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**European Commission activities related to equal opportunities for all children in education**

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Thank you to the Lithuanian Ombudsperson for children's rights and to ENOC for having given me the opportunity to speak at your annual conference.

Education is the remit of EU Member States and the Commission plays a supporting role. I will give you a brief overview of Commission activities to promote and protect the child's right to education and to ensure equal opportunities for all children in education. I will focus on two of the main policy areas, early childhood education and care and early school leaving and I will also look at what we do for children in vulnerable situations, focusing on Roma children and migrant children.

I do not include a separate section on **equal opportunities for children with disabilities**, but I am aware of many challenges. In countries where parents and children have to continuously fight for their right to education, what happens to those without the means to fight or those who are unable to become expert in their rights and in navigating complex barriers? What happens, for example, to children with disabilities in foster care – who fights their corner? Without a presumption of inclusion, such as exists in Scotland, there will not be equal access.

Nor did I deal separately with **undocumented children**.

**Early childhood education and care (ECEC)<sup>1</sup>**

In 2014, the Commission with 25 Member States developed [a proposal for an EU quality framework on early childhood education and care](#).<sup>2</sup> It is a key document for ECEC reforms across Member States. From an educational angle, the focus of ECEC policies clearly needs to be on high quality services. We need to focus on the gap to be narrowed – the skills gap that develops very early between advantaged and disadvantaged children. By the time school starts, without high quality ECEC, the skills gap becomes an ever-increasing barrier to learning. But disadvantaged children, including those with a migrant background, participate less in ECEC than others. The most important fund to improve quality of ECEC is the Erasmus+ Fund, one of the main strands being the professionalisation of childhood educators and assistants. The return on investment in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-childhood\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-childhood_en)

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

ECEC is the highest of all educational stages. The Commission plans to reinforce inclusiveness and diversity-related aspects to take the quality framework further. In the [Action plan on the integration of third country nationals \(7 June 2016\)](#), ECEC is acknowledged as part of the response for migrant children and families. The Commission will develop guidelines, tools and methods that address barriers to their participation, support ECEC staff, reinforce cross-sectorial cooperation (including child protection services, cultural mediators and interpreters, social and health workers) and, finally, transfer ECEC settings as meeting places for families to help them better integrate into their new communities.

Work is also underway to develop **indicators that measure the quality** of the processes in place for developing accessible and high quality ECEC systems in the Member States.

In light of Europe 2020 targets, Member States have received **country-specific recommendations on ECEC/childcare (focusing on access, affordability and quality)**. There were 10 CSRs in 2014, seven in 2015 and six in 2016 (CZ, IE, ES, IT, SK, UK). On 30 November-1 December DG Education and Culture is organising an **early years conference** and I was asked to inform you about it. It covers children aged 0-12 and the transitions between home, childcare and school. Particular focus will be put on how to combat inequalities and include vulnerable groups.

### **Early school leavers (ESL)**<sup>3</sup>

Early school leavers are defined as young people between 18-24 with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. We have a [Europe 2020 target to reduce the average European rate of early school leavers to less than 10%](#). However, 2014 data indicated a rate of 11.1% early school leavers, or 4.4m young people. That rate is an average; the rates for disadvantaged groups such as young people from a migrant or Roma background or young people with a learning disability are alarmingly high.

The [Working Group on Schools Policy \(2014-2015\)](#), created [Policy messages](#) identifying key conditions for implementing a whole school approach to tackling early school leaving. The School Education Gateway offers policy makers and practitioners a wealth of resources and practical examples of effective practices to promote educational success and prevent early school leaving. Member States were encouraged to use EU funding to tackle this and to promote comprehensive and collaborative approaches to education and to ensure inclusive education. They defined inclusive education as the right of all to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners.

In November 2015, the Education Council adopted [conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school](#). The Council Conclusions underline the importance of access to quality early childhood education and care as a means to unlock the potential of children and to help prevent early school leaving. DG Education and Culture is now working on upgrading the European Toolkit for Schools and on translation into other EU languages.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers_en)

Given the 2020 target, Member States have received country-specific recommendations on inclusive education and early school leaving in 2014 (18 MS), 2015 (13 MS) and 2016 (5 MS and 2 MS for migrant populations: (BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK (and AT and BE for migrant populations)).

## School education gateway - [www.schooleducationgateway.eu](http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu)

A wealth of material is covered here on everything to do with schools and education, with sections on ECEC, early school leaving, etc. It includes good practices on providing targeted support to Roma children and working with Roma families. You can also find information on a conference in Vilnius in October 2015, linked to Lithuania's planned reforms of ECEC, on the ECEC quality framework. In September 2016, the focus theme is language teaching and learning in the context of inclusion and diversity.

## Roma children and education

### 2013 Council Recommendation<sup>4</sup>

The [2013 Council Recommendation on effective Roma Integration measures in the Member States](#) underlined the need to achieve: *equal treatment and full access for Roma boys and girls to quality and mainstream education (eliminating any school segregation, inappropriate placement of Roma pupils in schools for children with special needs, etc.), as well as equal treatment of Roma in access to housing (eliminating any spatial segregation and promoting desegregation, promoting non-discriminatory access to social housing access to public utilities, etc.)*

### Infringement proceedings against three Member States

The Commission has strengthened its efforts to fight against school discrimination of Roma children and uses all available tools to tackle it, including legal, policy and funding. Legal tools involve the use of infringement proceedings (CZ (2014), SK ((2015) and HU (2016) launched so far, but also other Member States are under investigation and monitoring). The objective of the infringement proceedings is to tackle the problem in a systematic way in cooperation with the Member State concerned and to allow the Commission to monitor progress.

These proceedings are linked also to the Council Recommendation and the European Semester Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) to promote the participation of Roma children in quality, inclusive mainstream education.

Besides CZ, HU, SK, BG and RO received CSRs in this area. The CSRs represented funding priorities when negotiating the use of 2014-2020 ESIF. The five Member States with CSRs can and should use the funds to promote inclusive reform of their public education system.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013H1224\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013H1224(01))

## 27 June Communication assessing the EU framework for the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies and the 2013 Council Recommendation<sup>5</sup>

Member States committed to strategies up until 2020. Every year the Commission reports on implementation. For the 2016 report, some Member States (France, Germany, Slovenia) opted for alternative reporting, while others (Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands) did not report on their measures. See the individual country reports in this [communication](#).<sup>6</sup>

Education rightly receives the most attention by Member States in their Roma integration measures, focusing on ECEC, ESL, inclusive education and individualised support. However, discrimination continues to be widespread across the EU. The Commission pleads for a balanced approach in addressing the integration needs of all those in need, particularly in light of the refugee crisis, where one group may be prioritised over the other. [The 2016 report includes assessments for each Member State, covering education also](#). The Member States report, and the Commission assesses. Having good country analysis reports to hand is particularly valuable for the Commission when looking at Member States reports.

### Guidance on the efficient use of EU funds to tackle educational segregation

In November 2015, the Commission issued guidance on the efficient use of European structural and investment funds to tackle educational and spatial segregation of marginalised people in the 2014-20 programming period.<sup>7</sup> The focus is on desegregation (active elimination of segregation) rather than the more passive non-segregation. I particularly welcome the guidance for its focus on an integrated approach and the focus on the links between spatial and educational segregation:

*"Within the varying spatial settings it is also important to address the links between spatial and education segregation in the scope of integrated approach. For example, residential segregation may lead to school segregation, especially in settings where schools are located in the proximity or within the segregated neighbourhood."*

*"The integrated approach, namely addressing the strong links between education, employment, housing and health will ensure that the needs of the people concerned are addressed in the most effective and efficient way."*

The guidance also underlines the importance of designing and implementing programmes and interventions together with the future participants, to **empower and involve them**. Examples of appropriate measures are given.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/1-2016-424-EN-F1-1.PDF>

<sup>6</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma-report-2016\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma-report-2016_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/thematic\\_guidance\\_fiche\\_segregation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/thematic_guidance_fiche_segregation_en.pdf)

## Education access

Measures recommended by the Council	Member States that have reported a measure
Eliminate segregation	BE, BG, ES, IE, IT, RO, SI, SK
End misplacement in special needs schools	BG, CZ, SK
Fight early school leaving	AT, BE, BG, CY, DE, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IT, RO, SE, SK, UK
Promote access to and quality of early childhood education and care	AT, BG, CZ, ES, FI, HR, HU, IT, PL, RO, SK
Provide individualised support	AT, CZ, DE, ES, HR, IT, LT, LV, PL, RO, SK, UK
Promote inclusive teaching and learning methods	AT, BG, CY, CZ, DE, ES, HR, HU, LV, PT, RO, SI, SK, UK
Encourage parental involvement and teacher training	AT, BE, BG, CY, DE, ES, FI, IT, LV, SI, SK
Promote participation and completion of secondary and higher education	AT, BG, CZ, DE, ES, FI, HR, HU, PL, UK
Widen access to second-chance education and adult learning	UK, BG, CY, DE, ES, SI
Other	BE, CZ, ES, FI, DE, HR, HU, IT, LT, LV, RO, SI, SK, UK

As well as the power of the structural funds to effect change, we also fund projects under the **Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme** and I include a link to the list of projects funded in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we plan to commission a mapping of data and research on respect of the rights of Roma children, to document the evidence base and help inform policy choices and decisions.

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[http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/calls/2015\\_action\\_grants/just\\_2015\\_rdis\\_ag\\_disc\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/calls/2015_action_grants/just_2015_rdis_ag_disc_en.htm)

## External research of relevance

I would like to mention upcoming research - not financed by the Commission - that will be published soon. A Bulgarian organisation carried out indepth research on access to kindergarten for Roma children among 6000 families throughout the country, using randomised control trials. The project was two years in the planning and 11 months in implementation with eight monitoring visits carried out every day for 11 months. The research has some interesting findings on the impact of **removing the barriers to kindergarten access are removed**. Education is important to Roma parents too, despite what many people believe and say.

Results of a (non-EU funded) Bernard Van Lier Foundation/ISSA project on access to education in Ghent, Rome and Belfast will also be published soon and are very interesting. All three subprojects reinforce the need for **integrated approaches** and **combined interventions** and also document quite graphically the discrimination and exclusion that Roma children continue to face in 2016 in Europe.

## Children in migration

Ninety-one per cent of children around the world attend primary school. But only one in two refugee children attend primary school. Three and a half million refugee children are not at school. Everyone is aware that many children fleeing conflict zones may never have attended school. There are 18.000 refugee and migrant children of school age stranded in Greece. Where children change country or are moved from one reception facility to another this will have an impact. Where governments decide to close reception facilities without considering the educational continuity of the residents, this poses problems. Member States face new challenges in integrating refugee children in the education system, aside from the numbers and language barriers. If a teenager has never gone to school, he may face difficulties sitting still. Cultural references and textbooks may need to be adapted. If a child has never used a book, they need to be taught to navigate a book. Alongside many positive initiatives, there were reports in Denmark in September of segregated classrooms in one school to prevent "white flight" and in Northern Greece parents have been objecting at plans to enrol refugee children.

## Commission activities in the area

In April 2016 the Commission, in collaboration with Member States, and in particular Sweden, the host country, organised a Peer Learning Activity on the reception of newly arrived migrants, and assessment of previous schooling. Ten countries participated in the PLA: SE, AT, BE, EE, FI, DE, GR, NO, PT, and SI.

The PLA looked at the pros and cons of using reception classes versus structured support in mainstream classes.

Four main themes emerged: **1) whatever approach is taken (reception or immersion), the individual needs of children must be the starting point, rather than the organisational model in place; 2) a whole school approach is crucial 3) the respect of the child's right to mother tongue tuition as well as in the language of the host country, with strong support**

**for fostering both the mother tongue language and the language of instruction, 4) the need for further evaluation and research was recognised.** The Swedish PLA report will be published soon. A second PLA took place in Saxony in June. Member States can request or initiate a PLA via the Commission to address particular challenges.

## **EU funding in the area of education for refugee and migrant children**

In 2016, with €380m available under Erasmus+, one quarter, or more than 2500 project applications, targeted inclusive education, training and youth. In 2017, the budget will be increased to €470m with a further €43m for staff mobility.

The European Social Fund can also be used for the education of asylum seekers and refugees and for children. The Commission has encouraged managing authorities to use the funds for this purpose.

In 2016, 4% of the humanitarian aid budget (up from 1%), namely **€52m** is allocated to education in emergencies and to activities that enable children affected by conflict to access safe, quality education.

**In Greece, in the context, of the Emergency Support Instrument,** non-formal education is a priority. While access to the national education system is the remit of the national authorities, so far in 2016 DG ECHO has allocated €4.9m to humanitarian organisations and the UN to deliver non-formal education activities for refugee and migrant children stranded in mainland Greece and on the islands. Activities funded by DG ECHO include language classes (mother tongue, Greek, English), basic maths and literacy, the provision of school kits, and the transportation of children to and from public schools. All of these activities are planned and implemented in collaboration with the Greek Ministry for Education.

In 2016, the European Commission **allocated €120m to the [Regional education and protection programme for vulnerable Syrian refugee and host community children and adolescents](#)**<sup>9</sup> via UNICEF and others, **in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.**

## **Equity in education**

The Commission is working on a draft Council Recommendation on promoting social inclusion and common EU values through formal and non-formal education. Educational opportunities are still very much dictated by socio-economic and immigration background of children. On the programming side, **€13m was made available through Erasmus+ to scale up and disseminate innovative practices that promote social inclusion in education.**

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<sup>9</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria/madad/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria/madad/index_en.htm)

## Overview of European Semester country-specific recommendations (CSRs) on children

Policy Topic	Countries receiving a child CSR in 2014	Countries receiving a child CSR in 2015	Countries receiving a child CSR in 2016 <sup>10</sup>
Child poverty			IE, IT ( <i>N.B.</i> ‘National Anti-Poverty Strategy’)
Income support	IE, IT, UK, ES, HU, BG, RO, PT, LV	BG, CZ, HU, IT, LV, LT, PT, RO, SL, ES	BG, ES, FR, HU, HR, IE, IT, LT, LV
Efficiency/ effectiveness of social protection support	FI, RO, EE, HR, LV, ES, BG	HR, IE, IT, FI	HR, ES, IT
ECEC/childcare (access, affordability, quality)	IE, IT, SK, RO, PL, DE, EE, CZ, AT, UK (10)	AT, CZ, EE, IE, RO, SK, UK (7)	CZ, IE, ES, IT, SK, UK (6)
Inclusive education/ Early school leaving	SE, ES, SK, RO, PT, MT, IT, DK, DE, FR, CZ, BE, AT, PL, HU, HR, EE, BG (18)	AT, BG, CZ, EE, HU, IT, LV, LT, MT, PT, RO, SK, UK (13)	BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK [AT, BE – migrant populations] (5 + 2)
Affordable housing	UK, SE, NL	NL, SE, UK	IE, NL, SE, UK, LU
Financial disincentives to the labour market	NL, LU, DE, BE, IT, AT, FR, EE, IE, LU	HR, CZ, DE, EE, IE, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK	DE, IE, FR, FI
Reconciliation	MT, PL, LU	IT	
Youth activation	LU, LT, LV, UK, SE, FI, SK, SL, PT, HU, IT, HR, FR, ES, IE, DK, BG, BE	IT, RO, SK, ES, FI	BG, RO
Access to health	BG, RO, LV, ES	BG, LV, LT, RO	BG, CY, LV, PT, RO, SI
Roma-related	BG, HU, CZ, RO, SK	BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK	BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK

<sup>10</sup> In order to avoid duplication Cyprus and Greece did not receive any CSRs in 2014 and 2015 as they were still subject to macroeconomic adjustment programmes. However, Cyprus received CSRs in 2016.

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