Summary assessment of the 2017 Country Specific Recommendations of the European Commission

On 22 May, the European Commission published its proposals for the 2017 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). These recommendations constitute, along with the Country Reports, drafted by the Commission, and the National Reform Programmes, submitted on a yearly basis by each EU Member State, a key step within the European Semester cycle.

The CSRs articulate the European Commission’s position with regards to Member States’ progress towards the implementation of the Europe 2020 targets. The CSRs are published alongside an overview of the specific situation in each Member State, as well as an assessment of the efforts to comply with the 2016 CSRs. Once adopted by the European Council, the onus is on the Member States to adopt, over the course of the following year, national policies and budgets in order to integrate the CSRs. These recommendations, therefore, have the potential to play a key role in encouraging national governments to deliver on the Europe 2020 targets, which include lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020, and in advocating for children’s rights to be at the heart of policy and decision making.

This year, the European Commission proposed 78 CSRs (11 less than in 2016), covering macroeconomic, financial and social issues. In the press release accompanying the 2017 CSRs, Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, underlined the Commission’s intention to give more prominence to social issues: "This year addressing inequality is firmly at the heart of our assessment. We have turned the page of the crisis: the next chapter is social." Despite this, Eurochild’s assessment of the 2017 CSRs shows that social issues are still not given sufficient importance.

While Eurochild welcomes the CSRs on inclusive and quality education for Roma children (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia) as well as on the need to improve access to education and educational outcomes for people with a migrant background (Austria and Belgium), and on fostering female labour market participation through the provision of quality childcare (Austria, Ireland, Slovakia, Spain), we regret that other prominent child rights issues are still not given the consideration they deserve.

Child poverty, although mentioned within the country assessments (Bulgaria, Ireland, Hungary, Italy, Romania, United Kingdom), is not covered by any of the CSRs. This is a further step back compared to the 2016 CSRs, which included an explicit recommendation to address the situation of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland.

Eurochild joins the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in calling on the European Commission to focus the attention in the European Semester “on those EU Member States where child poverty rates remain high and unchanged in recent years”. As underlined in the 2017 Fundamental Rights Report released on 30

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Eurochild advocates for children’s rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.
May, the European Semester should “always and consistently address the situation of children” – lack of focus on issues such as child poverty increases the risk that progress towards the Europe 2020 target on poverty reduction will be hard if not impossible to achieve.

While Eurochild welcomes the reference, albeit small, to children in alternative care and the deinstitutionalisation process in the country assessment for Bulgaria, we remain deeply concerned that, as in 2016, the 2017 CSRs fail to offer concrete recommendations on this issue. Eurochild believes that this is, once again, a missed opportunity to foster deinstitutionalisation and encourage Member States to take steps towards alternative forms of community and family-based care.

Moreover, child participation, one of the key pillars of the European Commission’s 2013 Recommendation on ‘Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ is neither mentioned in the 2017 CSRs nor in the country assessments.

Eurochild encourages the Commission to better address the millions of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, as well as to increase the focus on migrant and refugee children, children in alternative care and child participation. Eurochild remains hopeful that the newly published European Pillar of Social Rights, which includes an explicit mention of children’s right to affordable, good quality early childhood education and care, and children’s right to protection from poverty, will provide an opportunity to strengthen the social dimension of the European Semester and reinforce a social investment approach in the coming years.

Background:
Eurochild publishes a yearly report on the European Semester based on national developments reported by its members, and a set of alternative recommendations for the following year. Read the 2016 report on the European Semester featuring 20 country profiles online.

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