and strengthening of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights*, Centre for Human Rights, Geneva, 1995, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/training4en.pdf>.

In addition to establishing offices of a children's ombudsperson, many Member States have also undertaken additional legislative and policy actions to strengthen the provision of children's rights in their countries. For example, in 2016, the German Children's Fund began implementing the Council of Europe's 2016-2021 Sofia Strategy for the Rights of the Child on a national level, including campaigning for the interests of children in politics and raising awareness of children's rights among schools, child and youth services, local authorities and the general public.²⁶ In 2018, the Scottish government launched a national action plan for progressing children's rights from 2018 to 2021, including plans to deliver a three-year awareness programme on children's rights and to explore approaches to the integration of a rights-based perspective on child welfare into Scottish

law.²⁷ Similarly, in 2018, the Swedish government committed to enshrining the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in national law, making the document legally binding from 2020 onwards.²⁸

In addition, the German federal government intends to explicitly recognise children's rights in the constitution. To this end, a joint working group composed of representatives of the federal government and of the state (*Länder*) governments has been tasked to work out a proposal for an amendment of the constitution by the end of 2019 at the latest.

More information on how a children's rights perspective is embedded in policy and decision-making is included in the EPIC policy memo on this subject.²⁹

In focus: EU-level efforts to support children's right to participation

A major focus in the area of children's rights has been the fundamental right of children to participate in politics, with many recent developments occurring at the EU level. As reported in Chapter 2, in 2018, the EU 2019-2027 Youth Strategy was approved by the EU Council to establish a cross-policy and multi-sectoral approach to meeting young people's needs.³⁰ Furthermore, International Day of the Girl Child (October 11) saw a variety of efforts to inspire young girls' interest in politics and raise awareness of women's roles in political decision-making, including the invitation of teenage girls to an event hosted by MEPs at the European Parliament and the launch of the #Girl2Leader Campaign by the Women Political Leaders Global Forum.³¹ Similarly, the European Parliament marked World Children's Day (November 20) by inviting 40 children and young people to meet and engage in discussions with political decision-makers, particularly regarding the results of the Europe Kids Want survey.³²

2018 also saw progress in the Council of Europe development and implementation of the Child Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT).³³ Following successful piloting of the CPAT in Estonia, Ireland and Romania throughout 2016 to 2017, the finalised version of the tool was applied in Bulgaria, Italy and Latvia from 2017 to 2018.³⁴

Box 4 What is the Child Participation Assessment Tool?

The Child Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT) was developed by the Council of Europe in order to help Member States meet the goals set out in 2012 by the Recommendation on Participation of Children and Young People under the Age of 18.³⁵ The goals included:

- Protecting children's right to participation through constitutional, legislative and regulatory mechanisms
- Raising awareness of children's rights to participation among policymakers, service providers and the general public
- Creating opportunities for child participation through intergenerational dialogue, media platforms and contact with political institutions

The main function of the CPAT is to enable Member States to:

- Determine how well they are adhering to the Recommendation at baseline
- Identify measures needed for states to better comply with the Recommendation
- Monitor progress on an ongoing basis

Source: Council of Europe, 'Child Participation Assessment Tool' (n.d.). Retrieved 10 June 2019 from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/child-participation-assessment-tool>

Children's right to participate is also a prominent on the EU policy agenda during the Romanian Presidency of the EU, in the first half of 2019. The Bucharest Children's Declaration, co-developed and co-drafted by children, was agreed at a Children's Summit in May 2019.³⁶ The Declaration includes calls for a 'clear roadmap' for implementing the UNCRC, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and EU recommendations related to child participation; for provision of training for children and adults about children's right to participate and the establishment of EU-level mechanisms for children to participate; and for the use of these mechanisms and fora to inform children about policies affecting their right.³⁷

In focus: Member State initiatives to support children's right to participation

In some Member States, mechanisms to facilitate children's active participation in politics are well established. The Cyprus Children's Parliament, for example, has been a year-round standing body since 2001 and provides children with opportunities to deliberate on decisions which concern them. It comprises 80 voting members and four observer members, the composition of which is regulated by quotas to ensure adequate representation of the nation's different ethnic groups.³⁸ In Ireland, 'youth councils' called *Comhairle na nÓg* have been operating in 31 regions since 2002, in order to enable young people to influence changes in their local areas.³⁹ Furthermore, although there are no permanently active youth parliaments in Estonia, the government holds an annual Youth Forum called '101 Children at Toompea', during which children are invited to the Estonian parliament to express their views and participate in decision-making.⁴⁰

While these mechanisms have long been in place in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Estonia, various initiatives by Member States across the EU have indicated that attention to children's participation is spreading. In Croatia, for example, the government announced in 2018 that local and regional representatives would soon begin to receive training to enable representatives to better support the youth councils under their supervision and more effectively encourage young people's involvement in politics and society.⁴¹ In Malta, in January of 2019, children were invited to a roundtable organised by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, where they were given the opportunity to meet candidates standing for election in the European Parliament and discuss topics of their choice.⁴²

In Ireland, a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making is currently in place for the period 2015-2020 and has led to the establishment of a participation hub titled *Hub na Nóg* to centralise and provide central support for different participation-related activities by local authorities.⁴³ Meanwhile, in Scotland, the cabinet meetings have been held with children and young people on an annual basis since 2017 to provide children with the opportunity to share their views and experiences with Scottish ministers.⁴⁴ Furthermore, 2018 was designated the Year of Young People in Scotland. It encompassed events organised both by young people and by their representative organisations.⁴⁵ The 2018-2021 Action Plan for progressing Children's Rights in Scotland also places a strong focus on children's participation and includes plans to develop a framework for the participation of children and young people.⁴⁶

In sum

The UNCRC sets directions for the development, implementation and adoption of EU- and Member State-level initiatives to ensure protection of children's rights. To date, most of the EU countries have appointed an authority responsible for protecting and promoting the rights of children and young people, and they have undertaken additional legislative and policy actions to strengthen the provision of children's rights. Several of these initiatives include efforts to support children's right to participate, e.g. development and implementation of the Child Participation Assessment Tool and establishment of children's parliaments and/or children's and youth councils. However, there is still a considerable diversity in activities undertaken at the level of the national Member State. As the impact of these initiatives has not been assessed yet, there is also uncertainty about the effectiveness of these actions.

CHAPTER 4 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC) PROVISION

Many European countries continue to invest in accessible, affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision. This investment is motivated by the well-known benefits of ECEC services for children, their parents and society at large. Participation in ECEC has positive impact on the cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development of children; their educational and labour market outcomes; and parental employment (in particular women's employment).⁴⁷

Most of the efforts undertaken at the European and national levels are still focused on increasing access to services and making services more available by creating additional childcare places. However, over recent years there has been a gradual shift in policy discussions and more focus on issues related to the quality of care provision. The development of a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in 2018, and the adoption of this Proposal by the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council in May 2019, has put childcare quality firmly on the EU- and national level agendas.⁴⁸ The following sections of this chapter focus on assessing progress in the provision of ECEC services across EU Member States.

Assessing progress against Barcelona targets

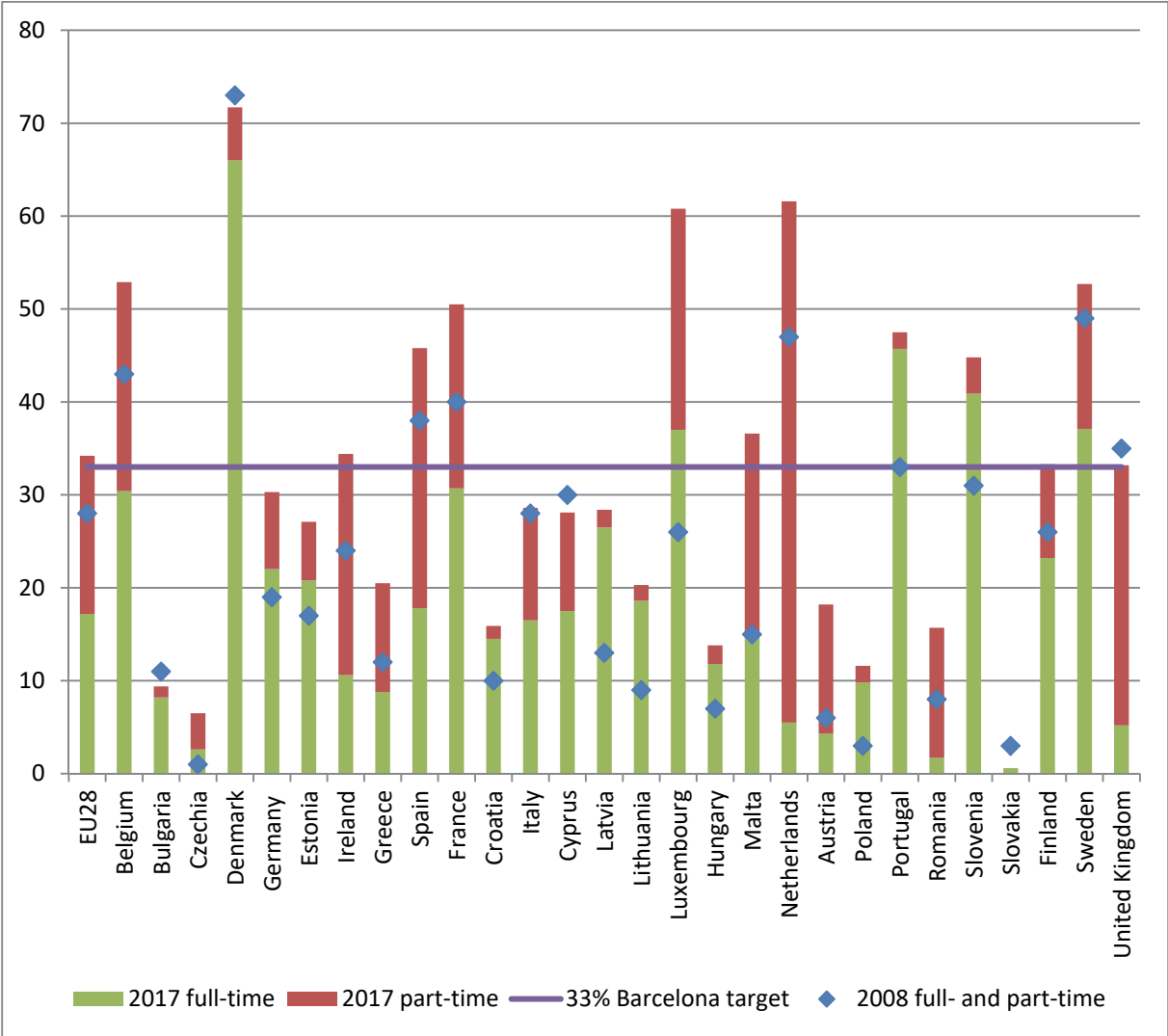
At the Barcelona Summit in 2002, the European Council set childcare provision targets to ensure that at least 33 % of children under age 3 and at least 90 % of children between age 3 and the mandatory school starting age have access to formal ECEC services by 2010. Despite progress made, there are still considerable differences among EU Member States in the extent of participation of children in formal ECEC.

On average, 34.2 % of under-3-year-olds were enrolled in childcare in the EU in 2017 according to Eurostat data. However, there are considerable differences in enrolment among Member States, varying between 71.7 % in Denmark, 61.6 % in the Netherlands and 60.8 % in Luxembourg, to only 9.4 % in Bulgaria, 6.5 % in Czechia and less than 1 % in Slovakia. Comparison of the 2008 and 2016 full-time attendance data shows that participation rates increased in most Member States. Yet, there are still countries that need to invest more in ECEC provision to reach the Barcelona targets.

As for children age 3 and above, 84.8% had access to ECEC services in 2017. However, access to childcare for this age group is still less than the agreed Barcelona target of 90 % in 15 EU Member States.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the percentage of formal ECEC in all EU Member States for children up to age 3 and children age 3 until mandatory school age, respectively.

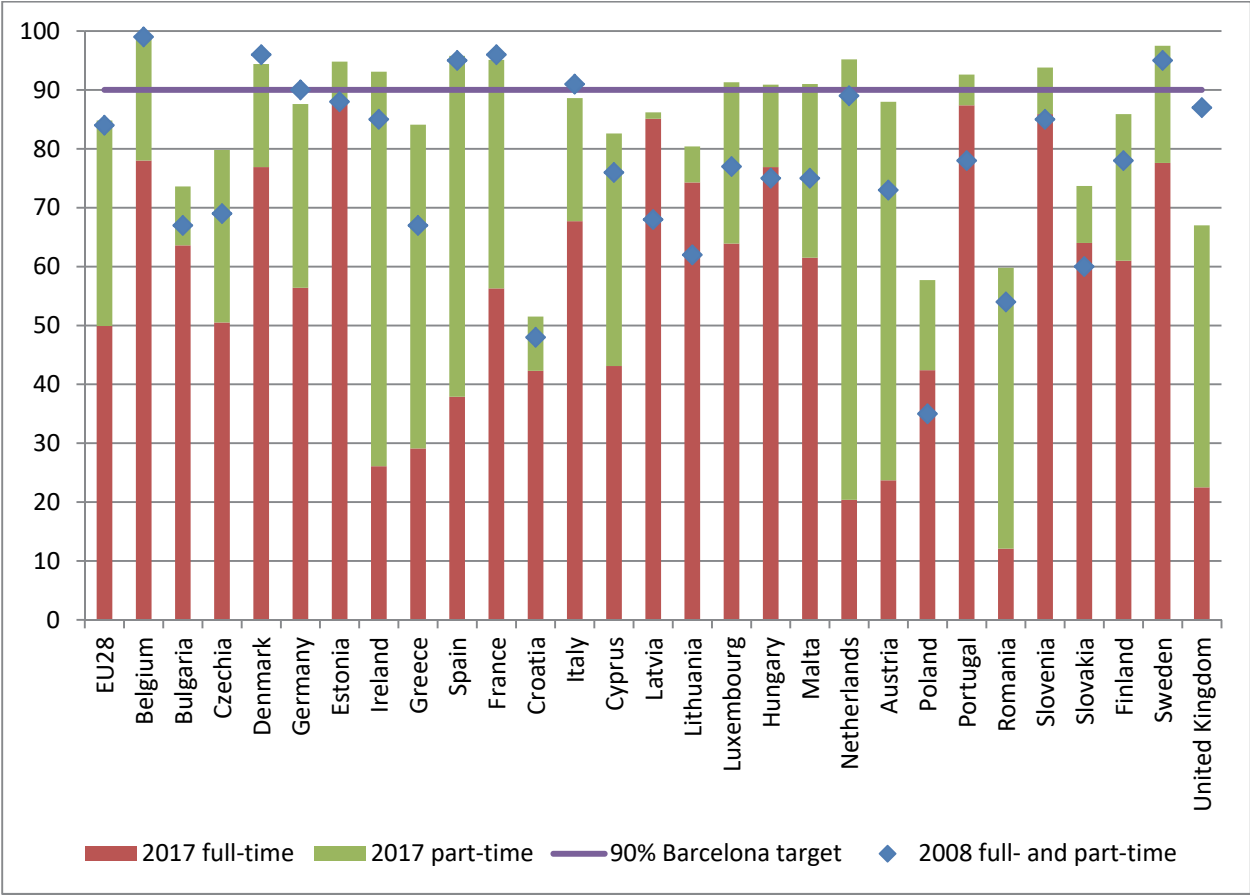
Figure 2 Percentage of children up to age 3 in full-time or part-time formal childcare arrangements, EU28, 2008 and 2017



Source: Eurostat, Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration EU-SILC survey (online data code: [ilc_caindformal]).⁴⁹

Note: No 2008 data are available for EU28, Croatia and Slovakia, so 2009 data were used for Slovakia and 2010 data were used for EU28 and Croatia instead.

Figure 3 Percentage of children from age 3 to mandatory school age in full-time and part-time formal childcare arrangements, EU28, 2008 and 2017



Source: Eurostat, Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration EU-SILC survey (online data code: [ilc_caindformal]).⁵⁰
 Note: No 2008 data are available for EU28 and Croatia, so 2010 data were used instead.

Expanding the number of ECEC places

A number of Member States have made legislative changes to increase the volume of childcare provision offered to families. In 2018, the Austrian government announced plans to invest €552.5 million towards the expansion of childcare places over the period 2018-2021.⁵¹ New legislation was also passed in Hungary obligating local governments to provide childcare in any settlement where there are more than 40 children under the age of 3, whereas previously, childcare only needed to be provided in settlements with at least 10 000 inhabitants.⁵² Furthermore, the president of Romania initiated the national project Educated Romania, which runs 2018-2030 and includes goals to achieve 30 % enrolment of children aged 0-3 in childcare by 2030 and 95 % enrolment of children aged 3-5 in preschool by 2025.⁵³

Recent EU-wide developments indicate that the move to create more ECEC places is ongoing. France, for example, is currently working to create 30 000 additional ECEC places by 2022, some of which are concentrated in underserved ‘priority neighbourhoods’ and targeted at disabled or socioeconomically disadvantaged children.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Estonia is applying to secure 2.5 million from the European Social Fund to create new ECEC places, with express priority for children with disabilities and children whose parents work outside of standard business hours.⁵⁵

Sharing information about ECEC places

Some Member States have sought to improve ECEC provision by developing knowledge-sharing platforms. In 2018, Denmark’s Ministry of Education created a new online portal

with records on approximately two thirds of the country's ECEC centres, thus providing parents with up-to-date and easily accessed information about the centres' opening hours, staffing, languages and pedagogical practices.⁵⁶ In December of that same year, Greece launched an online platform to collate information on educational initiatives, programmes and interventions implemented by the government over the past three years.^{57,58}

Making ECEC more affordable

In recent years, some Member States have begun to prioritise the subsidisation of existing ECEC places. In 2018, the Walloon community of Belgium prohibited schools from charging parents unauthorised fees and committed additional funding to enable schools to meet the costs that would ordinarily fall upon parents.⁵⁹ In the Netherlands, the free early education entitlement of disadvantaged children was increased from 10 hours per week in 2018 to 16 hours per week in 2019.⁶⁰ In 2018, the Irish government announced plans to expand the eligibility criteria for its free preschool scheme, so that more children are able to benefit from the 15 hours of free preschool education it offers to current beneficiaries per week.⁶¹ Furthermore, both Scotland⁶² and Wales⁶³ have announced that they will follow England's 2017 decision⁶⁴ to increase the free preschool entitlement of eligible children from 15 to 30 hours per week, and are currently trialling pilot programmes to inform future implementation.

A number of Member States have also committed to abolishing ECEC fees for some parents altogether. In Estonia, the passing of the Bill on the Amendments to the Preschool Child Care Institutions Act in December 2018 effectively guaranteed close-to-home, free-of-charge nursery places to all children in Estonia.⁶⁵ In Germany, the Good Daycare Facilities Act became effective in January 2019, mandating the reduction of fees for low-income parents and the abolition of fees for parents who are eligible for specific benefits.⁶⁶

In the Czech Republic, recent initiatives have centred less upon reducing childcare fees and more upon creating affordable childcare alternatives. Low-cost childcare centres called 'children's groups', which offer less structured education and are prohibited from charging fees that exceed their operating costs, were introduced in 2014.⁶⁷

Additionally, in Slovenia, the Kindergarten Act (2008) and the Exercise of Rights to Public Funds Act (2012) grants payments to parents with two or more children enrolled in preschool education in order to improve access to ECEC. Parents only pay 30 % for the second child and no fee for younger siblings. The fee amount is determined according to the parents' income levels. Municipalities can also further reduce the fees, according to their policies in this area.⁶⁸

Making ECEC mandatory

Across the European Union, there has been a trend towards the introduction of compulsory preschool attendance. Hungary is unique among Member States, as since 2012 preschool attendance for a minimum of 4 hours per day has been compulsory for children from the age of 3.⁶⁹ However, preschool attendance during the final year before primary school has been compulsory in certain Member States (including Cyprus⁷⁰ and Croatia⁷¹) for several years, and this policy was also adopted by Lithuania⁷² and Poland⁷³ in 2016, the Czech Republic in 2017,⁷⁴ and Sweden in 2018.⁷⁵ In Greece, preschool attendance for two years before primary school was made compulsory in 2017.⁷⁶

Improving ECEC quality

As research has linked the extent to which ECEC exposure improves child outcomes to the quality of the services delivered (for a review of evidence, see Janta et al. 2016⁷⁷) ECEC quality standards have also become a priority among Member States. The President of Romania's Educated Romania project includes plans both to develop a framework for regulating the quality of ECEC provision and to ensure its implementation by 2030.⁷⁸

Germany's Good Daycare Facilities Act (usually shortened to Gute-KiTa-Gesetz) committed €5.5 billion towards the improvement of ECEC quality from 2019 to 2022.⁷⁹

Some Member States have focused on the role of ECEC professionals in ensuring the provision of high-quality services. In 2018, Austrian universities introduced new Bachelor programmes in Early Education and Care, aimed at qualifying preschool and nursery educators to lead their own ECEC institutes.⁸⁰ In Finland in the same year, a new law raised the minimum qualifications required for staff to be employed at an ECEC centre, with the ultimate aim of emphasising child rights in the ECEC system.⁸¹

Some Member States have sought to ensure high-quality ECEC provision through mainly pedagogical approaches. Luxembourg, for example, introduced a multilingual education programme to preschools in 2017, with the aim of promoting proficiency in three languages (Luxembourgish, French, and the language spoken at home) for children aged 1 to 4.⁸² Meanwhile, Belgium is piloting a new personal learning-support system across 85 French-speaking primary schools, with the aim of informing the roll-out of personalised learning support to all French-speaking primary and secondary schools in Belgium by the start of the 2020 school year.⁸³

In sum

Overall, the availability and use of the formal childcare provision has increased across Member States over the past decade. This increase resulted from a combination of several factors, such as continuing investment towards the expansion of childcare places, wider information sharing about available provision, making accessing ECEC provision more affordable, and making participation in the ECEC provision mandatory. There have been also improvements in the quality of the services delivered, in line with recent legislative and policy actions at the EU and national levels.

However, despite progress made, many children still face difficulties in accessing and/or affording high-quality provision. This calls for more efforts at the EU and national levels to ensure that all children can benefit from services that can have enduring impacts on their development and the work-balance of their parents.

CHAPTER 5 MATERNITY, PATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE PROVISION

Research demonstrates that early infancy is a formative and critical period for child development and that adequate access to maternity and paternity leave following the birth of a child yields a range of positive outcomes for parents and for children. Recent research concerning the best ways to support parents through maternity, paternity and parental leave provision has shown, for example, that prolonged periods of maternity leave can have a detrimental impact on mothers' career progression and labour force participation.⁸⁴ Recent research has also show that, while the presence of fathers in early infancy has been found to benefit children in a range of ways, fathers' uptake of available parental leave remains uneven.⁸⁵

Box 5 Definitions of leave entitlements for parents of young children

Maternity leave is usually understood as a health and welfare measure taken just before, during and immediately after childbirth.

Paternity leave is a short period of leave available to fathers, usually immediately after the birth of a child.

Parental leave is a period of leave to care for children in their first years of life.

Sources: Janta, B., Stewart, K., *Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union: assessment of current provision*, Policy memo for the European Platform for Investing in Children, 2018. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a8464ad8-9abf-11e8-a408-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

European-level policy measures to support working parents and carers

In 2017, the Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers⁸⁶ was proposed by the European Commission as part of the European Pillar on Social Rights, with the aim of ensuring that maternity, paternity and parental leave policies are developed for the benefit of citizens across the EU. The European Parliament and European Council reached a provisional agreement on the details of the Directive in early 2019, which includes setting a minimum standard of 10 days of paid paternity leave, providing 2 months of non-transferable parental leave for each parent, and entitling carers to 5 days of carer's leave per year.⁸⁷ This EU-level initiative coincided with a range of Member State initiatives to expand and improve leave provision for parents and carers.

Table 3 Summary of results of research on the benefits of leave provisions

Children	Active participation of both parents in children's lives from birth has positive and long-lasting benefits for child development.
Parents	Involvement of both parents in caring responsibilities leads to improved gender equality in the labour market as flexibility becomes a workplace imperative.
Employers	Despite the cost to employers, paid leave can have positive impacts on businesses, in that it reduces absenteeism and staff turnover and increases morale and productivity.
Families	Sharing professional and domestic responsibilities has a positive impact on work-life balance in families.

Source: Janta, B., Stewart, K., *Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union: assessment of current provision*, Policy memo for the European Platform for Investing in Children, 2018. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a8464ad8-9abf-11e8-a408-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Expanding Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave

For some Member States, improved provision has involved expanding eligibility for existing leave provision. In 2017, for example, paid paternity leave entitlements were extended to include fathers of adoptive children up to age 3 in Latvia⁸⁸ and age 5 in Bulgaria.⁸⁹ In 2018, maternity protection legislation in Germany was extended to include

students, women in the national voluntary service and women in the development cooperation service.⁹⁰

Box 6 Barriers to uptake of leave provisions

The EPIC policy memo *Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union*⁹¹ concluded that there are several challenges for the uptake of leave provisions, such as:

- Low compensation levels
- Lack of flexibility in leave use
- Eligibility criteria (e.g. employment length)
- Prolonged periods of leave having negative impacts on parents' labour market situation
- Cultural norms and perceptions about gender roles

The new Directive⁹² aims to address these challenges by giving more flexibility in the timing of leave, obliging Member States to financially compensate the periods of leave and giving all parents and carers a right to request flexible working arrangements.

Source: Janta, B., Stewart, K., *Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union: assessment of current provision*, Policy memo for the European Platform for Investing in Children, 2018. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a8464ad8-9abf-11e8-a408-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>; European Commission, 'Work-life balance: Commission welcomes the provisional agreement reached today'. Retrieved 10 June 2019 from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release-STATEMENT-19-424_en.htm

Several Member States have also opted to increase the time and financial support to which parents are entitled. In 2017, for example, the Croatian government increased the benefit ceilings for both maternity and paternity leave.⁹³ That same year, the Belgian government increased maternity leave entitlements for self-employed women⁹⁴ and the government of Luxembourg reformed parental leave to enable salaried workers to care for their ill children without loss of pay.^{95,96} In 2018, the Romanian government fielded a legislative proposal to increase the maximum parental leave allowance offered to parents who need to start a new parental leave period less than 12 months after the end of their previous period of parental leave.⁹⁷ In January 2019, furthermore, Slovenia increased the cap on paternity and parental leave benefits from 2 to 2.5 times the average national salary.⁹⁸

In focus: Expanding paternity leave

Over the past two years, several EU Member States have made amendments to their paternity leave entitlements. For example, in 2017, Luxembourg extended paternity leave to 10 days for the birth or adoption of a child.⁹⁹ In Cyprus, also in 2017, statutory paternity leave was introduced for the first time through the Protection of Paternity Law, which entitles working fathers to 2 weeks of paid leave to care for a newborn child.¹⁰⁰ In 2018, statutory paternity leave was increased from 4 days to 5 days in Italy¹⁰¹ and from 4 weeks to 5 weeks in Spain.¹⁰² In January of 2019, paternity leave in the Netherlands was extended from 2 days to 1 week, and there are plans to extend it to a maximum of 5 weeks from July of 2020. The leave offers flexibility, and it needs to be taken within 6 months after the birth.¹⁰³

These recent initiatives have been accompanied by discussions within other Member States about amending their own policies on paternity leave provision. In 2018, for example, a French government audit suggested making paternity leave compulsory, as well as extending it to 4 weeks in duration.¹⁰⁴ That same year, the Romanian government put forward a proposal to increase paternity leave to 7 days for the birth of one child and 10 days for the birth of multiple children, with the possibility of an extension to 10 days for the birth of one child and 15 days for that of multiple children if the father attends a childcare course.¹⁰⁵

Making leave more flexible

Based on the available research, in EPIC policy memo¹⁰⁶ we concluded that the lack of flexibility in the conditions (e.g. length, compensation level) of maternity, paternity, and parental leave are key explanations for their lack of uptake.¹⁰⁷ Some Member States have amended their policies to provide parents with more autonomy in deciding when and how they use leave. In 2019, Italy granted mothers the flexibility to choose how much of their 20-week maternity leave entitlement to use before and after birth.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Slovakia introduced the option for parents to claim maternity and paternity leave benefits simultaneously, primarily to benefit parents who have two or more children in close succession.¹⁰⁹ In Estonia, moreover, the passage of the Family Benefits Act in 2017 ensured that, from July 2020, all parents will have the ability to pause and re-initiate payment of parental benefit as they wish until the child turns 3.¹¹⁰

Across some Member States, there has also been a noticeable trend towards eradicating financial disincentives for parents who want to make an early return to work. In 2017, Bulgaria changed its maternity leave regulations so that if a mother chooses to return to work less than one year after the birth of her child, she can retain 50 % of the remaining financial compensation she would have been entitled to if she had used the full duration of her leave.¹¹¹ That same year, Germany introduced Parental Allowance Plus with Partnership Bonus, a scheme to enable parents to combine their parental allowances with part-time work.¹¹² In 2018, Greece followed suit with the introduction of special breastfeeding and childcare leave, which provides parents with the option of combining their parental leave with reduced working hours for up to 30 months after the birth of their child.¹¹³ That same year, Estonia passed the Family Benefits Act and granted parents the ability to retain parental leave benefits even if they return to work, provided their salary remains below the value of €1 544 per month.¹¹⁴

In Portugal, in December 2018, the 3 em linha ('Three In Line') programme was launched aiming for the reconciliation of work, personal and family life.¹¹⁵ The programme includes several sectoral measures (e.g. cross-sectoral), pilot projects, and widespread implementation measures, with diverse target groups: public, social and private organizations as well as different types of families. The impact of the programme will be evaluated three years after its implementation.

Encouraging leave-sharing between the partners

Some Member States have also taken recent steps to encourage sharing of parental leave among both parents during the early years of their children's lives. For instance, Germany's Parental Allowance Plus with Partnership Bonus, introduced in 2017, includes financial incentives for parents who both decide to work part-time simultaneously while raising young children.¹¹⁶ The Czech Republic's Family Policy Strategy, introduced in 2017, includes several initiatives related to the provision of childcare services and work-life balance measures. As part of this strategy, a legislative act on job-sharing and a draft on an increase in parental allowance are currently under discussion.^{117,118}

The status of leave provision for non-traditional families – including foster families, reconstructed families and same-sex parents – will be covered in an upcoming EPIC policy memo on this subject.

In sum

Overall, recent changes in leave policies aim to create more gender equality in the workplace and flexibility for both parents to benefit from leave provisions. Legislative changes, e.g. the proposal for a new Directive, put more emphasis on encouraging fathers to take up allocated leave entitlements. These EU-level initiatives are introduced in parallel with national-level policy changes, with many Member States putting in place regulations making leave provisions more flexible and encouraging more equal sharing of leave between the parents. Yet, despite progress, there are still opportunities for EU and

Member States to introduce policies that would further support families in achieving greater reconciliation between work and family life.

CHAPTER 6: SOCIAL AND INCOME SUPPORT, AND BENEFITS FOR FAMILIES

Most European countries provide financial support to families. However, there are considerable differences among countries in how this support is offered. In general, the financial support can take the form of direct cash transfers (e.g. child benefit, working family payments) and/or of a fiscal support (e.g. tax rebates, tax credits). The objectives of financial support for families also differ, from offering a better reconciliation of work and family life, to promoting child development and reducing child poverty and maltreatment.

Child benefits, and child and family tax credits

Many Member States have opted to enhance their support for children and families by increasing the value of existing child benefits and child or family tax reliefs or expanding access. These include Bulgaria,¹¹⁹ Germany,^{120,121} Slovenia¹²² and Romania¹²³, in 2018, and the Netherlands, in 2019.¹²⁴ New child benefits were introduced in Italy,¹²⁵ Lithuania¹²⁶ and Luxembourg¹²⁷, in 2018. The eligibility criteria for support were also adjusted in the Netherlands¹²⁸ and Croatia,¹²⁹ in order to increase the number of families able to access them.

In Poland, a new cash benefit, called Family 500 Plus, was introduced in April 2016. This benefit is a universal monthly cash transfer of 500 PLN (around €118) for every second and any consecutive child below the age of 18. Some low-income families are eligible to receive the transfer for their first child as well. From July 2019, the means test will be abolished and all the children up to age 18 will be eligible for the benefit.¹³⁰

Support for large families

In addition to expanding universal and means-tested support for parents, some Member States have introduced measures to ease financial pressure on large families. In Latvia, for example, a '3+ family card' was introduced in 2016 to provide a range of discounts to families with three or more children, and this was followed by the introduction of an allowance to cover large families' travel costs on public transport in 2017.¹³¹ In 2018, Latvia also extended supplementary child benefit payments to families with two or more children.¹³² That same year, state family allowances for families with three or more children were increased in Estonia¹³³ and introduced for the first time in Lithuania.¹³⁴ Estonia also introduced a new monthly benefit for parents of triplets or higher-order births.¹³⁵ Furthermore, Italy proposed that from 2019 to 2021, parents who have three children or more will be awarded state-held agricultural land, as well as being eligible for a zero-interest loan to buy their first home on or near this land.¹³⁶ In Poland, the Large Family Card was introduced in June 2014 as a document that offers discounts to families with at least three children, irrespective of their income, when using the services of participating public institutions and private companies. In January 2018, a smartphone application of the card was launched, allowing families to access discounts more easily.¹³⁷ Finally, in November 2018, the European Large Families Confederation launched the new European Large Family Card. The objective of the card is to provide opportunities to large families to access discounts and special offers when travelling within the EU countries.¹³⁸

Support for single parents

Some initiatives have also centred on increasing support to single parents. In 2017, Malta introduced a single-parent benefit for parents engaged in full-time post-secondary, vocational or tertiary education;¹³⁹ Portugal increased the value of existing benefits for single parents;¹⁴⁰ and Luxembourg increased the value of single-parent tax credits.¹⁴¹ In 2018, the Luxembourgish government increased the rate of existing benefits for single parents.¹⁴² In the same year, the Romanian government considered a new proposal to offer a monthly, means-tested allowance for single parents.¹⁴³

Notably, some Member States have opted to provide special support to single parents whose (ex-)partners refuse to provide court-ordered child support or alimony payments. State-funded subsistence payments for such families were introduced in Estonia in 2017,¹⁴⁴ and they were increased in Germany in 2018.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, Poland¹⁴⁶ introduced plans in 2019 to enact new legislation and empower the state to recover funds from non-caregiving parents who fail to contribute to their children's maintenance. Finally, also in Estonia, the state can claim back maintenance costs from debtor parents and implement various measures to encourage compliance, e.g. rescinding driving licenses, restricting entrepreneurial support and publishing the names of debtors.¹⁴⁷

Other initiatives aiming to combat child and family poverty

Member States have also sought to prevent child and family poverty in a range of other financial and non-financial ways. For example, a national strategy for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion was in place from 2017 to 2018 in Bulgaria,¹⁴⁸ and such a strategy is currently ongoing in Malta for the period 2014-2024.¹⁴⁹ Also in Malta, apart from financial benefits, the government introduced the National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting (2016-2024), which seeks to strengthen the family, support parents in their parenting roles and promote collaboration among ministries and agencies to ensure that services are available and accessible to those who need them most.¹⁵⁰

France has also undertaken additional actions to tackle poverty. President Emmanuel Macron, on 13 September 2018, unveiled an €8 billion anti-poverty plan focused on early childhood and on training young people. It pledges to guarantee children's rights to food, health and shelter. The goal of this policy is to address the root of the problem in the long run, explicitly the intergenerational poverty trap.¹⁵¹

In Ireland, the *Whole of Government Approach to Tackling Child Poverty*, issued in 2017, emphasises the need for a combined approach to tackling child poverty, involving both income supports and services.¹⁵² In relation to children, the main actions under this approach include a provision of universal free GP care for all children, the reduction of the cost of education at all levels and the provision of safe and adequate housing. Wider initiatives include support for parents to enter, remain and progress in the labour market.

Other financial initiatives to tackle child poverty include, for instance, an increase in the value of the survivor benefit offered to children who have lost a parent, introduced in Latvia in 2018.¹⁵³ Also in 2018, birth grants for newborn infants were introduced for low-income parents in Scotland.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, the Spanish government introduced a new tax deduction to meet the childcare costs incurred by mothers of children under age 3 who engage in full-time work,¹⁵⁵ and the Danish government launched its 1000-day Programme, aimed specifically at supporting children from vulnerable families up to the age of 3.¹⁵⁶ More recently, in 2019, the Swedish government invested in a national strategy to help parents through maternity- and child-support groups, a parenting-support programme, and an online knowledge-sharing platform.¹⁵⁷ In the same year, the United Kingdom launched a freephone helpline to provide advice and emotional support to parents facing financial, parenting or family-related stressors.¹⁵⁸ Finally, the Federal Foundation for Early Childhood Intervention was established in Germany in January 2018, with a dedicated funding to support families and child development and to protect children from violence.¹⁵⁹

In sum

Family policies across Europe often have a direct objective of providing financial support to children and families. This support takes the form of direct cash transfers, such as child benefits, and of child and family tax credits, with many Member States increasing the value of existing benefits or introducing new forms of financial support. Additional financial measures are often available for some family types, such as large families or single-parent households, identified as requiring extra support. Many countries have also

introduced national strategies and actions to tackle poverty, seen as a root cause of many social problems.

CHAPTER 7 WIDER MATERIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

In order to meet their national family policy objectives, European Member States also provide a wider range of packages. These include initiatives related to improving the material well-being of families to reduce child poverty, e.g. through housing support, and initiatives promoting child development and strengthening resilience in children by offering psychosocial support to children and families.

Housing

Some Member States have opted to support children by improving their access to secure and good-quality housing. A programme to guarantee bank loans for families looking to buy or construct houses has operated in Latvia since 2015,¹⁶⁰ while rent subsidies for low-income families were introduced in Luxembourg in 2016,¹⁶¹ and subsidies to help young parents buy property were introduced in Lithuania in 2018.¹⁶² The Bulgarian government also outlined a National Strategy for Dwellings in 2018, which includes a strong emphasis on the construction and provision of adequate housing for vulnerable groups.¹⁶³ Initiatives to improve housing for children were also proposed in France and Romania in late 2018. France allocated additional funds to provide adequate housing to children living in overcrowded conditions.¹⁶⁴ In Romania, as part of the National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020, new recommendations were issued regarding vulnerable children and families living in inadequate housing. There, recommendations cover those in overcrowded households and those who are homeless, with proposals around developing social housing services, ensuring emergency support and adopting homelessness-prevention policies.

Measures to support participation in schools

Member States have also sought to provide children with a range of material resources to facilitate their participation in education. In 2018, for example, a bill was passed in Poland to grant 80 euros to each child per year to subsidise the costs of education-related supplies.¹⁶⁵ In 2019, schemes for free school meals were launched in Poland¹⁶⁶ and Slovakia.¹⁶⁷ In Romania, a pilot programme to provide warm food in schools was initiated in 2017, and it is still ongoing.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, a school vacations programme was approved for launch in Spain in 2018 to ensure continued access to food, cultural activities, leisure activities, and care for children from low-income families.¹⁶⁹

Psychological support

There have also been efforts across some Member States to facilitate children's participation in education through the delivery of emotional and psychological support. For example, in 2018, the Greek parliament launched a weekly educational television programme for youths designed to promote media literacy and dialogue about bullying, smoking and other critical topics.¹⁷⁰ The Greek government also mandated the employment of psychologists in all vocational schools from 2019 in order to provide regular support to students.^{171,172}

Some initiatives have focused specifically on bullying prevention. In Latvia, for example, a school-based initiative called Friendly School is run each year by the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights, with the aim of preventing violence and promoting cooperation among pupils, parents, teachers, and staff.^{173,174} Meanwhile in Spain, a Strategic Plan for School Coexistence is currently in place for the period 2016-2020 to develop and implement best-practice approaches to the prevention of physical and emotional violence among children in schools.¹⁷⁵

Additionally, some initiatives have focused on the promotion of tolerance and prevention of discrimination. In Spain, a manual was produced and distributed in 2015 to collate legal resources, information on good practices, and a guide to action for the prevention

of homophobia and transphobia in schools.¹⁷⁶ More recently in 2019, Germany launched the programme Youth Remembers in order to encourage German youths to reflect on German history and the dangers of xenophobia, racism and antisemitism.¹⁷⁷

In sum

Apart from the direct cash transfers and fiscal support to families, European Member States also provide a wider range of financial and non-material initiatives to support families. Provision of secure and adequate housing is seen as one of the strategies to reduce child poverty and promote social inclusion. Improving the material well-being of families through housing support is an ongoing challenge across many countries, with several programmes aiming at improving housing conditions. Other family policy priorities implemented by Member States focus on facilitating children's participation in education by the provision of additional financial resources and the delivery of emotional and psychological support.

CHAPTER 8 SUPPORTING FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION MIGRANT CHILDREN

Reviewed evidence suggests that supporting migrant children (including refugee and asylum-seeking children) is one of the most urgent policy challenges facing European countries. Migrant children are often identified as the most vulnerable groups in society, at risk of social exclusion and in need of support and protection (see, for example, the EPIC policy memos^{178,179}). During the migration crisis in 2015 and 2016, more than 1.3 million people applied for asylum in the EU.¹⁸⁰ Many Member States have since had to initiate urgent policy responses in order to ensure the smooth integration of newly arrived (first-generation) migrant children. Member States also need to design, implement and monitor policies and initiatives that support second-generation migrant children to ensure that the multiple and complex needs of these children are adequately addressed.

European-level policy responses

In 2017, the Council of Europe's Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe was adopted. It emphasises that it is paramount to ensure the better protection of children. Based on three key pillars, the Action Plan states that all children should have access to child-friendly procedures and be provided with effective protection, and that countries should take actions to enhance the integration of children into host societies.¹⁸¹

Research by the Migration Policy Institute suggests that assimilation into a host country's mainstream schooling system is among the most effective drivers of migrant children's integration, primarily because it facilitates their successful entry into the job market in the future.¹⁸² In 2017, the European Commission's Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration re-emphasised the importance of education for migrant children's long-term outcomes and encouraged Member States to ensure that migrant children have rapid and equal access to the formal education system.¹⁸³

Removing barriers to migrant children's integration

Although in legal terms migrant children are guaranteed education in most EU Member States, research has indicated that even in settings where they have a legal and undisputed right to education, access may still be limited. Significant barriers to education include racism, poor financial support, lack of knowledge on available educational opportunities, and inadequate knowledge of the language of instruction.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, while many Member States have mechanisms in place that are intended to ease migrant children's transition into formal education,¹⁸⁵ the Fundamental Rights Agency has presented evidence that the migrant children who do access state education sometimes continue to be segregated in schools.¹⁸⁶ Member States have sought to address these obstacles to successful integration in a number of ways.

Continuing and preparing new national responses to address the needs of migrant children

In response to increases in new arrivals, however, many Member States have also introduced or amended laws and policies that are specific to migrants in order to better coordinate national responses. In Latvia, a new asylum law was enacted in 2016 in order to guarantee asylum-seeking children with access to the same state educational system as all other children.¹⁸⁷ In 2017, Cyprus developed a policy framework to guide the integration of migrant children in the Cypriot education system¹⁸⁸ and Slovenia ratified the International Protection Act, guaranteeing all applicants for international protection with the same rights to primary, secondary, tertiary and adult education as Slovenian citizens.¹⁸⁹ In addition, various Member States produce national action plans relating to the wider integration and protection of migrants and asylum seekers.

Providing language support

Some Member States automatically offer extra language classes to newcomer children who are not proficient in the language of instruction, including Belgium,¹⁹⁰ Luxembourg,¹⁹¹ France,¹⁹² and the Czech Republic, with the latter offering Czech language classes to children as early as nursery school.¹⁹³ In Greece, children who lack proficiency in Greek have been offered additional support classes at school since the beginning of the 2016/17 school year.¹⁹⁴ In Austria, language-support classes for non-German speakers were introduced from the beginning of the 2018/19 school year.¹⁹⁵

Additionally, some Member States have opted to make language learning for new arrivals obligatory. In Estonia, for example, free-of-charge Estonian language learning was made compulsory for refugees of all ages in 2016.¹⁹⁶ From 2017 in Denmark, attending 30 hours of 'language stimulation activities' per week became obligatory for all bilingual 3-year-olds, including migrants, provided they were not already attending a Danish-speaking preschool.¹⁹⁷

Providing broader educational support

For some Member States, integration efforts for migrant children have extended beyond language learning alone. In Poland, for example, migrant children are entitled both to 12 months of language learning and 12 months of intensive preparatory education, both of which are intended to facilitate an easier transition into mainstream schooling.¹⁹⁸ In Ireland, the Irish Refugee and Protection Programme (IRPP), which has been active since 2015, coordinates all services for asylum-seeking children and families, including accommodation, healthcare, language education, academic education and cultural orientation. For children who have not yet been placed in conventional housing and live in reception centres, schooling is provided on-site.¹⁹⁹

More recently, in 2017, Luxembourg established a 'guided integration trail' to formalise the integration of newly arrived children, including 16 hours of compulsory language learning and civic education courses on Luxembourgish life and institutions.²⁰⁰ That same year, Cyprus ran a programme called Measures to Improve the Social and Educational Integration of Third Country Children in Cyprus, which aimed to promote the integration of newly arrived children by raising awareness among parents and teachers, providing Greek-language teaching to children, and coordinating the efforts of external partner organisations in meeting migrant children's needs.^{201,202} In October of 2018, Greece commenced the development of special reception classes for state schools with comparatively high rates of migrant or refugee pupils.^{203,204}

Improving information provision

Member States have also addressed barriers to integration through improved information sharing. In Croatia, for example, a web programme called Article 28 was developed with the aim of accelerating the inclusion of asylum-seeking children, both by streamlining the process through which they are allocated to schools and by supporting schools and kindergartens to prepare adequately for their arrival.²⁰⁵ In Germany, furthermore, migrant children and young people were provided with access to a range of support and information-sharing services. These include the programme Jugend Stärken,²⁰⁶ which is aimed at assisting all disadvantaged youths aged 12-26 in the transition from school to work, and Jugendmigrationsdienste,²⁰⁷ a service for youths with migration backgrounds that offers support and advice on questions relating to education, vocational training and social aspects of integration. A separate version of the service, called *jmd2start*, was piloted from 2015 to 2017 with the specific aim of providing advice and information to young refugees immediately following their arrival.²⁰⁸

Other initiatives

Finally, some recent Member State initiatives have focused primarily on ensuring sufficient resource availability to deal with new arrivals. In the UK, for example, a National Transfer Scheme was launched in 2016 to facilitate the even distribution of unaccompanied minors across local authorities, thus ensuring that every child is placed in a council that has sufficient capacity to meet the child's needs.²⁰⁹ In 2018, furthermore, the Spanish government responded to a sudden spike in the arrival of unaccompanied migrant children by allocating €40 million to the autonomous communities where they were received.²¹⁰

In sum

Over recent years, many legal and policy initiatives have been implemented across Member States that are aimed at promoting the social inclusion of migrant children and their families. Many of these actions focus on educational services and provision of language training, because host country language competencies are considered an essential component of a successful integration into the host societies. It is now essential to monitor implementation of these policies and initiatives to ensure that they contribute to building more inclusive societies in the EU28.

CHAPTER 9 SUPPORTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Several groups of children and families are identified across European countries as requiring additional protection and support because of their psychosocial and/or physical conditions, family situation, or membership in a societally disadvantaged group. This chapter provides evidence on the services that are provided to those children and their families.

Children with disabilities

Supporting children with disabilities and the families who care for them

Across the European Union, many Member States have policies in place to support the families of children with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities are entitled to additional annual leave from work in order to fulfil their caring duties in many Member States, including France,²¹¹ Estonia,²¹² Greece,²¹³ Portugal,²¹⁴ Romania²¹⁵ and Slovenia.²¹⁶ However, the length of this leave and compensation levels (whether it is paid or not, and how much) varies significantly from country to country.

There are well-established structures to provide special financial allowances to families of children with disabilities in several EU Member States. Many Member States have also taken recent action to enhance existing support. In the Flanders region of Belgium, for example, eligibility for a non-taxable allowance of 300 euros for adults with disabilities was extended in 2017 to include children with disabilities.²¹⁷ In 2018, Italy increased the annual cash benefit available for parents of children with disabilities to cover the expenses of public and private care services.²¹⁸ Sweden also reformed its benefits system in 2019, introducing two separate benefits for children with disabilities and their parents, respectively.²¹⁹

Providing educational support for children with disabilities

There have been a range of initiatives by Member States to ensure that the educational needs of children with disabilities are met. In Poland, for example, a new programme was introduced in 2016 with the aim of building 380 specialised childcare and education institutions to provide care and therapy to children with disabilities.²²⁰

However, many Member States have placed particular emphasis on ensuring that children with disabilities are educated in non-segregated environments. The Scottish government, for example, has stressed the rights of children with special educational needs to learn alongside their peers in mainstream schools.²²¹ Since 2014, all regular schools in the Flanders region of Belgium have been obligated to make 'reasonable adaptations' for children with special needs, specifically in order to reduce the large share of special needs children learning in segregated settings.²²² In Croatia, a National Strategy for the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities is in place for the period 2017-2020; it includes an emphasis on integrating children with special needs into the mainstream education system.²²³ In Austria, the Education Reform Act was enacted in 2017 in order to fulfil a national action plan of developing inclusive school classes.^{224,225} Furthermore, in Portugal, an Inclusive Education Law was passed in 2018 specifically to universalise access for children with disabilities to education in non-segregated settings.²²⁶

Many Member States have undertaken more targeted measures to ensure that children with disabilities have access to mainstream education. For instance, in Malta, an inclusive education policy has been active since 2005; it provides learning-support zones, home tuition and teachers to children with special needs.²²⁷ In France, plans to create 30 000 additional early childhood education and care places by 2022 have also included financial bonuses to incentivise centres to reserve a share of new places for children with

disabilities who need extra support.²²⁸ Finally, the Italian government announced plans in December 2018 to provide Italian sign language training to teachers in mainstream schools.²²⁹

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children

Strategies for integrating Roma communities

Box 7 EU Framework for integration of Roma communities guides national strategies

The protection and integration of Roma communities has long been a priority of the European Union.²³⁰ In 2011, the EU launched an EU Framework for National Integration Strategies up to 2020 and called on all Member States to develop national strategies for the integration of Roma populations. The priorities outlined in the framework aim to ensure that Roma populations have equal access to the entitlements stipulated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, including education, employment, healthcare, housing and essential services.²³¹

A range of Member States have modelled their own national strategies for Roma integration upon the priorities of the EU framework, including Croatia,²³² Cyprus,²³³ Greece,²³⁴ Italy,²³⁵ Portugal,²³⁶ Romania,²³⁷ Slovakia²³⁸ and Spain.²³⁹ Additionally, Poland passed an act for the integration of the Roma community in 2014, outlining a range of strategic goals for the period from 2014 to 2020, including improving health and housing conditions, fostering cultural integration and facilitating Roma participation in education and in the labour force.²⁴⁰

Government funding for non-governmental organisations

In contrast with those Member States that have developed national strategies themselves, some Member States have chosen to outsource Roma integration efforts within their state to non-governmental organisations. For example, while the Austrian government has not initiated any of its own programmes, it continues to provide financial support to non-governmental integration strategies. These include the Roma-School-Mediators in Vienna, who facilitate communication among Roma parents and teachers, and learning assistance for Roma pupils in schools.²⁴¹ More recently, the UK government opted to provide £200 000 (approx. €226 000) to six community-led projects from 2018 to 2019, all of which aim to improve the health, educational attainment or social integration of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.²⁴²

Targeting discrimination and intolerance against Roma populations

Some Member States have undertaken targeted efforts to reduce discrimination and intolerance. In 2017, Latvia launched the European Commission-funded project Platform I for Latvian Roma people: dialogue, cooperation, and involvement. The aim of this project was to foster collaboration among Roma citizens, state, municipal representatives and social partners, and develop effective policies for Roman integration. It was followed by the project Platform II for Latvian Roma People: Dialogue, Participation, and Peer Learning in 2018.²⁴³

In addition, in 2017 in Estonia the Ministry of Culture initiated a 12-month project to identify young Roma who would be interested in active civil society participation with the potential to become Roma community spokespeople in the future.²⁴⁴ Furthermore, in 2018, an exhibition of Roma children photographing their own lives was presented. It is still available online and has been supported by different Estonian ministries and governmental institutions, among others.²⁴⁵

Finally, Poland initiated a Cultural Integration plan in 2018 which aimed to promote tolerance by protecting the cultural heritage of Roma communities and educating broader Polish society about Roma history and customs. To this end, the Polish government delegated funding to a range of cultural programmes and activities.²⁴⁶

De-institutionalisation and foster care provision

As research evidence continues to underline the negative impact that institutionalised care can have upon children who have become wards of the state,²⁴⁷ the European Union has prioritised the expansion of family-based foster care.²⁴⁸

Countries with de-institutionalisation strategies

At the national level, many Member States have undertaken long-running processes of de-institutionalisation in their own foster care systems. In Austria, for example, de-institutionalisation began in the mid-1980s and is now nearing completion.²⁴⁹ However, recent changes across the EU suggest a renewed emphasis upon reforming the way in which orphaned or otherwise unaccompanied children are raised. National policies, strategies and legislative changes for the de-institutionalisation of care have been similarly enacted in a range of Member States.²⁵⁰ For example, in Latvia, an action plan on deinstitutionalisation announced by the government in 2015 included supplementing the existing foster care system with the introduction of two new types of alternative care, namely foster families for crisis intervention and foster families for children with disabilities.²⁵¹

Countries promoting family-based foster care through financial incentives

Many Member States aim to secure the availability of family-based foster care by providing financial support to foster parents, including Lithuania,²⁵² Malta²⁵³ and Slovakia.²⁵⁴ Financial allowances for foster parents were also increased in Latvia²⁵⁵ and Croatia²⁵⁶ in 2018. Additionally, Estonia ruled that from 2022, the rights for family leave and benefits will be extended to include both adoptive and foster parents.²⁵⁷

Countries promoting family-based foster care through non-financial incentives

Many Member States have also looked beyond strictly financial means to encourage citizens to become foster carers. For example, media awareness campaigns to promote participation in family-based foster care provision were run in Croatia²⁵⁸ and Malta²⁵⁹ in 2018 and in Belgium from 2015 to 2018.²⁶⁰ In Estonia, in 2017, specialised counselling services were established to provide additional support and advice to foster and kinship carers.²⁶¹ Similarly, Latvia developed a service called Plecs (meaning 'shoulder' in English) to expand the assistance and support available to families who are either planning to become alternative care providers or have already taken a foster child into their care.²⁶²

In sum

European Member States recognise that some groups of children and families should be provided with additional support. Accordingly, countries are updating and developing new legal actions, policies and services to improve the quality of life and social inclusion of vulnerable children and young people. Initiatives related to children with disabilities tend to focus on the provision of additional financial support for families caring for such children, as well as on the provision of educational support to ensure that the educational needs of children with disabilities are met. Policy, strategies and practice towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children aim to provide protection, target discrimination and intolerance, and support integration of those children within the wider society. Member

State countries are also making systematic progress towards the development of alternative child care services to transform the lives of children living in institutions.

CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSIONS

This second edition of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) annual trend report provides an overview of the main changes in European- and national-level child and family policies. The document builds on the information provided in the EPIC national profiles highlighting and summarising recent developments in all EU Member States.

The main developments and changes in child and family policy in the EU in recent months are related to progress made with delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Pillar, introduced in April 2017, aims to modernise the EU legal framework to give more effective social rights to EU citizens. As part of the Pillar (Principle 9 related to work-life balance), the European Commission proposed the Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers. In April 2019, the European Parliament backed the Directive, making it the first legislative proposal to follow the implementation of the Pillar. The Directive must now be transposed into the national legislation in all Member State countries by 2024. In this way, through the EU legal framework, the Directive is a step in a direction of promoting a more equal understanding of gender roles and a more equal sharing of responsibilities within families.

The Proposal for a Council Recommendation of High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in 2018 is also one of the developments coming from the Pillar. It builds on Principle 11, focusing on the right to affordable quality early childhood education and care provision. Adopted at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council in May 2019, the proposal has put childcare quality firmly on the EU- and national-level policy agendas and has a potential to modernise the provision of ECEC services in the EU28. The work on the Common framework for high-quality ECEC is still in progress.

Work also continues on the preparatory action for establishing a Child Guarantee Scheme for Vulnerable Children. As currently envisaged, the Child Guarantee, formulated as a new political priority by the European Parliament, aims to provide an implementing framework for EU policies, legislation and programmes for the provision of essential services for children. The study assessing the feasibility of the implementation of the child guarantee was launched in 2018 and thus far has produced results from the online consultation. A series of stakeholder workshops are planned for the autumn months of 2019 to provide further evidence for recommendations for the implementation of the scheme.

Recent months have also brought more EU-level efforts to support Children's Right to Participation. In 2018, the EU 2019-2027 Youth Strategy was approved by the EU Council, and there was also progress on the development and implementation of the Child Participation Assessment Tool. In May 2019, the Bucharest Declaration was agreed at a Children's Summit, making children's right to participate more prominent on the EU policy agenda.

Despite progress made across several areas related to child and family policy, key challenges remain with regard to child poverty and social inclusion. The direction of current policy developments is based on the principle of inclusion and integrated approaches within the policy framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is also crucial to assess the impact of all these initiatives. Project managers are advised to insist more often on evaluations that can assess the effectiveness of their programmes, initiatives and projects. It is only through the collection of robust evaluation evidence that we can inform and shape future policy decisions.

ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY AND DATA USED

The report draws on the data and information collected during the process of updating the national profiles featured on the EPIC website.²⁶³ National profiles are an important tool to report on family policy trends and changes at national level, to monitor progress made towards the implementation of the Recommendation, and to map how common certain practices are in a particular country. EPIC national profiles are updated annually. The information used for this report builds on the recent round of national profile updates, conducted during the last months of 2018 and the first months of 2019.

The EPIC project team at RAND Europe worked in close collaboration with national experts across Member States to collect relevant information and data. All national profiles are structured in accordance with a common reporting template, requiring experts to provide information on current policy objectives, legislation, programmes, initiatives and other measures covering the past 12 months in relation to the three pillars of the Recommendation. Nevertheless, national experts have some flexibility in reporting information, thus there is some variation in the content, length and breadth of information available for each Member States country profile. This variability is also reflected in our report when we outline the policy changes across European countries. Therefore, information on some topics is sometimes covered in more depth for some Member States than for others. And on a few occasions, information is not available for some countries at all. The report should be read with this caveat in mind.

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