

Defending Children's Rights!

European Strategies Against Right-Wing Populist and Right-Wing Extremist Narratives and Attacks on Civil Society – 27 November 2025 organised by the German National Coalition and AGJ

Anti-Rights Movements in Europe and their Impact on Children's Rights

Mieke Schuurman, Director of Child Rights & Capacity Building at Eurochild

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to this important event organized by 2 Eurochild member organisations.

Eurochild is a network with 225 members in 41 European countries. We are the largest network of organisations and individuals working with and for children in Europe and having the UNCRC as a basis. We aim to bring about positive changes in the lives of children, in particular those affected by poverty and disadvantage. We do this by influencing policies, building civil society capacity and facilitate mutual learning and exchanges.

As we have just heard from Lea about the anti-rights climate in Germany, I would like share the European perspective, including sharing examples from our members across Europe.

Across Europe we see an increase in attacks on democracy, shrinking civil society space and unprecedented backlash against universal human rights, including children's rights. As Lea mentioned, also in Europe we see that non-state groups as well as States have been leading conservative initiatives and attacks on children's rights both at international and European levels. **They are gathered under the banner of advocacy for the protection of the family and traditional values restrictions.**

Family protection is the reference point here as it prioritises other concerns over children's rights. It is arguing that focusing on children's autonomy undermines parental rights and family integrity.

We have seen in Europe that attacks on anti-child rights movements have taken different forms and we also see that the scale of attacks are spreading across European countries and among child rights organisations.

I will go into six different forms and attacks we have observed across Europe.

- 1. We see that laws, strategies and initiatives to further children's rights are opposed, blocked or repealed.**

For example, in **Bulgaria, the National Strategy for the Child** remains stalled, blocked by anti-rights groups who argue that children's rights would undermine parental authority.

In many countries we see that the supposed well-being of children is used to cover to oppose rights and protection for girls, women and LGBTIQ+ people and block efforts to protect and advance sexual and reproductive rights. In Bulgaria amendments to the **Preschool and School Education Act** explicitly ban any promotion of ‘non-traditional sexual orientation or gender identity’ in schools.

A similar law was passed in 2021 in Hungary, which is referred to as the **Propaganda Law**. It prohibits the dissemination of content related to LGBTQ+ issues to minors, arguing that this was necessary to protect children. The law also banned LGBTQ+ individuals from being featured in school educational material or TV shows for people under the age of 18. **This law has been widely criticised trying to equate LGTBQ+ content with harmful content.** It restricts access of minors to content which “promotes or portrays divergence from self-identity corresponding to the sex assigned at birth, sex change or homosexuality” (known as the “child protection” or “anti-LGBTIQ” law).

This criticism led to the, by far, the largest lawsuit to defend civic space in EU history. *(separate part for panel discussion)*

2. We see that human rights defenders and civil society are targeted for their human rights activities and for speaking out.

In several countries we see that child rights CSOs are facing an increasingly hostile climate. For example, in **Ireland**, in recent years, far-right and anti-NGO movements have gained traction in Ireland, using **disinformation campaigns, legal actions, and online harassment to intimidate children’s rights defenders**. In 2024, the leadership of Eurochild’s member CRA faced orchestrated online attacks and death threats following participation in an anti-racism event. This forced the organisation to adopt crisis communication strategies and increase security measures.

In Bulgaria, CSOs advocating for children’s rights are under pressure, with [proposed laws](#) threatening to restrict CSOs that receive foreign funding or criticise government narratives. Online, child rights defenders face intimidation and attacks, while xenophobic rhetoric against migrant children, particularly unaccompanied minors, undermines their protection and safety. And similar to the leadership of the Irish national child rights coalition, also the leadership of the Bulgarian national children’s rights coalition came under attack.

3. We see that well-known public figures are part of anti-rights movements

Organisations working on children’s rights are attacked. They are named and shamed by dehumanizing propaganda speech.

In Ireland **anti-NGO narratives have gained legitimacy through amplification by certain political figures and media outlets**, particularly during election cycles. This context is especially

concerning because Ireland plays a pivotal role in regulating digital platforms headquartered there, with direct implications for children across the EU.

4. We see children who are human rights defenders attacked for their human rights activities and for speaking out.

Children have reported being subject to adverse experiences such as **heckling, interruption, being joked about, belittled or insulted when speaking about children's rights.**

I would like to share with you the situation within **Serbia**. Over the past year after the collapse of the roof of a station in Novi Sad, in Serbia, in which many students were killed, we have seen many high school students participating in peaceful protests. There have been multiple incident reports that these students were ordered by the police to be questioned, a move that has raised serious concerns about intimidation and the misuse of legal measures to suppress peaceful activism.

Serbia also witnessed significant disruptions to education, the Ministry of Education closed the school semester prematurely in December last year for reasons of safety concerns amid strikes and school blockades. Some schools have been closed for months. The violence against peaceful protesters, suppression of youth activities, have created uncertainty and fear among Serbia's youth and children.

5. We see that in particular vulnerable groups of children are the target of anti-child rights movements

In **Spain** a far-right party launched a public campaign targeting unaccompanied migrant children during the 2021 Madrid elections – linking them with crime and portraying them as a financial burden. Their posters flooded the Madrid Metro, and some party leaders even suggested withdrawing Spain from the UNCRC to justify deporting these children.

6. We also see a backlash in funding for civil society including child rights NGOs.

So-called foreign agents and lobbying acts are implemented in several countries. These laws criminalise organisations receiving foreign funding.

In Hungary this goes so far that the government set up an **Office for the Protection of Sovereignty** beginning of this year. This office published a report in which organisations were listed that receive **EU funding from the CERV programme** (which is a citizens and democracy programme). They were accused for **using these funds only for political purposes**. It leaves CSOs scared to apply for more EU funds, though some continue doing so.

Even the **EP just set up a Scrutiny Committee to check funding streams to NGOs** not being used for advocacy purposes towards the EU institutions. They target in particular environmental and climate NGOs.

What is Eurochild doing to support its members and address these anti-child rights attacks?

We started an **anti-child rights campaign** in spring of this year.

We publish statements in support of our members, in cooperation with our members or with European allies. For example, we published a statement on anti-child rights movements and the shrinking space for CSOs in Europe, including examples from our membership.

We have also provided a training to our members on what European strategic litigation measures can be used to address child rights violations.

We draft articles and publish these on our website and social media and we inform EU decision makers, including European Commissioners, the FRA and CoE HR commissioner on the situation.

Our call to action to EU decision makers is that there is an urgent need for a European mechanism that protects human rights, with a specific focus on children's rights defenders: A European Child Rights Observatory that monitors, documents and counteracts anti-child rights discourse, actions and movements in Europe.