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4 Human rights

4.5 Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI)

Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller issues² (ADI-ROM)

c. Thematic report on early childhood education

Item to be considered by the GR-H at its meeting on 12 September 2024

¹ This document has been classified restricted until examination by the Committee of Ministers.

² The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians and Ashkali; c) Eastern groups (Dom/Garachi, Lom/Bosha and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Context of the thematic report and visit

A thematic visit on early childhood education was agreed on at the request of the Slovak Republic ADI-ROM member at the 6th ADI-ROM meeting (Galway, 14-15 September 2022). The proposed thematic visit was re-confirmed at the 7th ADI-ROM meeting (Strasbourg, 11-12 May 2023), when Greece was confirmed as a host country and Cyprus, France, Hungary, Ireland, North Macedonia, the Slovak Republic and Türkiye as partner countries. On 19 July 2023 the Greek authorities sent an official letter inviting the ADI-ROM group of experts to join the thematic visit scheduled to take place on 20-22 September 2023 in Athens, Greece (see Appendix 1).

The overall objective of the thematic visit was to identify and describe policies and practices on ensuring early childhood education and care for Roma and Traveller children aged 0-6. These tools are also working to further prevent inequalities and educational segregation, and to facilitate inclusion and quality education. During the visit, the host country and participants analysed policy issues and concerns in this area, mostly about quality and access, and discussed feasible policy suggestions. The discussions touched upon what type of data or tools would be needed to support development of policies in the field of early childhood education and care for Roma children. Finally, the thematic visit also aimed at providing a set of recommendations for future actions of the Council of Europe and its member States.

Member States interested to take inspiration from policies or programmes presented in the current report, are encouraged to follow-up with relevant ADI-ROM members, for bilateral or multilateral discussions, exchanges and development of initiatives by contacting the ADI-ROM Secretariat (adi-rom@coe.int).

The basis for the discussion during the visit and for the thematic report is based on information provided in advance by member States, after a questionnaire was distributed by the Secretariat of ADI-ROM.

According to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), level 0 corresponds to early years that usually covers the period from childbirth up to the age of 6. Early childhood education and care initiatives refer to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children under the age of 6. This includes preschool education programmes that are more or less similar to school settings, which usually don't start before the age of minimum 3, and in some member States are mandatory.

There is growing consensus in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries that "care" and "education" are inseparable concepts. There are countries that make a distinction between child-care, understanding it as looking after children while parents are at work, and early childhood, seeing this as fostering child development and preparing them for formal education settings. This difference is unclear, as structures that provide "care" also offer learning opportunities, and those focused on "education" inevitably provide care while parents are working. Making a forced distinction between the two "can lead to an incoherent approach and disjointed policymaking and service delivery."³

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) notes that early childhood education is an important determinant of future life opportunities. It further points out that providing Roma children with an equal start in life alongside their non-Roma peers is essential to breaking the cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty.⁴ It thus recommends that the authorities evaluate the inclusion of Roma children in existing preschool programmes with a view to increasing their participation.

³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Starting Strong – Early Childhood Education and care", 2001.

⁴ ECRI Fifth Report on Romania, adopted on 3 April 2019, §§ 72 et seq.; Third report on Serbia, adopted on 22 March 2017, §§ 79 et seq.; Sixth report on the Slovak Republic, adopted on 1 October 2020, §§ 81 et seq.

ECRI called on member States to vigorously combat all forms of school segregation by taking measures, including legal and political ones to put an end to school segregation of Roma children and to ensure the effective enjoyment of equal access to education.⁵ ECRI underlined that national law should provide the prohibition of discrimination for all public authorities and cover preschool education as well.⁶ Furthermore, ECRI recommended that member States ensure compulsory, free and quality education for all, and to this end, devise policies to avoid pupils from minority groups being overrepresented in certain schools or separate classes.⁷

Most importantly, ECRI recommended that member States eliminate all financial and administrative obstacles to Roma children's access to education. Furthermore, it suggests that actions be carried out to ensure that each Roma child has genuine access to nursery school, to increase Roma parents' awareness of the importance of nursery school, to prevent school dropouts, and to give priority to children's education and to the recruitment of school mediators, including those among the Roma, to ensure a liaison between schools and Roma parents.⁸ In its most recent examination of the execution of the judgment of *D.H. and Others v. Czech Republic*, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers encouraged authorities to remove barriers to access preschool education, including through cooperation between institutions, to support socially disadvantaged children and to gather data that would allow estimation of the proportion of Roma children outside compulsory preschool education and under home schooling.

Where authorities have recognised the importance of early childhood education for Roma children, ECRI welcomed the introduction of one year of preschool education for all children aged five, as well as the allocation of significant financial resources to municipalities to build new nursery schools. ECRI notes, however, that in those instances when municipalities do not see preschool education as a field which should be in their remit, there is a risk that they do not invest as much in this area.⁹ It is further noted by ECRI that focus should be put on recruiting and training a sufficient number of educators and teachers to provide quality education during preschool years, as well as on ensuring that the teaching staff is well trained to teach Slovak as a second language to Roma children who speak only Romani at home.¹⁰ Similar concerns were noted by the OECD, which highlighted that the challenge remains in many countries to provide staff in early childhood care and education who value and respond to the needs of ethnically, culturally and diverse families.¹¹

It is recommended by ECRI that authorities raise awareness about the right of Roma families to free preschool education, and that they support and encourage participation in early childhood education, with a view to facilitating the acquisition of English and combatting educational disadvantage.¹²

The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) noted that a key obstacle to educational success later in life is the low participation of Roma children in early childhood education. The Advisory Committee urges the authorities to undertake additional efforts to address educational inequalities between Roma and non-Roma children relating to preschool education, early dropouts and attainment levels caused by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, taking a gender-sensitive approach.¹³

It is acknowledged, including by authorities, that Roma still face special challenges in education compared to the general population, including a lower number of enrolments in early childhood education¹⁴. The Advisory Committee on the FCNM notes with concern in one of its opinions that for four years in a row, the net enrolment rate in pre-primary education has decreased, and that the rate among Roma children is particularly low¹⁵. More educational activities aimed at involving children at an early age and their parents in the school environment are suggested, such as Roma education incubators.¹⁶

⁵ ECRI, General Policy Recommendation no. 3 on combating racism and intolerance against Roma/Gypsies, 1998, ECRI General Policy Recommendation no. 13 on combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma, 24 June 2011, amended on 1 December 2020.

⁶ ECRI, General policy recommendation no. 7 on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination, 13 December 2002 amended on 7 December 2017, Explanatory Memorandum, § 19.

⁷ ECRI, General policy recommendation no. 10 on combating racism and racial discrimination in and through school education, 15 December 2006, section 1, § 3 letter b and d.

⁸ ECRI General Policy Recommendation no. 13 on combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma, 24 June 2011, amended on 1 December 2020, §4, let h-k.

⁹ ECRI sixth report on the Slovak Republic, adopted on 1 October 2020, §§ 82-83.

¹⁰ ECRI sixth report on the Slovak Republic, *cited above*.

¹¹ OECD, *cited above*.

¹² ECRI fifth report on Ireland, adopted on 2 April 2019, § 77.

¹³ Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Fifth Opinion on Romania, adopted on 3 April 2023, §§ 171, 174.

¹⁴ Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Fifth Opinion on Spain, adopted on 27 May 2020, §§ 135.

¹⁵ Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Fifth Opinion on Bulgaria, adopted on 26 May 2020, §§ 157.

¹⁶ Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Fifth Opinion on Portugal, adopted on 28 June 2019, §§ 114.

The placement of Roma children and children with disabilities in early childhood medical care institutions was found to be in violation of Article 17 of the European Social Charter on the right of young children to protection. According to the Committee, the authorities failed to take significant and targeted steps to deinstitutionalise the existing system of early childhood care and to provide young children with services in family-based and community-based family-type settings.¹⁷

In the same context, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health urges all stakeholders to understand the harmful effects of institutional care in early childhood. It emphasizes that children have a right to thrive, develop in a holistic way to their full potential and enjoy good physical and mental health in a sustainable environment. Early childhood must be seen as a crucial time for effective investments in individual and societal health and must receive significantly more attention and a more adequate response from all relevant actors.¹⁸

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe urges its member States to take concrete measures to end discrimination against Roma children, in particular to, *inter alia*, expand access to integrated early childhood services by: enabling easier registration of births and issuing birth certificates; strengthening outreach services for young children and families from isolated communities; addressing maternal health, food security, child-rearing and the family environment, health protection, responsibility for and care of newborn infants; sending mobile health care units to visit Roma neighbourhoods and communities for screening on dental care, childcare and reproductive health; sending officials to inform Roma women about their rights, health care services, and educational opportunities for their children; helping poor Roma families to promote the growth and development of their young children at home in a safe and stimulating physical and psycho-social environment; regularly informing the Roma communities about public services such as health provision and educational opportunities, by using the media, and especially television for awareness raising; training Roma mothers on childcare, health care and education directly within their own communities or providing free transportation to training centres where such training sessions can be organised.¹⁹

Comparing data from 2016 to data from 2021, there is almost no negative change in the enrolment rates for early childhood education of Roma children. However, the gap between Roma and the general population attending early childhood education and care remains very large (44% for Roma, 93% for the general population).²⁰

In May 2019, the Council of the EU adopted a Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems approved by the education ministers of EU member States. The Council Recommendation includes a quality framework, which identified 5 key components of a qualitative system: 1) access to early childhood education and care; 2) training and working conditions of staff in charge of early childhood education and care; 3) definition of appropriate curricula; 4) governance and funding; 5) monitoring and evaluation of systems.

2. NATIONAL PRACTICES AND GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES IN RELATION TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

2.1. Legal and policy framework on early childhood education and care

In Greece, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is provided in two types of structures, according to the age of the child. ECEC provision for children under the age of 4 (ISCED 010) includes municipal infant care (*vrefikoi stathmoi*) and infant/childcare (*vrefonipiakoi stathmoi*) for infants aged from 2 months up to 4-year-old children, and childcare centres (*paidikoi stathmoi*), accommodating children from 2.5 years old up to 4 years old. These municipal settings are under the competence of the Ministry of Interior and operate according to the “Standard Regulation of Operation for Municipal Infant/Child Care and Child Care Centres”,²¹ defined as premises of care and safe accommodation for preschool-aged children. ECEC for children aged 4-6 (ISCED 020)²² is part of primary education, can be public or private and is under the competence of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

¹⁷ Decision on the merits, *European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and Mental Disability Advocacy Centre (MDAC) v. Czech Republic*, complaint no. 157/2017, 17 June 2020, §165.

¹⁸ UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, report to UN General Assembly, A/70/2015, § 73.

¹⁹ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 1927(2013), “Ending discrimination against Roma children”, § 7.

²⁰ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, “Roma in 10 European countries – main results”, 2021

²¹ Joint Ministerial Decision 41087/29-11-2017, as amended by Min. Decision Δ11/οικ.26396/920/2020)

²² Regulated by Law no. 4521/2018

Compulsory preschool education has recently been extended to two years, starting from the age of 4.²³ Since the school year of 2020-21, the two years of preschool education is compulsory nationwide.²⁴ These two mandatory years of kindergarten (*nipiagogeio*) for 4- and 5-year-old children are free of charge.

The term “early childhood education and care” is not defined in the national legislation of Cyprus. Pre-primary education is compulsory from the age of 4.8 until the age of 6 and it is free. NGOs help local authorities who run social care programmes for all children and organise subsidised childcare, which is provided through the State Aid Scheme, more specifically under the Childcare Services Grant (0-4 years old)²⁵. The scheme has been implemented since September 2022, and has been renewed for the 2023-2024 school year. According to the prerequisites for approval in this Scheme, the family must have a dependent child under the age of 4 as of 31 August 2023, and the child must be currently enrolled or have secured a place in a nursery or nursery school that participates in the Scheme. Additionally, providers are required to adhere to a uniform pricing policy for all parents, meaning they cannot charge different prices for beneficiaries of the Scheme than other parents. Beneficiaries may receive a monthly subsidy of 80% of tuition fees.

The **Multi-functional Centres and Child-care Centres** carry out studies under the Technical Assistance Instrument, to assess the state of provision of early childhood education and care services for young children in Cyprus, and to develop recommendations for investment in the sector, more specifically in children’s centres, with a view to expanding the offer of affordable, accessible, high quality and inclusive services. This analysis will inform the joint development of a framework for the provision of integrated quality services and the monitoring of their quality, involving authorities and stakeholders from the social, education and care sectors. The framework will be piloted in selected early childhood education and care settings. Further, a **national strategy on Early Childhood Education and Care** will be elaborated and an accompanying action plan considering the recommendations of the Technical Assistance Instrument.

In France, early childhood education is seen as the educational framework for children aged 0-6.²⁶ From the ages of 0 to 3, children can be cared for in specialised facilities known as early childhood establishments (*établissements d'accueil du jeune enfant* - EAJE). Children in this age group can be cared for in dedicated early childhood establishments or at home by a professional.

Compulsory education in France starts at the age of 3. This requirement was introduced in 2019 and is part of the legislative framework for the “school of trust”,²⁷ aimed at addressing and reducing inequalities inherited at birth through a process of early education.

In Hungary, the system of early childhood education and care comprises two stages and is bi-sectoral (social care and education). The first stage is the provision of non-compulsory institutional care for children aged 0–3 years, either at full cost or subsidised by the State (nursery; outside the scope of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)). The second stage is mandatory for all children – with the possibility of exemption - from the age of 3 until school age, and it is free of charge (kindergarten; ISCED level 020).

The “Sure Start Children's House” Hungarian programme has been in operation since 2013 as a service regulated by the Child Protection Act. The primary objective of the “Sure Start Children's House” is to offer a prevention service that assists in the healthy development of children facing socio-cultural disadvantages. It aims to compensate for any developmental delays, enhance parental competencies, and facilitate social integration for both the parent and the child who has not yet entered kindergarten.

In Ireland, the regulations that govern early learning and care practice are enshrined in the Childcare Act.²⁸ The act references “preschool education” and defines it as services that include preschools, play groups, day nurseries, crèches and childminders who care for children in their home from birth to school entry. Ireland’s Early Childcare Education and Care (ECEC) programme offers two years of free preschool to all children, aged 2.8 to 5, for 3 hours a day, from September to June. There is a 96% take up rate in the general population.

²³ Law 4521/2018

²⁴ Law 4704/2020

²⁵ Under Regulation 360/2012

²⁶ Articles L214-1 to L214-7, Chapter IV, French code on social and family action

²⁷ Law no. 791/2019, 26 July 2019, “Ecole de la confiance”

²⁸ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1991/en/act/pub/0017/index.html>

Ireland plans to include the right to the ECEC programme in law but does not intend to make preschool compulsory. This is an effort to avoid stigmatizing families, often Roma and Traveller families, who might fall foul of such a requirement. Instead, efforts will focus on convincing families of the benefits of preschool for their children and on making services more inclusive. Ireland's ECEC preschool programme was introduced in 2010, aiming to provide children with their first formal early learning experience before they enter primary school, to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children, as well as to narrow the gap in attainment between the most and the least advantaged children.

Preschool care and education up until the age of 6 are not compulsory in North Macedonia.

In Türkiye preschool education is defined as “the education of children who have not reached the age of compulsory primary education”.²⁹ Two different education programmes are implemented in early childhood education, one for children aged 0 to 3 and the other for those aged 3 to 6.

2.2. Policies and programmes promoting access to early childhood education and care of Roma children

Greece (host country)

Considering that Roma are not a minority in Greece, there are no specific policy provisions related to the inclusion of Roma children in the context of access to early childhood education and care. This is, however, approached through the lens of inclusion policies in general that encompass all vulnerable groups, as well as policies to promote intercultural education.

There are several compensatory and supporting structures, aiming to re-integrate students in the learning process, such as intercultural schools (*scholeia diapolitismikis ekpaidefsis*), remedial teaching (*enischyтики didaskalia*), additional teaching support (*prostheti didaktiki stirixi*), or educational priority zones (*zones ekpaideftikis proteraiotitas - ZEP*).

Pillar II of the National Roma Inclusion Strategy – NRIS (2021-2030) is dedicated to enhancing equal access of Roma to basic social services, including education and social care.

Roma children are admitted to nursery school regardless of whether they are registered in the birth registry or population registers. Headmasters and Directors of nurseries must not impede the enrolment of Roma children due to lack of a certificate of permanent residence and shall accept any data attesting, in their opinion, the pupil's permanent address.³⁰

The “**Programme for the Integration and Education of Roma Children**”³¹ focuses on improving access and participation of Roma children in early childhood education and care, their systematic schooling in primary and secondary education and the re-integration of early school leavers.³²

The Institute of Education Policy was the coordinator of the project “**Inclusive Schools for Roma**”,³³ which aimed at developing and implementing an effective inclusion strategy for integrating Roma students in primary and secondary school. The initiative was piloted for one school year with 200 teachers and 50 mediators, involving the development of training and support guides for the educational community.

In order to provide and ensure equal opportunities and conditions for all students in the country, **Educational Priority Zones (ZEP) have been established**.³⁴ The general purpose of the implementation of the ZEP programme is to formulate and test in real classroom conditions alternative and flexible educational approaches of differentiated teaching, in order to ensure equal inclusion in the educational system of students from areas with low educational and socio-economic indicators.

²⁹ Law no. 1739, National Education Basic Law

³⁰ European Committee on Social Rights, Conclusions 2019, Greece, *cited above*.

³¹ Launched in 2016 and co-funded by the EU structural funds

³² European Committee on Social Rights, Conclusions 2019, Greece, Article 17-2 (reporting period: 1 April 2014 – 31 December 2017).

³³ Co-funded by the European Programme “Rights, Equality and Citizenship” and in collaboration with the Athens Lifelong Learning Institute, the NGO Antirropon and the Association of Young Horizons of Greek Roma.

³⁴ Law no. 3879/2010 (Government Gazette 163A/21.09.2010) art. 26 par. 1a and 1b. For school years 2021-22 and 2022-23, the relevant MD are: Φ1/101891/Δ1/19-08-2021 Φ1/101185/Δ1/17-08-2022

Cyprus

There are no specific laws or policy provisions regarding the access to early childhood education and care of Roma children. To encourage parents to enrol their children in pre-primary education, including Roma families, an attendance certificate of the child in preschool is required to continue the payment of the child allowance.

Following the registration of all children in compulsory pre-primary education, any vacant places in public kindergartens are allocated to younger children aged three to four years and eight months. The **allocation of places is based on specific criteria which give priority to children at risk of socio-economic deprivation, including Roma. Younger children who take up vacant places in public pre-primary schools pay lower fees. Full fee exemption is given to poor families. Fee reduction is also ensured for families with four children or more.**

The Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (MoESY) provides **support to all children at risk** during the implementation of the curriculum (teaching Greek as a second language, extra support with a second teacher in the classroom, extra teaching staff for implementing creative activities, enhancing adaptation skills and special teaching staff for children with special needs etc.).

Several public kindergartens participated in the co-funded European Social Fund programme “**School and Social Inclusion Actions**”, which was implemented during 2019. These kindergartens are provided with a **second teacher in the classroom for extra support**, as well as other teaching staff for implementing creative activities, like dancing, drama games, physical education, music, arts, and crafts. During the school year 2023-2024, **a new project will be implemented** focusing on (a) the **specific needs of children** with a migrant background, (b) violence and delinquency issues and (c) learning difficulties. Several kindergartens will be staffed with a second teacher in the classroom to deal with these specific issues.

The Social Welfare Services of the Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare are responsible for the approval, inspection and termination of social care programmes, including care programmes for children until the age of 4. The inspections are aimed at ensuring minimum levels of operation, among others, in the areas of staff qualification, suitability of premises, and health and safety of people receiving care.

France

Public action aimed at Roma children living in settlements has been implemented as part of a **dedicated policy to reduce improvised settlements** that has been backed up by the **national strategy to prevent and fight poverty (2018-2022)**. One of the commitments of this strategy is to guarantee equal opportunities from the earliest stage.

The aim of this public action is to **facilitate access to schooling from the age of 3, as well as to mainstream childcare services for families living in improvised settlements.**

Awareness-raising and care initiatives for young children (aged 0-3) are organised in the settlements together with specialists, mediators and families. Psychomotricity or school preparation workshops can be organised.

This public action will be continued and extended in the coming years to children from Traveller families as part of the new solidarity pact, which is the funding programme that should replace the strategy on preventing and fighting poverty.

The school mediation programme deployed by the *Délégation interministérielle à l'hébergement et à l'accès au logement* (DIHAL – Inter-ministerial Delegation for housing and access to accommodation) is a good example of a policy designed to improve access for children, operated by national authorities in co-operation with local authorities. Public initiatives for social mediation and access to the law are deployed locally in line with policies pursued by local authorities to enable families living in extreme poverty to access social rights. This includes financial assistance for the purchase of school supplies, access to catering, free services or solidarity pricing. Montpellier and Toulouse are cities that deploy ambitious measures on these issues.

In 2021 the French government launched an information and **action programme on early childhood named “1 000 first days”**. This public action programme focuses on the child’s first 1 000 days, from pregnancy to kindergarten entry (at the age of 3, and sometimes as early as age 2).

The aim of the programme is to fund local projects that pursue one or more of the following objectives:

- Provide parents and their children with simple, accessible and reliable information;
- Improve support for parents throughout this period;
- Offer enhanced support according to parents' needs and vulnerabilities;
- Encourage parents to take time to build a relationship with their child; and
- Improve the quality of childcare for young children.

Hungary

The **Hungarian Social Inclusion Strategy 2030** stands out as Hungary’s most comprehensive initiative in the fight against poverty and the inclusion of the Roma population. The primary target groups of this Strategy are families with children living in poverty and extreme poverty, including Roma, as well as the Roma population in general. The main intervention areas covered by this Strategy are birth, early childhood and public education, vocational and higher education – from kindergarten to university.

In May 2023, a **national plan guaranteeing children’s rights** was adopted. It aims to enhance the well-being of children and to diminish poverty. This will be achieved by ensuring the provision of high-quality, inclusive public services accessible to all children. Special emphasis will be placed on early childhood care and education, healthcare, nutritious food, and access to suitable housing as key areas of focus.

Since 2017, disadvantaged children who are entitled to regular child protection benefits are eligible to an increased amount of support, in kind, twice a year. Free daily meals are provided to every child attending a nursery school since 1 January 2015 and receiving regular child protection benefits; to every child attending a nursery school or kindergarten since 1 September 2015, is chronically ill or disabled; to every young child living in a family with such a child, in a large family, or living in poverty or in a family with lower income.

In 2019 the government selected 300 settlements from the most serious socio-economic and infrastructure issues to benefit from a multi-approach programme, **Emerging Settlements – the first 1000 days**, focusing on social development, education, health and access to services. Currently, the programme is being implemented in 177 locations, aiming to reach 300 municipalities by 2024 and to engage professionals and facilitators to work with these communities. **The programme also focuses on early childhood development** and addresses the whole family. Key activities include **a package of programmes focusing on the child's first 1000 days and supporting caregivers**. The project strongly emphasises **improving the opportunities, living conditions, and diminishing the impacts of poverty on children living in the area**. These goals will be achieved through intensive and comprehensive social work in the local community to ensure healthy and balanced development for children aged 0-3 years. The programme assists families by providing local, regular and intensive social work, family mentoring, strengthening of parental skills, ensuring access to childcare and hygiene facilities, and supporting optimal physical development through direct and regular contact with them. Family mentors also work closely with midwives and early childhood professionals and services. Families will also have access to tangible assistance: new-born babies will receive a baby kit, mothers will receive a maternity kit, older brothers and sisters will receive toys, and childcare equipment will be available at the so-called “presence points”. If necessary, the programme will also contribute to making the homes of families with young children safer by reducing household hazards, providing heated rooms, and improving hygiene.

Ireland

One of the requirements of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 is that **all ECEC services are inclusive settings that engage in meaningful collaboration with parents/guardians and other professionals to ensure access, equality and full participation for all children**. Each service must have a written policy stating how this happens in practice.

Families who need their children to be placed with ECEC services for longer hours can get financial support through the **National Childcare Scheme**,³⁵ which includes two types of support: Universal Subsidy - everyone receives the same amount of financial support regardless of their own circumstances, and Income Assessed Subsidy which is based on a family's individual circumstances.

The Equal Participation Model (EPM) is a strategic policy currently under development in the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Division of the Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), as part of Together for Better Ireland's **new funding model**³⁶ for ECEC services, to ensure that support is allocated adequately and equitably.

Traveller and Roma children are a key cohort that DCEDIY wish to reach through this work, and representative groups have been consulted and engaged with throughout the development of this policy. The mechanism to identify services requiring support is still under development, however, consultations have made it clear that **ethnicity should be one element in assessing need**. Ethnic identifiers are currently just being introduced and are **included in the National Childcare Scheme** and the preschool programme ECEC forms. From now on, DCEDIY will use a self-selection, ethnic identifier for parents/guardians on all their programme application and registration forms.

North Macedonia

The Project "Inclusion of Roma Children in Preschool Education" was implemented from 2006 to 2022 by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in cooperation with the Roma Education Fund, the Local Self-Government Units and kindergartens. During the period of implementation, a total of 4 000 Roma children were included in the project in 20 municipalities. As of December 2018, the project started to be implemented through a systemic approach with the inclusion of the local self-government units and the exemption from payment of tuition fees for Roma children that come from disadvantaged families. It is envisaged to include 430 Roma children from socially underprivileged families who will be exempted from payment of tuition fees in the school year 2023-2024, in a total of 21 municipalities at the national level. Part of the project's activities for the current school year will be supported by UNICEF.

The Project "**Raising the quality of preschool education and care**" is also being implemented under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance IPA-2017. The main goal of the project is improving and raising the quality of preschool care and education. The activities envisaged within the project are structured around 3 components:

- Modernisation of professional and career development of employees of preschool institutions;
- Revision of the model for (re)licensing employees in preschool institutions; and
- Strengthening parental involvement in early childhood education and care, especially for children at risk.

Within a project implemented with a loan from the World Bank, an amendment to the education and care system funding formula is being financed, which will change the amount paid by the parents, so that poorer families and single parents can pay less or be exempted from paying.

Türkiye

A protocol was signed between the Ministry of Family and Social Services and the Ministry of National Education to reduce costs for families with children living in socio-economically disadvantaged households. Within the scope of the protocol, cash support is provided to the schools to be used for nutrition, cleaning services and educational material expenses of disadvantaged children. As of the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, free school meals have been provided to all children attending preschool education.

Stationery expenses for preschools in neighbourhoods with a high number of economically disadvantaged people are reimbursed by the Ministry of National Education.

Conditional education aid is allocated to children who are enrolled in preschool and attend school regularly.

The "**Parent-Child Support Education Programme**" aims to support both the family and the disadvantaged child.

³⁵ <https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/>

³⁶ <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/together-for-better/>

A summer education framework programme, consisting of 2 months of educational activities, has been implemented for children who could not attend any preschool education during the preceding school year.

The “**My PlayBox**” model has been implemented since 2019 and focuses especially on children aged 5 and their families living in underprivileged conditions with limited or no access to early childhood education services. My Playbox sets were distributed to the children of 27 000 families living in disadvantaged areas. Volunteer preschool teachers support the process by making regular monitoring and evaluation visits.

2.3. Support for the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff

The Greek Institute of Educational Policy (I.E.P.), is responsible for training programmes and the certification of the training activities of teachers and education executives, the evaluation of educational work and teachers, as well as the monitoring and study of relevant international and European policy. I.E.P. implements a training programme, “**Training in practices to support students in the context of Differentiated Teaching (DT)**”,³⁷ aimed at training primary (including preschool) and secondary (including vocational) education teachers in student support practices in the context of Differentiated Teaching, with the objective of responding to the heterogeneity of educational needs. The programme includes materials and methodologies focused on the practice of the differentiated teaching approach for Roma students.³⁸

Staff working in social action programmes targeting Roma and Travellers in France are **trained on the specific needs of these communities**. This particularly concerns school mediators in the programme piloted by the DIHAL. Some French departments organise cross-training courses for different administrative staff and education professionals. The national plan to combat racism, anti-Semitism and discrimination (2023-2026) includes a **training programme on inclusive practices and non-discrimination for national education professionals with a focus on antigypsyism**.³⁹

Hungary’s National Framework for the Care of Young Children⁴⁰ encourages and recommends that professionals working in childcare establishments must be trained on non-discriminatory educational practices. In the case of Sure Start Children’s House, the employees take part in **mandatory training**. In the case of kindergartens and nurseries, further training for professionals is continuously available. Training for preschool teachers working with Roma children is also available. To ensure the provision of professional preschool education, several universities in Hungary have initiated preschool teacher training programmes, including a specialisation in education in Romani. Furthermore, for students who opt for the specialisation, the training’s objective is to prepare them, once they have graduated, to teach 3–7-year-olds not only in Hungarian, but also in Romani.

In Ireland, the **initial educator training at all levels** includes education on **equality, diversity and inclusion**. Training for educators uses the **Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care**, which address Roma and Traveller children as well. In 2019, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published a **curriculum audit on Traveller history and culture across early years, including primary and post-primary**. The audit identified areas across the curriculum where teachers could teach about aspects of Traveller history and culture. The proposed Equal Participation Model will update existing resources to ensure there is sufficient **emphasis on all aspects of disadvantage, and how to challenge prejudice or bias when it arises**. This will ensure the inclusion of a **particular focus on Traveller and Roma communities**.

The North Macedonia reform around improving the quality of preschool education was initiated with the support of UNICEF through the “Strengthening of the professional competences of educators and raising the quality of kindergarten” programmes. Two of the components of the “Raising the quality of preschool education and care” project are the modernisation of the professional and career development of employees of preschool institutions and the revision of the model for (re)licensing of employees of preschool institutions. A **web-platform** at national level was created in partnership with UNICEF, ensuring a space where **educators and parents** can use their ideas to create educational materials and games. **Training courses on game-based learning for educators** were also carried out by international experts for more than 1 300 educators working in kindergartens, including Roma employees.

³⁷ Funded by the operational project “Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong” with the co-financing of Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund)

³⁸ Details on the I.E.P. programmes here.

³⁹ <https://www.dilcrah.fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Plan-national-de-lutte-contre-le-racisme-lantisemitisme-et-les-discriminations-liees-a-lorigine-2023-2026-Janvier-2023.pdf>

⁴⁰ Ministry of Solidarity and Families, National Framework for the Care of Young Children, 19 May 2021

The Ministry of National Education in Türkiye aims to provide inclusive education training for all preschool teachers in Türkiye. So far, 40 000 teachers have been trained.

2.4. Measures to recruit staff from Roma communities for early childhood education and care facilities

Roma branches of Community Centres, which operate in municipalities with a significant Roma population, provide support to Roma in early childhood education and care, as well as in school enrolment and attendance, among other services. In particular, the Roma branches are in constant cooperation with local schools to ensure information on attendance issues and to facilitate intervention by social workers, teachers and mediators from the Roma branches in these situations, thereby improving the preschool participation of Roma children.

The school mediation programme in France encourages and advocates for the recruitment of people from the communities involved to enhance the effectiveness of the mediation actions. In particular, the programme works with young children (aged 0 to 3) to increase the number of children who live in informal settlements that attend early school facilities.

Over the course of a four-year long EU funded project implemented in Hungary, Roma nannies fluent in Romani were employed in each of the 65 kindergartens targeted by the project. These nannies played a crucial role in facilitating communication between kindergarten teachers and families, strengthening the bond between parents and the kindergarten, as well as preserving Romani traditions.

Participants consulted during the design of the Irish Equal Participation Model highlighted the lack of professionals from minority communities, particularly the Traveller and Roma communities. Ireland recognises that the **lack of diversity among early years educators can negatively impact children from minority communities**, as children cannot see themselves or their cultures represented, and may not be able to participate equally as a result. One of the actions that will be included in the new model will target Traveller and Roma students, to **offer work placement opportunities in ECEC**, and to facilitate pre-employment experience.

In Türkiye, Social Solidarity Centres (SODAM) are organised in areas where the population of Roma is significant, offering courses for Roma women and ECEC facilities for the children of Roma women who attend the courses. The co-ordinators working in these centres are selected from the Roma community.

2.5. Support for the development of early years' curricula tailored to take into account the specific needs of bi/multilingual children and of children who speak another language at home instead of their future language of instruction

The **new Greek framework for preschool education of children 0-4 years old** called "Kipseli"⁴¹ aims at introducing innovative child-centred models, focusing on the social, psychological, mental and emotional development of children aged 0-4, but also on identifying learning difficulties. Central axes of the framework are the development, guidance and improvement of abilities as well as the acceleration of the integration of children into society. It is a key regulatory intervention in the daily preschool education programme of municipal, public and private schools. A key principle of the new framework is to ensure the provision of free quality preschool education and care, accessible to all children, with the aim of mitigating social and economic inequalities. Starting from the school year 2021-2022, the **new curriculum is applied in all experimental schools**, while new regulations will define their implementation in all schools across the country. As defined by the I.E.P., the new curriculum ensures that the identities, languages, special educational needs, abilities, skills, and aptitudes of the students are recognised and explored respecting non-discrimination and avoiding separation.

The Greek Institute of Educational Policy (I.E.P.) participates as national coordinator in the experimental pilot policy programme implementation of the Council of Europe, "**The role of the Romani language in the educational inclusion of Roma children and youth: from policy to practice in primary schools of the country**".⁴² The purpose of this policy experimentation is to test these principles by applying them to school policy and classroom practice in a small number of primary schools across several Council of Europe member states.

⁴¹ "Κυψέλη", Law 4837/01-10-2021.

⁴² 2021-2025, Ministerial Decision 34031/16-09-2021





A project to facilitate communication of kindergarten teachers with parents and children during the first year in kindergarten is underway in Cyprus. The **project “Learning Greek in the Kindergarten”** aims to **support kindergarten teachers in teaching Greek to children of third-country nationals**, and to produce support material.

In Hungary, if at least eight parents who belong to the same minority make an official request, the State must organize kindergarten education in the minority language of the parents who make the request. Apart from kindergartens teaching in Romani or Beas languages, there are also kindergartens that provide Roma cultural education in Hungarian.

Aistear is the Irish early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to 6 years. The inclusion of **language supports** that meet the specific needs of bi/multilingual children has been identified in the updated version of *Aistear*, the Early Years Curriculum Framework, as an area that **needs additional support, training and resources**. These supports will be included in the new Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy that will be published in the coming months.

2.6. Monitoring and evaluation of early childhood education and care systems - benchmarks and targets on Roma children’s participation in early childhood education and care

The Greek National Roma Integration Strategy 2021- 2030 sets horizontal and sectoral objectives at national, regional and local level for the development of interventions for social inclusion of Roma, equality, empowerment and participation. Relevant benchmarks and targets on Roma children’s participation in early childhood education and care include:

Pillar 2: Enhancing Equal Access of Roma to Basic Services and Goods				
Education				
Indicators	Initial targeting	FRA (2016)	FRA (2021)	Updated targeting
Children aged 3 and over attending preschool education and care	75% 	69%	32%	69% 
Roma children, 6-15 years old, attending classes where "all classmates are Roma"	20% 	13%	34%	20% 

Data collection for this policy area is conducted through existing monitoring systems, including through IT systems of the Ministries involved, such as “Myschool platform”. Data from the “Myschool” platform for 2021-2022 indicate a number of 2 067 Roma students, aged 4 to 6, who are enrolled in preschools.

With regard to the participation of Roma and Traveller children, the French government has set itself the following objectives: identification of children; developing initiatives to “reach out” to families and accompanying children to school; facilitating the reception and administrative procedures for the enrolment of children in schools; preventing children from dropping out of school when they move residences or in any other situation that could lead to a disruption in their education.

The main objective of the Hungarian Social Inclusion Strategy 2030 is to significantly **reduce material and social poverty for families with children by 10%** compared to 2020 levels, and to approximate the data for both the Roma and non-Roma populations. The strategy aims to narrow the poverty gap, demonstrating the relative situation of those living in poverty to be below 20% (compared to 38.7% in 2020). In the area of child welfare and increasing opportunities for children, the goal is to increase by 1 000 the number of children visiting Sure Start Children's Houses, which provide help from the earliest age. Additionally, the strategy aims at encouraging the provision of quality daytime care for disadvantaged children, including Roma children, by expanding and developing the nursery network.

In advance of the 2023 programme year, an ethnic identifier has been added for the first time to the registration system for ECEC programmes in Ireland. Ireland is aiming for 100% participation in its preschool programme, including all Roma and Traveller children in the age group.

Starting from the principle that children have the right to quality preschool care, upbringing and education, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia has committed to increasing the coverage of preschool care and education (for children aged 3-6) by 50%.

There is a target for every child in Türkiye, including Roma children, to start primary school with at least one year of preschool education.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. States should ensure that Roma and Traveller children have the right to free and equal access to rights-based, quality and play-based early childhood education;
2. States should put in place measures to continuously monitor, evaluate and map the access to and enrolment of Roma and Traveller children in early childhood education by setting clear benchmarks and targets, and by conducting research on the barriers to accessing and participating in early childhood education and care services;
3. Socially excluded Roma and Traveller children and their families must be supported through multi-sectoral approaches to ensure their sustainable participation in quality early childhood education, which target poor housing, poverty, and lack of healthcare, including through strategies or national action plans focusing on (early childhood) education which incorporate policies fostering equality of outcomes and non-discrimination;
4. States should put in place measures to introduce free preschool years for all children, in order to ensure access to high-quality education, including for Roma and Traveller children;
5. Targeted measures must be put in place to increase (during their early and preschool years) the school readiness of Roma and Traveller children and to improve their educational attainment and outcomes. Examples of such measures are communication with parents prior to enrolment in preschool; school mediators/Home School Liaison Workers; and other examples from the countries participating to the thematic visit;
6. Multi-sectoral approaches should envisage support for Roma and Travellers mothers, including by facilitating their employment;
7. Measures should be put in place to foster social inclusion, including legislative and policy measures to prevent and combat educational segregation (in early childhood education facilities, preschool units and onwards);
8. Member states should take inspiration from existing practices on promoting access to and ensuring sustainable participation in early childhood education and care of Roma children, which can serve as a basis for shaping policies, and extend them to national-wide programmes;
9. Early years' curricula should be shaped to consider the specific needs of children who speak another language at home compared to their future language of instruction, which is the case for many Roma children;
10. Adequate training should be put in place for early childhood years' social workers and the staff of preschool institutions to prepare them to teach those children in their future language of instruction, as many Roma children speak another language at home;
11. The relevant authorities should develop and implement continuous professional development programmes for early years' workers and staff of educational institutions in charge of preschool education that cover equality, diversity and inclusion and methods that take into consideration and support the child's background, interests and culture;
12. Staff from Roma communities should be recruited for early childhood education and care facilities, in order to foster an environment for Roma and Traveller children that values their language, culture, background and way of life;

13. Functions such as school mediators should be strengthened and promoted at institutional levels;
14. Actions should be developed to build partnerships with parents aiming to strengthen parental participation and involvement in early childhood education, including in preschool education and to increase their children's school attendance;
15. While the approach in member states is different in respect to sanctioning families for non-participation in compulsory preschool education, all possible impact of sanctioning measures should be carefully weighed, having in mind the impact on the family as a whole, as well as the impact on the child and their best interest;
16. In view of the evidence pointing towards the negative impact of early academic pushing, early childhood education and care, including preschool, should be play-based.