



Strasbourg, 23.4.2024
COM(2024) 188 final

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**Putting Children's Interests First: A Communication accompanying the Commission
Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems**

“Children’s voices should be empowered more, and this could encourage other children not to hide their problems” (Contribution of a child from Lithuania¹)

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN EUROPE AND BEYOND, AS AN EU PRIORITY

In many respects, the lives of children in the European Union and globally have improved over the past decades. This also is thanks to increased prosperity, better healthcare and improved access to education. As we face a rapidly changing world, from the adverse effects on children of the pandemic, inequalities, discrimination, conflicts or climate change, and in the virtual world, we took action to continue to uphold and further strengthen the rights and quality of children’s lives in the EU and beyond. The EU, its European and international partners, and civil society organisations have worked together to leave no child behind as we tackle these challenges and harness the opportunities of the green, digital and demographic transitions.

Over recent years, the Commission has put in place a robust and comprehensive legal, policy and support framework with clear commitments to step up the protection, promotion and fulfilment of children’s rights, notably through the adoption of the comprehensive EU strategy on the rights of the child² (‘EU Strategy’) and the European Child Guarantee³ in March 2021. Under the EU Strategy, a number of measures are implemented together with the Member States, including measures against online and off-line child sexual abuse and exploitation⁴ and actions to tackle child poverty and socio-economic exclusion for children in need, including those with disabilities or of minority and migrant background. Measures have also been taken to better adapt justice systems to children’s needs as victims, suspects, accused or convicted persons, witnesses or as other parties to legal proceedings. Furthermore, the Commission has developed measures to improve mental health and well-being of children. Meaningful child participation and consultation, including through the Children’s Participation Platform⁵ has been a hallmark of the EU Strategy, and it is becoming a recognised practice in the EU and beyond.

The EU Strategy also includes a strong external dimension with the EU stepping up its work to promote, protect, fulfil and respect the rights of the child globally, eradicating child labour, fighting child marriage, investing considerably in education around the globe, and protecting from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect, including in humanitarian context. The EU is also fostering child and youth participation at the global level through the Youth Action Plan in External Action⁶. The EU guidelines on children and armed conflict⁷ are being revised to prevent, respond and end harmful practices against children affected by armed conflicts .

While significant progress has been made, violence against children remains a challenge both inside and outside the EU, at many levels. Ending all forms of violence against children,

¹ Through the [EU Children’s Participation Platform](#) consultation.

² COM(2021) 142 final.

³ Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee (OJ L 223, 22.6.2021).

⁴ Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA (Child Sexual Abuse Directive) ([OJ L 335, 17.12.2011](#))“Child Sexual Abuse Directive, including its recast COM(2024) 60 final, Communication on a Digital Decade for children and youth: the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) (COM(2022) 212 final), Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse COM(2022) 209 final.

⁵ [EU Children’s Participation Platform](#).

⁶ JOIN (2022) 53 final.

⁷ [EU Guidelines on children and armed conflict](#).

including by developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems, is both a moral and a legal imperative. It is furthermore a strategic investment in the future of our societies.

PROTECTING CHILDREN: AN IMPERATIVE AND A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IN SOCIETY

Violence can take many forms and include all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, physically, online, or in virtual worlds. Such violence includes domestic violence, human trafficking, sexual abuse, gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation and child marriage, as well as all forms of bullying and corporal punishment. Children are also exposed to discrimination and intolerance, including in their digital life⁸. In 2021, 114 children were the victims of intentional homicide across the EU⁹. It is estimated that 20% of children in Europe suffer some form of sexual abuse during their childhood¹⁰. In a recent survey of violence against women, up to 13.7% of adult women reported at national level to have experienced sexual violence in childhood¹¹, although this share might even be higher, since disclosure rates are unfortunately lower than the reality. It is estimated that 190,000 girls across the EU are at risk of being forcibly subjected to genital mutilation¹². Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people (15 to 19 years old)¹³. 13% to 29% of children (15-years old) reported being frequently bullied in different Member States¹⁴.

Violence against children also has an economic cost estimated at up to 8% of global GDP, amounting to around EUR 6.5trillion, as it slows economic development, increases socioeconomic inequality, stifles economic growth, and reduces per capita income¹⁵. By devoting resources to early childhood programmes, this can yield a return on investment at least four times higher than the original outlay¹⁶. The annual loss of human capital from mental disorders of children and young people is estimated at EUR 54.2billion in Europe¹⁷. Childhood socio-economic disadvantage also bears large costs for societies, totalling on average the equivalent of 3.4% of GDP in the EU¹⁸. Investing in child protection and violence prevention therefore also yields high economic returns and long-term cost savings.

Children themselves ask to be empowered, and speak out about their issues, their lives. They are rights holders and agents of change in the here and now and are eloquent in their calls on adults for action to respond to their needs. As experts in matters concerning them, children rightfully demand “*Nothing for us without us*”. In accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the rights of the Child (‘UN Convention’) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (‘the Charter’), children’s voices and needs are central to the

⁸ Evidenced in the accompanying Staff Working Document (SWD(2024) 98 final).

⁹ Eurostat, [Intentional homicide victims by age and sex - number and rate for the relevant sex and age groups](#), 2021.

¹⁰ [Council of Europe Human Rights Channel](#).

¹¹ Eurostat, [EU survey on gender-based violence against women and other forms of inter-personal violence \(EU-GBV\)](#), 2022.

¹² [Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹³ UNICEF, [The State of the World’s Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children’s mental health. Regional brief: Europe](#), 2021.

¹⁴ [The twin challenge of equity and excellence in basic skills in the EU. An EU comparative analysis of the PISA 2022 results - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#), 2024.

¹⁵ [The Violence-Prevention Dividend. Why Preventing Violence Against Children Makes Economic Sense](#), 2022.

¹⁶ The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, [High Return on Investment](#), 2015.

¹⁷ UNICEF Report on the State of the World’s Children 2021, [Europe regional brief](#).

¹⁸ C. Clarke, et al. (2022), [The economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage in European OECD countries](#), OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities, No. 9, OECD Publishing.

Recommendation on integrated child protection systems. More than 1,000 children were consulted on their protection needs through the EU's new Children's Participation Platform.

TOWARDS INTEGRATED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Protecting children from all forms of violence is a core EU objective. It is also intrinsically linked to the prevention of violence, to ensure children's well-being and respect of their rights. Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union ('TEU') establishes the objective for the Union to promote the protection of the rights of the child. Article 24 of the Charter provides that children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being, and that in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration. Child protection is also a key objective of the UN Convention and of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for every child to live free from fear, neglect, abuse and exploitation. The staggering statistics and evidence of the broad range of child abuse, violence, and neglect across the EU, including the toll of the pandemic, the repercussions of the war of aggression against Ukraine and a spike in global armed conflicts, are a call for further action.

The Commission therefore presents a Recommendation¹⁹ to Member States to further develop and strengthen their child protection systems to make them more integrated to better address children's needs for protection from any form of violence and to promote child protection as a global priority of the Union.

Child protection is a whole of society and cross sectorial issue. The responsibility for child protection is shared among a wide range of actors, which include public authorities, private actors, international and civil society organisations. The wide variety of tools at the disposal of Member States, and at Union level (legislation, policies and funding) and across all levels of governance, can help make child protection systems more integrated and robust. Coordination mechanisms across Member States are needed to ensure effective multi-disciplinary responses across ministries or across different layers of competences. It is essential that actors assume clearly defined roles and ensure close coordination. The availability and coordination of human and financial resources is also a challenge. Based on this, more efficient and integrated child protection systems are clearly needed.

A whole of society approach to child protection is a tangible and strategic long-term investment, also in the context of the longevity society that is developing before our eyes. It will substantially contribute to fairer, more equal, and just societies, underpinned by intergenerational equity and solidarity for present and future generations.

Building on the calls by the European Parliament²⁰, the Council²¹ and the European Committee of the Regions²², the Recommendation presented by the Commission to the Member States reaffirms the Commission's commitment to strengthen child protection across the EU and beyond. It supports and calls upon Member States to assess, strengthen, and integrate their child protection systems, drawing on best practices and utilising EU-level tools such as legislation, policy measures, and funding. The Commission also calls on the European

¹⁹ See references in the Recommendation on integrated child protection systems (C(2024) 2682 final), in its Annex on key Union Acquis, key policy documents and funding relevant to child protection systems and in its supporting Staff Working Document (SWD(2024) 98 final).

²⁰ European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 on children's rights in view of the EU Strategy on the rights of the child ([2021/2523\(RSP\)](#)).

²¹ Council Conclusions of 9 June 2022 on the EU Strategy on the rights of the child ([10024/22](#)).

²² [European Committee of the Regions Opinion on "Empowering Local and Regional Authorities in Integrated Child Protection Systems" adopted at the Plenary session of 17-18 April 2024. See: Opinion Factsheet \(europa.eu\).](#)

Parliament and the Council to take this Recommendation into account in their future deliberations, and on the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee to promote dialogue with local and regional authorities and civil society. In all those actions, the best interests of the child should always remain a primary consideration.