



**ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ  
ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑΣ, ΑΘΛΗΤΙΣΜΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΝΕΟΛΑΙΑΣ**

**Eurochild's 2026 Conference "Social Protection Systems"  
16th June in Paphos  
Hosted by the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union  
Opening Speech by the Minister of Education, Sport and Youth,  
Dr Athena Michaelidou,  
on Behalf of the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr Nicos Christodoulides**

It is my great honour to address you today on behalf of the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr Nicos Christodoulides, who extends his warm greetings to all participants and expresses his strong support for the objectives of this important Conference.

The organisation of the Eurochild Conference on "Social Protection Systems" in Cyprus, under the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, reflects our country's firm commitment to advancing children's rights at both national and European level.

Strong and integrated social protection systems form the foundation of a society that upholds human dignity and social justice. When these systems function effectively, they prevent harm, reduce inequalities, and support families before crises emerge. Conversely when they are fragmented or under-resourced, children face heightened risks of violence, neglect, exclusion, and discrimination.

Across Europe, we continue to witness serious gaps: preventive services remain insufficient, vulnerable groups encounter barriers in accessing support, and coordination between sectors such as education, health, justice, and social welfare is often inadequate. These challenges require collective responsibility and coordinated solutions.

Our shared compass remains the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This landmark Convention obliges us not only to protect children from harm, but to ensure their right to participation, development, and non-discrimination. Social protection systems must therefore be rights-based, inclusive, and centred on the best interests of the child.

In Cyprus, safeguarding children's rights is supported by strong institutional frameworks. I would like to underline the important and independent role of the Office of the Commissioner for Children's Rights. The Commissioner acts as an independent authority monitoring the implementation of the Convention,

promoting children’s voices in public dialogue, and advising the State on legislative and policy reforms. This independent oversight constitutes a vital pillar of accountability within our child protection system. Equally significant is the contribution of the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children, co-organiser of this conference. Through its nationwide coordination role and its long-standing engagement with civil society, it strengthens collaboration and promotes the welfare and protection of children across Cyprus.

Evidence-based policymaking is fundamental to strengthening social protection systems. The work of the Commissioner for Children's Rights provides valuable data, monitoring and analysis that help identify gaps and inform effective interventions. These findings reveal persistent challenges, including domestic and peer violence, inequalities affecting children from vulnerable backgrounds, and the need to further strengthen child-friendly justice mechanisms and preventive family support services. In Cyprus, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth recognizes that education systems are central pillars of social protection. Schools are often the first place where signs of vulnerability become visible — whether related to poverty, domestic violence, mental health challenges, or social exclusion.

Data from Cyprus reflects challenges that are also evident across Europe, reinforcing the need for stronger prevention, early intervention and coordinated support mechanisms for children and families. As policymakers, we must move from awareness to action.

The European framework provides us with direction. The 2024 Commission Recommendation<sup>1</sup> on integrated child protection systems and the European Child Guarantee call for prevention, family- and community-based care, equal access to services, and cross-sectoral coordination. These are not merely policy documents — they are calls for transformation.

In education, this means:

- Strengthening inclusive education policies so that no child is marginalised because of disability, language, or socio-economic status.
- Investing in school psychologists, counsellors, and social workers to ensure early identification of risk.
- Promoting safe school environments free from violence and discrimination, through actions involving educators, parents, and students
- Embedding children’s participation in decision-making processes at school and national levels.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EL/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L\\_202401238](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EL/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L_202401238)

For this reason, cooperation between educational services, social welfare services, health professionals, and justice authorities must be systematic and structured. Fragmentation weakens protection, integration strengthens it.

Cyprus remains committed to reinforcing preventive approaches, strengthening family- and community-based support, and ensuring equal access to quality services for all children.

We are also particularly proud of the Cyprus Children's Parliament, which provides a structured platform for children to express their views and influence decision-making processes. Participation is not symbolic; it is a fundamental right and a cornerstone of democratic culture.

Social protection systems must move beyond reactive responses. They must prioritise early intervention, invest in trained professionals, ensure adequate resources, and eliminate discrimination in access to services. Above all, they must uphold the dignity of every child.

The Government of Cyprus, under the leadership of President Nicos Christodoulides, firmly believes that protecting children goes beyond policy formulation. It is a moral responsibility and a measure of our society's maturity. The presence of children and young people at this conference reminds us that their voices must guide our actions. Let this conference serve as:

- A platform for meaningful policy dialogue
- A space for sharing innovative and evidence-based practices
- A forum where children and adults engage as equal partners
- And a catalyst for strengthening integrated, rights-based social protection systems across Europe.

Cyprus stands ready to contribute actively to advancing integrated, rights-based, and inclusive social protection systems at both national and European levels.

Our collective task is clear: to build systems that prevent harm, protect without discrimination, empower families, and place children's rights at their very centre.

Because when we invest in children's protection, we invest in Europe's future.

On behalf of President Christodoulides, I wish you every success in your deliberations. May your discussions lead to concrete commitments that translate into safer environments, stronger families, and brighter futures for all children.