



**Save the Children**

# **GUARANTEERING CHILDREN'S FUTURE**

**How to end child poverty and social exclusion  
in Europe**

Key findings and recommendations



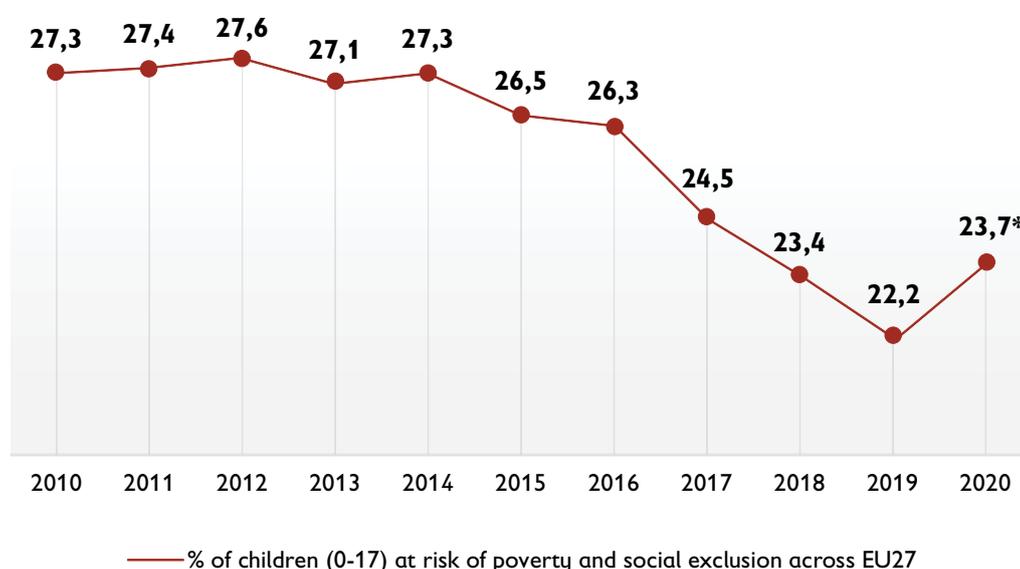


**A family from the Nou Moles neighborhood (Valencia, Spain), beneficiary of Save the Children.**  
Photo: Pablo Blázquez / Save the Children

# About the report

**The EU is considered one of the wealthiest and most equal regions in the world. Yet, no European country is free from child poverty.**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, approximately 1 in 4 children were growing up at risk of poverty or social exclusion across the 27 EU Member States. The 2020 Eurostat data<sup>1</sup> for the majority of the countries covered in this report estimate that this proportion will likely increase. According to the latest available data, in Germany, one of the world's richest countries, 1/4 of the children's population are growing up at risk of poverty, in Spain and Romania, one in three children are living below the poverty line. In Italy, estimates show that 200,000 more children have been driven to extreme poverty in 2020. The situation is even more dire in west Balkan countries where child poverty rates in the previous years varied from 49.4% in Albania to 30.6% in Bosnia-Herzegovina and 20.7% in Kosovo.

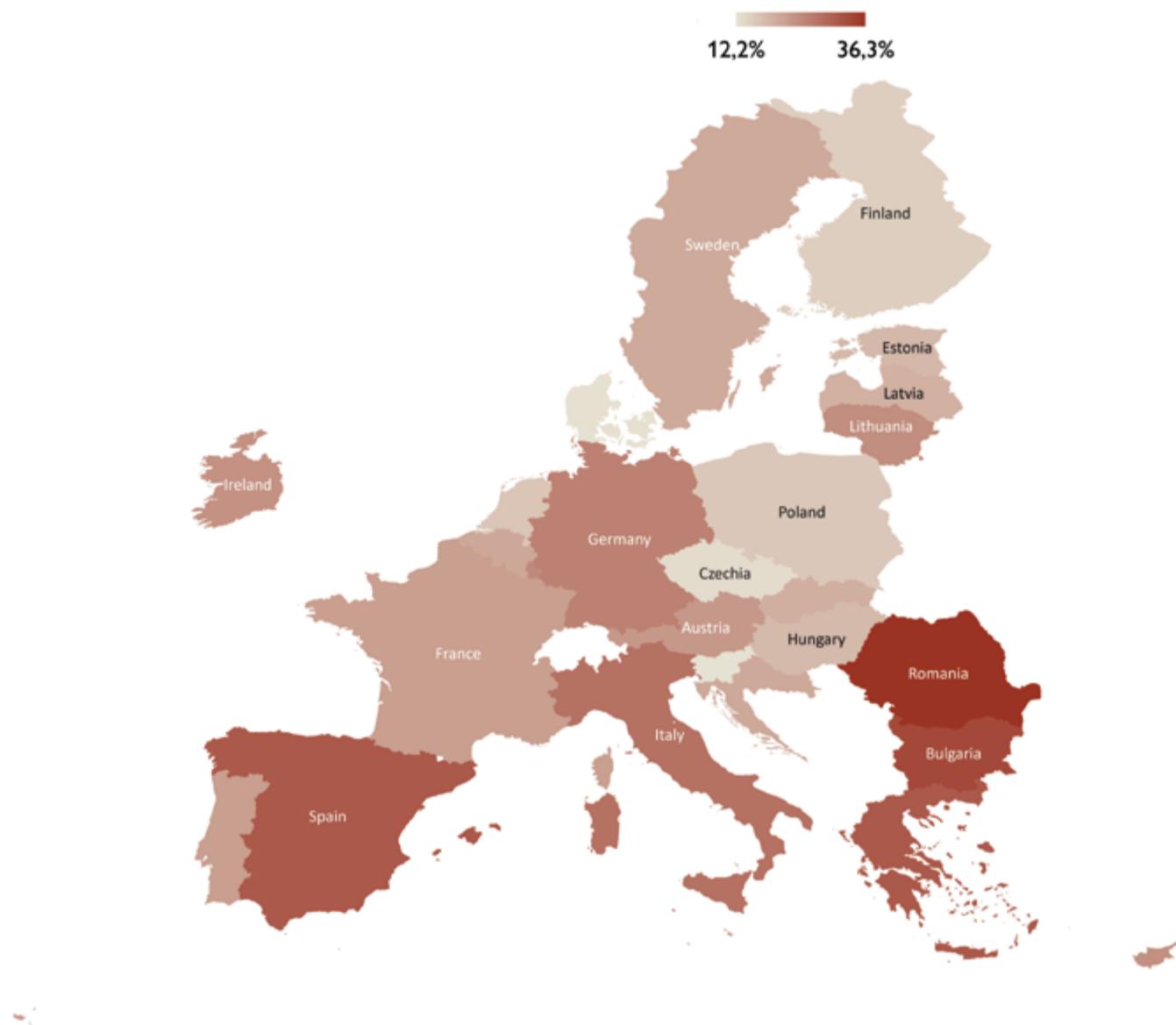


Source: Eurostat

\* break in time series, estimated, as 27 October 2021 for 24 out of 27 EU Member States

## Chart 1: Child poverty rates across the EU27 in 2010-2020

This confirms a new Save the Children's report 'The Guaranteeing our Future – How to End Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe.' The report provides a pan-European insight into what growing up in poverty means for almost 20 million European children facing poverty: from East to West and North to South.



Source: Eurostat

**Figure 1:** % of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion across the EU27 in 2020 (except for Italy, Latvia & Ireland where data is only available for 2019)

The report examines the challenges faced by children and families living in poverty and social exclusion in 14 European countries and territories: 9 EU Member States (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Lithuania, Romania) and 5 Non-EU Member States and territories<sup>2</sup> (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Iceland and Northern Ireland).

The report provides information on the levels of child poverty and identifies children in need in the 14 examined countries. It explores the key role of services like childcare, education, healthcare or adequate housing in addressing poverty, and analyses the state of children's access to these services in each country. The report also looks at the participation of children and civil society in decision-making procedures, and the allocation of EU funds and national budgets for child poverty reduction and social inclusion measures. In addition, the report highlights the work of Save the Children in each of these countries to support children and families in need. Furthermore, it outlines recommendations on how to improve national child poverty reduction policies, aiming to influence the Child Guarantee Action Plans in EU Member States.

The report also covers non-EU Member States as Save the Children considers the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation as an exemplary policy framework that can inspire and serve as a basis for policy making in countries outside the EU.

The findings and recommendations of this report are structured around the service areas of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation, namely:



Early childhood  
education and  
care



Inclusive education  
and school-based  
activities



Healthcare



Healthy  
nutrition



Adequate  
housing

**The report is divided into three main sections:**

**1**

The comparative analysis of the results of the 14 country pages;

**2**

The 14 country pages covering the challenges that children in need and their families face in each country, the role of Save the Children and recommendations on the Child Guarantee Action Plans or child poverty reduction measures;

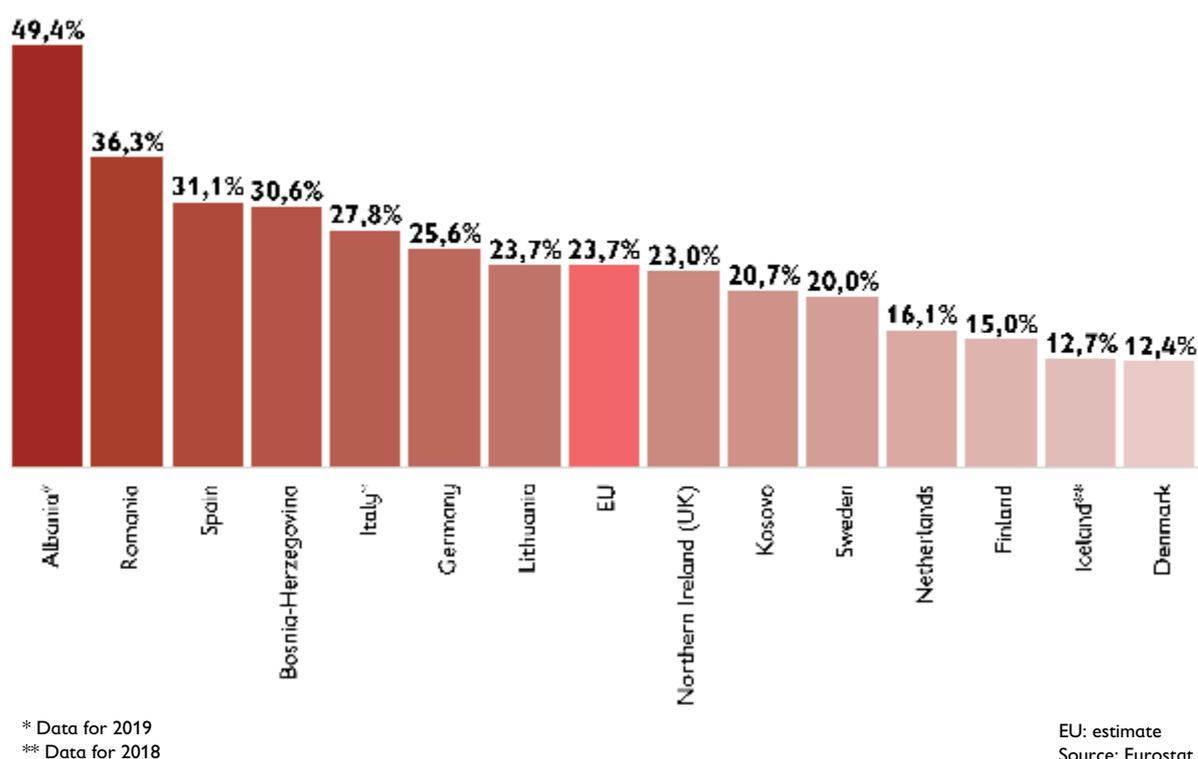
**3**

Recommendations for the EU and Member States on the successful implementation of the Child Guarantee and on child poverty reduction measures for countries outside the EU.

# Key findings

## CHILD POVERTY RATES IN EUROPE

Whereas the level of child poverty varies widely across the EU Member States, the most recent available data<sup>3</sup> for this report sample show the lowest level is in **Denmark** (12.4%) followed by **Finland** (15%) and the highest level is in **Romania** (36.3%) followed by **Spain** (31.1%). Only three countries: **Denmark**, **Sweden** and **Lithuania** saw a decrease in child poverty rates despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Children across the EU are facing unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality. The research predicts that countries such as **Germany**, **Spain**, and **Romania** will likely foresee substantial increases in family and child poverty beyond 2020, partly due to the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Chart 2: Child poverty rates in the report sample across EU Member States, 2020<sup>4</sup>**

The situation is even more dire in the Western Balkans where child poverty rates in the previous years varied from 49.4% in **Albania** to 30.6% in **Bosnia-Herzegovina** and 20.7% in **Kosovo** with Save the Children offices in the region reporting a severe underestimation of these rates.

## THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN

Poverty affects children's development and wellbeing from their earliest years, which means that a lack of access to key services like early childhood education and care, education, health care, and adequate housing and the multiple obstacles in accessing the support they need can have negative health and social consequences throughout their lives. Compared to their better-off peers, children living in poverty are more likely to underperform at school and will have difficulty finding a decent job. A child born to a poor family in the OECD country, for example, will need four to five generations to reach a level of earnings that is average for the country<sup>5</sup>. Poverty undermines a child's ability to thrive and reach their full potential in adulthood. Even temporary exposure to poverty and deprivation in childhood can have devastating consequences that last a lifetime. Child poverty is detrimental and costly for the economy and society as a whole.



Children are **disproportionately** affected by poverty.



Growing up in poverty has **lifelong** adverse consequences for children.



Child poverty is **multidimensional** and needs child rights-based approach.



Ending child poverty is key to break the **intergenerational** cycle of disadvantage.



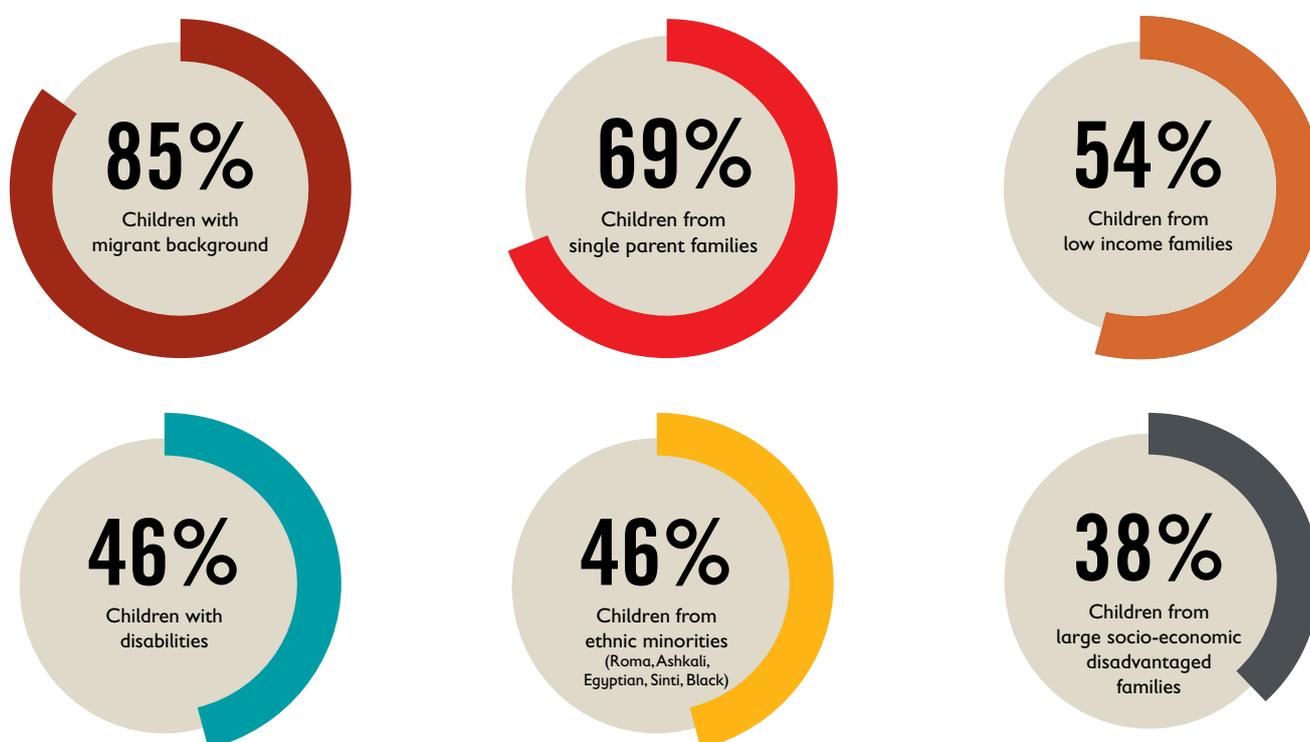
Child poverty is a **universal** challenge and affects children even in the world's wealthiest countries.



Child poverty is a problem that has **proven solutions**. Without urgent action, child poverty will soar.

## CHILDREN IN NEED

Children living in migration, growing up in single parent families, large families or low-income families, belonging to an ethnic minority or having a disability are more likely to be at risk of poverty and have been cited by the majority of countries in the report as those most in need of support.



**Figure 2: Main groups of children at risk across Europe**

In **Sweden**, 58% of all families headed by a single parent with a foreign background are at risk of poverty. In **Germany**, 45.2% of children receiving social benefits grow up in a single-parent family. Almost 50% of children experiencing poverty in **Spain** are under the age of 10 and almost 40% are younger than five. Large families with at least five members and families with a migrant background are affected by poverty in **Italy** the most. Children from ethnic minorities are among the most vulnerable groups of children, particularly, in **Albania**, **Bosnia-Herzegovina**, and **Kosovo**, where they face discrimination and a lack of access to essential services. In **Northern Ireland**, children from black ethnic communities are far more vulnerable to poverty, with two in three growing up in poverty.

## CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO KEY SERVICES



### Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

The report confirms that children from disadvantaged, migrant, low-income, and asylum-seeking households in **Finland, Germany, Sweden**, and the **Netherlands** are less often enrolled in early childhood education and care than their more affluent peers. In addition, **Romania, Italy, Germany**, and **Lithuania** experience a shortage of places in ECEC, particularly for children under the age of 3. **Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Albania**, and **Romania** report a shortage of teachers, high ratios of children per teacher/worker and overcrowded ECEC settings. In most cases, ECEC is not provided during the whole day, its quality is often questionable, it may also require the financial contribution of parents, thus limiting the access of children from vulnerable families. Many children – especially in southern, eastern, and **Balkan countries** – are being looked after by family members or stay-at-home mothers due to high levels of unemployment among women, which creates a vicious circle of combined lack of supply and demand.



### Education and school based, sports, leisure and cultural activities

Although education is free in most European countries, the hidden extra costs and low quality of education provision makes children's access to education frequently unpleasant. Children with disabilities continue to be among the most discriminated against. Despite positive changes, many of them are still being enrolled in special schools or placed in the segregating classes within mainstream schools. There is often a lack of professionals to support children with disabilities in mainstream education. Asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, and children from ethnic minorities are also often excluded from (or have limited access to) education. Furthermore, **Sweden** and **Finland** report school segregation as an increasing challenge that has been exacerbated by the school choice policies. Students with the highest degrees and from well-off families tend to opt out of immigrant-dominated schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced a pre-existing digital divide in education. In **Lithuania**, over 40.000 children were left without computers or internet connection during the 2020 school year due to poverty at home, and 25.000 children dropped out of distance learning for various reasons. Although the governments of **Romania** and the **Netherlands** have earmarked funds for digital equipment for children in need to support their online education during the pandemic, this was insufficient

to meet the high demand and fully ensure children's equal access to education. Extracurricular, sports, leisure and cultural activities are limited to children in need in most countries. School based activities – although provided in school settings most of the time – come with the requirement of a financial contribution by parents. Only two Member States in the study, **Finland** and **Sweden**, provide universal free school meals to all children. All other countries covered in this report apart from **Denmark, the Netherlands, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania** and **Iceland** provide free school meals for children in need. However, this provision does not reach all children in vulnerable situations.



## Healthcare

In most countries featured in this report, healthcare is free to all children.

However, the quality and the availability of services varies a lot, with rural areas always being more segregated and with fewer choices available. There is often no timely healthcare provision; long waiting lists affect many children. Children with disabilities throughout Europe have less access to healthcare, in particular, specialised care provision. Children's mental health is a key challenge in all countries. Mental health services are in high demand, but the supply is poor. In **Germany** and the **Netherlands**, access to mental health care for children seeking asylum is also extremely limited. Children in **western Balkan countries** covered in this report grow up deprived of the most basic health rights – deleterious health and living conditions, lack of infrastructure, inadequate governance and a permanent lack of resources are the norm.

**A mother plays with her son.**  
Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children





## Healthy nutrition

Children in need across Europe are frequently overweight or facing obesity. In **Italy**, for example, 20.4% of children are overweight and 9.4% face obesity. In the **Netherlands**, 11% of children between the age of 4 to 18 are overweight and 2.1% are obese. At the same time, in **Western Balkans**, children experience severe malnutrition and stunting. In **Kosovo**, 15% of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children under the age of five remain stunted<sup>6</sup> and 2.5% severely stunted. In many countries, including **Sweden, Finland, Spain, and Northern Ireland**, parents cannot provide their children with a nutritious daily meal. Eating meat or fish more than once per week – and in some instances eating vegetables – is also considered a privilege in some countries where the tax VAT has been increased or their price remains high. There is a need for public awareness campaigns across Europe around healthy eating habits as well as education for children and parents within the school settings.



## Adequate housing

Housing deprivation is among the most common challenges that children and families in poverty face across Europe. In **most countries**, poor families live in inadequate and overcrowded households, often sharing their homes with extended family due to high rent prices and insufficient financial household resources. This concerns not only unemployed parents or families on social benefits but also working families whose income cannot cover the rent. In 2019, 66.3% of **Romanian** children lived in overcrowded houses, of whom 79.7% were children at risk of poverty. In **most countries**, social housing is either too restricted or located in remote or segregated areas where access to the labour market and services is limited. The risk of eviction is also a serious challenge, especially in **Italy, Spain, Romania, and Northern Ireland**. Although eviction bans have been put in place during the pandemic in most countries, as the bans lift in the upcoming months, there is a real risk that an increasing number of children will become homeless. Refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking children and their families often have no entitlement to most housing benefits leading them to live in inadequate conditions.

## CHILD POVERTY REDUCTION MEASURES AND RESOURCES

Findings show that many countries in the report are not taking full advantage of national budgets and various EU funds: European Social Fund Plus(ESF+), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and REACT-EU – among others – to address child poverty and other challenges identified in each service area (i.e. childcare, education, health, nutrition and housing).

The draft ESF+ programmes of **Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands** have not included investments to reduce child poverty until now. Instead, a narrow perspective where employment is seen as almost the only path to combat child poverty still prevails. This limits the scope of a more holistic, social approach to addressing the problem. Similarly, **Denmark, Sweden, and Finland** have not included child poverty reduction and social inclusion measures as a priority in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

At the same time, **Romania, Lithuania, Italy, and Spain** have started introducing needed reforms through their draft ESF+ programmes which require at least 5% of funds to be allocated for reducing child poverty and social exclusion and improving the social welfare system for children and their families. These measures have also been reflected in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans in these countries.

In **Western Balkan countries**, EU funds and national budgets need to be used in a systematic and prolonged manner to provide children with the necessary services such as early education and care; inclusive, quality, and accessible education; leisure and sports; psychosocial support and counselling, as well as training to help them transition into adulthood.



**A boy from one of the at-risk families in Madrid, beneficiary of Save the Children Spain.**  
Photo: Pablo Blázquez / Save the Children

# Key recommendations

**Save the Children believes that ending child poverty and social exclusion must be a priority for all EU Member States, European countries and European institutions.**

The EU has recently agreed on a number of initiatives to tackle child poverty, including the European Child Guarantee – Europe’s flagship programme to address child poverty and break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, the ESF+, which calls on EU Member States to allocate appropriate financial resources to address child poverty and implement the Child Guarantee, and finally, the EPSR Action Plan aiming to lift at least 5 million children out of poverty by 2030<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the EU’s commitment to invest in the next generation, many Member States still fall short of allocating adequate resources to address child poverty. Save the Children urges the EU and the non-EU Member States to take a comprehensive approach to tackle child poverty through a variety of short term and long term social protection measures that will support present and future generations of children. Governments now need to swiftly harness new EU anti-poverty instruments and ensure the successful implementation of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation:

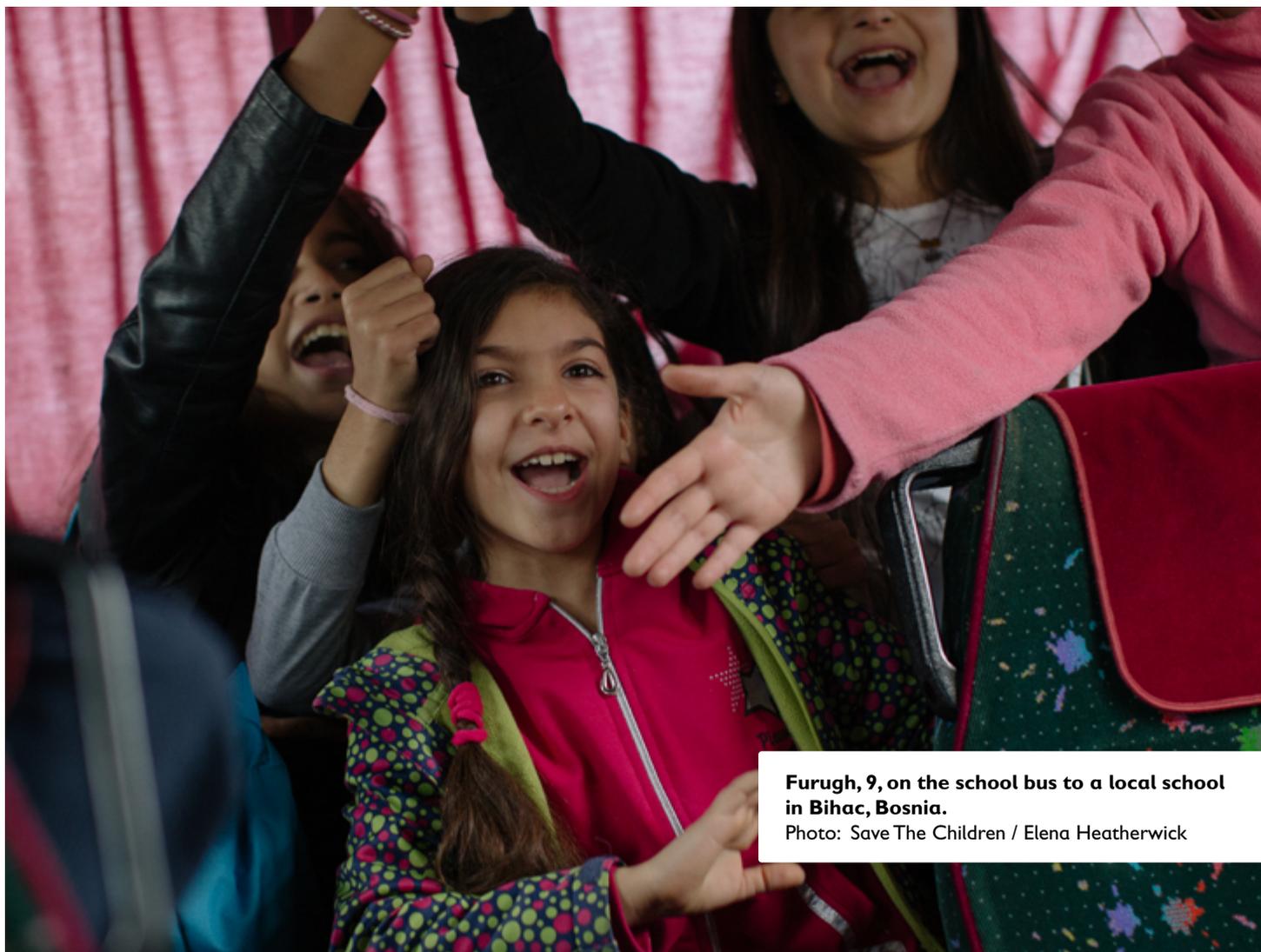
- take a comprehensive approach to addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the Child Guarantee national action plans and align the Child Guarantee action plans with national poverty reduction strategies;
- ensure that the Plans reflect the views and needs of children in vulnerable situations and do not stigmatise them and their families;
- set ambitious national targets for child poverty reduction, develop disaggregated indicators and collect appropriate data to monitor the implementation of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation;
- promote and clearly outline the allocation of national and EU financial resources for addressing child poverty in the Child Guarantee national action plans;
- guarantee the sustainability of reforms, ensuring that the financial resources continue funding services in the long run.

Save the Children calls on national decision makers in non-EU Member States to use the Child Guarantee as a basis for their child poverty reduction measures.

*For a comprehensive list of recommendations, see the full report ‘Guaranteeing Children’s Future – How to End Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe’.*

# Endnotes

- 1 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm040/default/table?lang=en>
- 2 When referring to non-EU Member States, we refer to countries in Europe, but non-members of the European Union.
- 3 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm040/default/table?lang=en>
- 4 The percentages refer to the groups of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion as presented in the 14 country pages.
- 5 [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility\\_9789264301085-en#page16](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility_9789264301085-en#page16)
- 6 Stunting refers to a child who is too short for his or her age. Stunting is the failure to grow both physically and cognitively and is the result of chronic or recurrent malnutrition. It can also be referred to as ‘chronic malnutrition’. The effects of stunting often last a lifetime: <http://www.who.int/>
- 7 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)



**Furugh, 9, on the school bus to a local school in Bihac, Bosnia.**

Photo: Save The Children / Elena Heatherwick

Save the Children believes that every child deserves a future. In Europe and around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and be protected from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach.

We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

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