

FIRST PROGRESS REPORT ON IMPLEMENTING
THE EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE IN SLOVENIA
2022-2023

OCTOBER 2024

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1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN SLOVENIA 2022-2023

Living standard in Slovenia was mainly affected by inflation and food and energy price increases in 2022 and 2023. Annual inflation was 10.3% in 2022 and fell gradually to 4.2% in 2023. People with the lowest incomes were most affected by the rising cost of living. Additionally, in August 2023 Slovenia was hit by the worst floods and landslides in its history as an independent country. This significantly worsened living conditions for residents in the areas affected. Moreover, the scale of the damage means that reconstruction is a major financial and budgetary challenge for the state and will also affect the macroeconomic situation in the coming years.

1.1 ONGOING OR PLANNED BUDGETARY AND LEGISLATIVE REFORMS TO COMBAT CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND TO SUPPORT CHILDREN IN NEED

The Slovenian government took several measures to mitigate the impact of the economic uncertainty in 2022 and 2023 on the population and the economy. In the second half of 2022, at a time of high energy and food prices and other costs, the government adopted several aid packages with measures to help the most vulnerable and boost the economy¹. It regulated fuel and energy prices and introduced a one-off energy allowance to protect the most vulnerable under the Act on temporary measures to address the impact of rising living costs on the most vulnerable population groups (ZZUOPD) (Vlada RS [Government of the Republic of Slovenia] 2022b). Anyone who between August 2022 and March 2023 received cash social assistance or income support or was among the most vulnerable persons with disabilities was entitled to the one-off energy allowance. 74 552 people received the allowance, with payments totalling just under EUR 20 million (Vlada RS 2023d).

A cost-of-living allowance was introduced for families entitled to child benefit. In November and December 2022 and January 2023, eligible families thus received, in addition to child benefit, a cost-of-living allowance for each child equivalent to child benefit for the first child. Foster families of children aged up to 18 were also entitled to the cost-of-living allowance (Vlada RS 2022e). It was paid automatically with child benefit for

¹ As a result of disruption in the oil products market and high price volatility, the government reintroduced energy price regulation in mid-March 2022. In the second half of 2022, it adopted several aid packages for the most vulnerable population groups (low-income households) and measures to mitigate the impact on the economy (IMAD [Institute of Macroeconomic Analysis and Development] 2022b). The ZZUOPD was adopted at the end of August 2022, followed by the Act on temporary measures to address the impact of rising living costs on child benefit recipients (ZZUODOD) at the end of September 2022. The Act on emergency measures in education (ZIUVI) was adopted in October 2022, followed by the Act on aid to the economy to mitigate the impact of the energy crisis (ZPGOPEK) in December 2022 (IMAD 2023b:15).

327 050 children, with expenditure totalling EUR 56 478 965.23 (MDDSZ [Ministry of Labour, Family, Social affairs and Equal Opportunities] 2023). Between 1 September 2022 and 31 August 2023 (2022/2023 school year), school meal prices did not increase despite inflation and remained at the same level as in the previous school year (2021/2022). There is also a price cap on accommodation in school and university dormitories. Two temporary economic measures were adopted to save jobs: wage compensation for short-time work and for temporary lay-offs.

A measure introduced to help parents with young children during the Covid-19 epidemic continued to apply in 2022 and 2023. Under that measure, parents with children born between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2023 with permanent residence in Slovenia received a one-off solidarity allowance for newborns of EUR 500. To cover the exceptional costs incurred as a result of the floods in August 2023, extraordinary cash social assistance was increased in 2023 up to a maximum of seven times the standard rate (minimum income). This was paid to all victims of the floods and landslides in August 2023 with a declared and actual permanent residence in Slovenia, regardless of income or property. Those affected by the floods were entitled to free nursery care and school meals between 4 August 2023 and the end of 2023. All flooded households had electricity supplied at EUR 1 per MWh until the end of 2023, which is expected to reduce the monthly bill of the average Slovenian consumer by just under 60%² (IRRSV [Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia] 2024).

1.2 OVERALL NATIONAL APPROACH TO COMBATING CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In terms of the proportion of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE), for many years Slovenia has been the best performer in the EU and second best among the 39 rich EU and OECD countries in reducing the number of children living below the poverty line over the last decade. According to UNICEF, child poverty in Slovenia has fallen by 33% in 10 years.

The share of the population having to skip a meal at least once a month on account of poverty is 2.1%, which is the lowest rate in the OECD. In terms of material poverty in the EU, we currently have the lowest proportion of children living without 3 or more of the 17 key products. Nevertheless, 2023 data show 9 000 children living in material and social

² Following the major floods in Slovenia in early August 2023, the government amended the Act on addressing the consequences of natural disasters and adopted the Act on measures to address the consequences of the floods and landslides in August 2023, containing measures to help people and the economy (Vlada RS 2023c, Vlada RS 2023f).

deprivation (SORS [Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia])³.

Progress in reducing child poverty is the result of targeted measures. The progress in Slovenia was achieved with the well targeted social transfers, which increase social protection for families with children, while parents are helped in various ways. Cash assistance is paid for every newborn to purchase essentials; a parental allowance is paid to mothers or fathers without parental protection insurance; child benefit is additional income for the maintenance, upbringing and education of a child. Parents of children in need of special care and protection receive an additional allowance and some are entitled to partial compensation for lost income and additional relief; subsidised nursery places are also important, as well as free nursery places for a second child, subsidised school meals, etc. Various allowances and types of relief are also granted to large families with at least three children.

At-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate before social transfers

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
AROP rate (% population)	23.3	24.7	24.6	19.9	20.4
Number of children below AROP threshold	90 000	96 000	96 000	79 000	81 000

Source: SORS, EU SILC

Parents or families who cannot provide for themselves owing to circumstances beyond their control, benefit from social protection and coverage of the costs of food and staples through social security benefits in the form of cash social assistance (and extraordinary cash social assistance) and income support. Families also benefit from various forms of state subsidy and payment relief, which can be claimed from local social services.

Social transfers and income ceilings are regularly aligned with increases in the cost of living. They rose in line with inflation by 4.9% in 2022 and 10.3% in 2023, with all entitlements to public payments and related ceilings increasing as well in real terms. Between 2020 and 2022, a period initially marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and, in 2022, by high inflation and the rising cost of living, the situation of households with dependent children in Slovenia did not deteriorate and even improved slightly. According to the ESSPROS⁴ European

³ SILC: Materially and socially deprived people are those who cannot afford at least 5 of the following 13 items owing to limited financial resources in the household rather than their own choices or habits: 1) regular mortgage or rental payments, utility bills, loan repayments; 2) keeping the home adequately warm; 3) meeting unexpected expenses; 4) a meal with meat or vegetarian equivalent at least every second day; 5) 1 week's annual holiday for all members of the household; 6) a car; 7) replacing worn or damaged furniture; 8) replacing worn clothes with new ones; 9) at least two pairs of properly fitting shoes for different weather conditions; 10) socialising with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month; 11) regular participation in paid leisure activities; 12) a small amount of money per week for own use; 13) home internet connection.

⁴ European system of integrated social protection statistics.

methodology, social protection spending on families and children in 2022 amounted to EUR 1.139 billion or 8.1% [sic] of GDP. Compared with the EU average, the impact of the whole benefit system (insurance for various risks and social assistance in different areas) on reducing the risk of poverty (excluding pensions) is relatively high in Slovenia. Among the various age groups, social transfers are most effective in reducing the risk of poverty among children (aged 0-17) (UMAR 2024, IRRSV 2024).

In conjunction with the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan on reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, Slovenia's general approach to combating poverty and social exclusion is set out in the Resolution on the national social protection programme 2022-2030. This is a strategic document designed to improve the quality of life of individuals and families and strengthen social cohesion, mutual solidarity and social inclusion of all population groups. It sets a target for Slovenia to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 3 000 by 2030. In addition to the child guarantee action plan 2022-2030, the social inclusion of children and the targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights are complemented by the Resolution on family policy 2018-2028 and the Programme for children 2020-2025.

1.3 IMPLEMENTING THE CHILD GUARANTEE 2022-2023

A national coordinator for the child guarantee was appointed in the family directorate of the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MDDSZ) to lead preparation of the national action plan. An interdepartmental working group was also set up to manage preparation of the action plan, bringing together representatives from MDDSZ, the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of a Solidarity-Based Future and the National Institute of Public Health. The Ministry of Finance was also involved in the process of preparing financial resources for the measures envisaged in the action plan. During this preparatory period, the interdepartmental working group met several times in 2022, 2023 and 2024. Meetings were held online and in most cases with individual members to exchange up-to-date information on each measure.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation was also involved in writing this report, with its digital inclusion measures for vulnerable children. Under the mechanism for ensuring access to computer equipment among other things, it is implementing a measure, devised in 2023, to give 13 000 of the most socially disadvantaged children free access to computer equipment at home in the course of 2024.

In addition to the interdepartmental working group, an advisory group was set up in 2022, bringing together representatives from the following NGOs in the field of children's rights:

Družinska pobuda, the Slovenian branch of UNICEF, Mreža za otrokove pravice⁵ and the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (IRSSV). The main purpose of the advisory group is to submit proposals and comments on the measures put forward by the interdepartmental working group. We also worked closely with the IRSSV in creating indicators for action plan measures and designing further activities relating to children's participation in monitoring and evaluation. The rest of the group has been more actively involved in the initial preparations for the action plan and monitoring implementation of measures and refining them. It will play a bigger role in the future once the new measures cofinanced by EU funds - which constitute major systemic innovations in the accessibility of services for vulnerable children in Slovenia - become operational.

One of the purposes of setting up the advisory group was for children to play a role in preparing the action plan. For example, 37 children aged 12 to 15 from all over Slovenia were consulted in March 2022 and made proposals on the draft child guarantee action plan in cooperation with MDDSZ, IRSSV, the Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth, the Legal information centre for NGOs and UNICEF Slovenia.

Children will be even more involved in future through active participation methods as informal advisers / in an informal advisory board for the child guarantee. Under the project partnership, IRSSV and MDDSZ are planning to carry out 25 regional consultations across the country between 2025 and 2029. The opinions of children and adolescents, as direct users of services, will be the best indicator of success for the measures in the action plan. As the action plan will be continuously refined up to 2030, working with children will help identify their needs, expected results, practical aspects, and potential challenges and pitfalls in planning and implementing (new) measures for children. They will therefore also have an important role in evaluating the plan in the future stages of implementing the child guarantee.

Slovenia's child guarantee action plan was adopted by the government on 20 April 2023 and was published shortly afterwards, with an English translation, on the Commission's website with the action plans of the other EU Member States. During interdepartmental coordination, we decided that the document would have a greater impact if the measures were supported, where possible, by financial resources and budget lines. This slightly delayed final adoption of the document, as we had first to wait for adoption of the 2023 state budget and the proposal for the 2024 state budget. Although most of the 62 measures are already in place, some have still not been financially evaluated in 2024. They are expected to be introduced at later stages of action plan implementation, as the planned funds and budget lines are still being coordinated under the plan for implementing the

⁵ The network for children's rights comprises 40 NGOs in Slovenia working on protection of children's rights.

European Cohesion Policy (ECP) programme 2021-27 and other European funding mechanisms.

2. TARGET GROUPS

According to Eurostat data, in 2021 11% of children (43 000) were at risk of social exclusion in Slovenia. Most of them (40 000) were at risk of poverty and 33 000 were exclusively at risk of poverty. Of particular concern is that 1 000 children were at risk of social exclusion across all three sub-indicators, i.e. at risk of poverty, living in low work intensity households and materially deprived. In 2022, 10.3% of children (41 000) were at risk of social exclusion. This figure increased slightly in 2023 but remains the lowest in the EU at 10.7% (EU average: 24.8%). 9.3% of children in Slovenia were living below the AROP threshold in 2022. 1.8% were living in severe material and social deprivation. 2.4% of all children lived in a household with very low work intensity. Worryingly, 26.6% of children living below the AROP threshold have a migrant background and 12.6% have at least one parent with a disability. 15.9% live in a single-parent household and 8.3% live in rural areas (Eurostat 2024, SORS 2024).

Slovenia typically has a lower at-risk-of-social exclusion rate among children than in the general population, by just over three percentage points. Compared with 2020, the rate among children decreased by 1.4 percentage points in 2023. Slovenia is also second among the 39 EU and OECD countries and, according to UNICEF's research centre Innocenti, has made most progress recently in reducing the number of children living below the poverty line. In terms of material poverty, we also currently have the EU's lowest proportion of children aged up to 18 living without key goods.

The Slovenian child guarantee action plan 2022-2030 also includes other measures that provide assistance and strengthen the social protection system for the entire family, not only for the child in need within the family. After all, a child is part of a family and shares the same fate as its other members. However, since children are economically dependent, they normally have no influence on the situation. Slovenia has various mechanisms and measures in place to guarantee a dignified life and social inclusion. The data show that children living in households with low work intensity are at significantly higher risk and therefore measures to ensure social inclusion and active involvement in the labour market are also set out in the new financial perspective up to 2030. In that context, we devised a number of development measures in 2022 and 2023 in various areas, especially under European Cohesion Policy, to be implemented up to 2029. We would highlight multifunctional Roma centres, multi-generational centres, social activation programmes to support the most vulnerable target groups, including a special focus on women from other cultures and Roma women, social inclusion programmes with additional and targeted support to users with complex

psychosocial problems, and modernisation of the social protection system for working with the most disadvantaged, as well as updating the network of social protection programmes to make services more accessible for vulnerable children and adolescents.

Ethnic minority children, in particular Roma children

With regard to better access to services for Roma children, the government set out a number of measures in 2022-2023, as we see a number of pressing challenges in the social inclusion of Roma. In addition to the measures described in more detail in the chapter on accessibility of services, a special interdepartmental government working group on Roma was set up in 2023 to address the issue of social exclusion of Roma from several angles. On the basis of a new integrated interdepartmental analysis on addressing the situation of the Roma community, MDDSZ issued a detailed sectoral programme to implement measures in the national Roma programme 2021-2030. As well as a number of additional measures for adults on employment and integration into the labour market, social protection and social inclusion, the programme also focused on family, with the aim of increasing protection of children, women and adolescents. In this context, we recognised the lack of nursery and primary school attendance and related social integration as a key problem for Roma children.

To promote the social inclusion of Roma children and support Roma families, in 2023 we prepared the ground for employment of 30 new experts to work with Roma in 2024, to re-establish and strengthen the network of multifunctional Roma centres and to re-establish the network of multigenerational centres. To increase social inclusion and overcome the material deprivation of socially vulnerable children, a major operational programme for food and basic material assistance to the most deprived was also implemented in 2022-2023, with several million euro in aid also being distributed to Roma families.

The Ministry of Education introduced a new programme for multifunctional Roma centres as an innovative learning environment to increase the social and cultural capital of Roma children and their families – these programmes aim to strengthen Roma children’s knowledge and skills by improving their inclusion and performance in school and society. The Ministry also introduced preschool measures with targeted additional assistance to promote greater inclusion of Roma toddlers in nurseries. This took the form of additional Roma assistants in nursery classes with Roma children, promoting inclusion of Roma children and children from other vulnerable groups in preschool at least 2 years before the start of primary school, and free or subsidised nursery care for vulnerable groups to facilitate preschool access.

To promote regular attendance of Roma children in primary school, the Ministry stepped up

efforts to recruit Roma assistants in primary schools, lower the requirements for specialists to work in classes with Roma children and for creating classes with Roma pupils, provide additional specialist assistance to Roma pupils, and strengthen specialist skills to work in a multicultural environment. It also implemented a measure providing free school transport for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or in specific situations.

Unaccompanied minors

Before 2015, the relatively few unaccompanied minors entering Slovenia were taken care of individually. However, mass arrivals highlighted the need for a systematic approach, and a pilot project to accommodate and look after unaccompanied minors was set up and extended several times. Based on the results and experience of the pilot project, in October 2023 the government adopted a decree on ensuring suitable accommodation, care and treatment of unaccompanied minors. The decree is the first overarching document in Slovenia on accommodation of all unaccompanied children regardless of their status, representing a major step forward in protecting child rights.

Round-the-clock care, psychosocial assistance and access to two forms of education is provided in the accommodation. The reception centre provides initial accommodation for children. A medical check-up is carried out on arrival in accordance with international protection rules. Accommodation in the reception centre for minors generally lasts up to 3 months. The centre is divided into different sections according to age, gender and potential vulnerability. The accommodation units for minors are designed for long-term accommodation of children. Each unit can house up to 10 minors and is split into sections according to age, gender and potential vulnerability.

Children with mental health problems and/or mental disorders

Key factors that can protect against mental disorders are economic and social security, a supportive social network, a safe family environment, good physical health and the ability to make effective use of social skills and effective strategies to deal with problems. One of our priorities in the national action plan is offering prevention services, early diagnosis and integrated treatment of children, adolescents and their families in their local environment. In 2022-2023 we further accelerated the process of establishing child and adolescent mental health centres at primary healthcare level within a network. This network has been set up at health centres across Slovenia. The centres play a key role in helping and supporting young people in need, as closely as possible to their home environment, and offering multidisciplinary treatment of mental health problems. The centres also work with other services and organisations in the local community offering assistance and support. There are 22 child and adolescent mental health centres in Slovenia. No referral is required for treatment.

A project on developing mental health programmes for children, adolescents and young adults under the recovery and resilience plan (2023-2026) is being implemented to expand programmes for health promotion and prevention of mental disorders nationwide and remove the stigma for children and adolescents by: strengthening parenting skills, overcoming anxiety, preventing suicidal behaviour and early identification of mental health problems, preventive work with adolescents, and preventing and treating non-chemical addiction.

We also decided to finance additional diagnostic and emergency treatment facilities from compulsory health insurance funds as part of primary health care at health centres in all Slovenian regions and in the context of hospital care.

To address the shortage of qualified staff, we approved new qualifications in childhood and adolescent psychiatry and clinical psychology. We have reinforced the intergovernmental working group on mental health, which coordinates mental health efforts within multiple departments and meets at least once a month. Through public calls for cofinancing health protection and promotion programmes, the Ministry of Health and MDDSZ regularly cofinance primary mental health prevention programmes for children, adolescents, young people and vulnerable groups, complementing the services provided in the healthcare system.

Children with special needs

In 2023, special needs classes in Slovenian nurseries and schools played a key role in educating children with special needs. These classes cater for children with various special needs, including intellectual disabilities, autism, emotional and behavioural problems, and other disabilities requiring a tailored educational approach. A tailored programme for more individualised treatment and support is carried out in these classes.

According to data from early 2023, about 5% of children in nurseries had special needs. These children received various forms of support, ranging from personalised learning programmes to additional specialist assistance. Slovenia's Statistical Office reports that, in the 2022/2023 school year, 9% of the school-age population had special needs.

The system has been substantially improved and upgraded over the past 2 years to ensure appropriate support and a suitable educational environment for these children. These improvements have been implemented and monitored by the National Education Institute (ZRSŠ) and comprise:

- Updated norms and standards: norms and standards for assisting children with special needs were updated in 2023. This includes determining maximum class sizes and special skills needed by teachers for early intervention.

- Advice and support for parents: mobile teams from specialist centres advised and assisted parents, nurseries and schools. This included drawing up protocols for cooperation between different institutions.
- European projects and funding: under European cohesion policy 2021-2027, funding was obtained for implementing measures to safeguard the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. This includes producing tailored educational materials and tools.

Key activities and targets

- Tailored programmes: in 2023, a special focus was on implementing tailored programmes for children with autistic disorders in various institutions and schools. The aim of these programmes was to ascertain whether the educational process met prescribed standards.
- Individual support plans: multidisciplinary teams devised individual support plans for families with children in special needs classes. The plans are individualised and support children for optimum development.
- Awareness-raising and professional training: teachers and other specialists attended training and workshops on working with children with special needs. The training covered topics such as communication strategies, tailored learning environments and use of specific educational tools.
- Monitoring and evaluation: The National Education Institute regularly monitored and evaluated the programmes to ensure they were effective. Monitoring included observing teachers and students, analysing individual programmes and collecting feedback from parents and teachers.

Children with mental, physical or other disabilities in the family environment

One of the vulnerable groups at risk of social exclusion in Slovenia on account of the environment they live in are children with mental, physical or other disabilities who do not benefit from round-the-clock care (fully financed by the state budget). These children live at home with their families. Existing services are insufficient in terms of organisation, accessibility, available facilities and financial resources to meet all the needs faced by families. Severe psychological distress and physical exhaustion of parents are particular concerns. We know that these families need services related to looking after, accompanying and educating the child, help with housework, support with extra-curricular and leisure activities, specialist mobile assistance and other tasks to maximise the quality of life of children and families in the target group. Parents have long pointed out these issues but they have never been properly addressed.

The Ministry of a Solidarity-based Future therefore started preparing a pilot project in 2023, which started in September 2024 and will last until 31 August 2025. During the project, the

centres for persons with disabilities (CUDV) will pilot ongoing respite care for families with children with intellectual and other disabilities. This will relieve the burden on parents, so they can look after themselves and the siblings, who are often neglected. Individual agreement will be made with each family involved on the scope and conditions of the assistance and an individual plan drawn up to work with the child and family, with the service being provided directly on the ground.

Children in risky living situations

In Slovenia, we face difficulties in the area of placement in the crisis centres for children and youth and in the foster families for children, who are removed from their families on account of unsuitable living conditions. In practice, stays in crisis centres for children and youth last longer than intended. There is an apparent lack of capacity and staff. It is also difficult to find suitable foster families for children. The problems are also reflected in placements in overcrowded institutions or specialist centres where children may not belong or where existing staff cannot cope with the situation for various reasons.

For this reason, we commissioned a study in 2023, which will run until the end of 2024, on children and adolescents with emotional and behavioural problems and disorders. The study will shed light on the placement of children in various institutions and help us find systemic solutions to the abovementioned problems.

In the field of foster care, a broader working group has been meeting since 2022 to upgrade and improve existing foster care arrangements and draft a proposal for systemic changes to foster care in Slovenia.

Three full-day consultations were organised in 2022 and 2023 by the Faculty of social work and the National foster care association on the following topics: foster care in Slovenia (March 2022), the role of foster parents and children in court proceedings (December 2022) and child's right to a safe and beneficial foster care experience (November 2023).

As of late December 2023, 759 children and adolescents were living in foster families with 544 foster parents.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICES

3.1 PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Preschool education is organised in public and private kindergartens in Slovenia, with parents free to choose educational programmes according to their personal views. Preschool care is organised for children from 11 months until compulsory entry into

primary school. Slovenia has one of the highest rates of participation in formal preschool education in the EU. In the 2022/23 school year, 84.6% of all children and 95% of children aged 5 attended kindergartens. In 2022 the proportion of children under 3 in formal childcare for at least 1 hour a week was 53% of the general child population and 47% of children under 3 at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Services are provided on a full-time basis, with children attending kindergarten every working day for 6 to 9 hours per day. The preschool programme is based on the national curriculum for kindergartens and covers education, care and food (breakfast, morning snack, lunch and afternoon snack, and possible additional late afternoon snacks). The price of preschool services includes the full cost of meals, which means that all meals are free of charge for children with a free nursery place. Nutritionists ensure that menus are as diverse, healthy and balanced as possible, meeting a child's physiological and psychological needs, in line with the applicable dietary guidelines for nurseries (SORS 2024, Eurofound 2024, ESPAN 2023).

Nursery fees are set according to average monthly income per person as a percentage of the price of the nursery programme based on classification in one of nine income brackets, with parents in the highest income bracket also receiving a grant worth 33% of total fees. The most vulnerable families pay no fees, while those in the second and third lowest income brackets receive a grant equivalent to 90% or 80% of total fees, leaving them to pay the remaining 10% or 20%. Parents with two children in kindergarten at the same time pay nothing for the younger child, regardless of income. The third - and each subsequent - child in the family also enjoys free kindergarten care, whether or not they started at the same time as their sibling. Children in foster care are also exempt from kindergarten fees.

The monthly net income ceiling for free preschool education is EUR 885.84 for a household with two adults and two children, while the AROP threshold in 2021 was EUR 1 618.58. As of the 1 January 2023, preschool was free of charge for: 2 170 children from low-income families who were the younger/youngest child or only child in a family, 10 428 other children in a family who were simultaneously enrolled in preschool care and 13 211 who were the third child in a family. They accounted for 2.37%, 11.9% and 15.0% respectively of all children in preschool care (in total 87 993 or 28.23% of all children enrolled in nurseries). In 2023 there was a slight drop in the share of preschool children with a free kindergarten place: 2.37% in December 2022 and 2.27% in December 2023 (IRRSV 2024, ESPAN 2023).

Public spending per child enrolled in preschool care stood at 19.2% of GDP per capita in 2019 (Eurostat 2024).

For easier and more effective integration of vulnerable children in the preschool system, we added a number of measures to the Slovenian child guarantee national action plan

2022-2030 as an additional incentive to increase the numbers of vulnerable children in nurseries. The state and local communities committed EUR 42.8 million in 2022 and EUR 48.6 million in 2023 for free and subsidised nursery places. Children with special needs can be enrolled in special nursery classes tailored to their needs. The number of these classes has increased over time, with the latest figures showing 59 of them nationwide. There has also been investment in new pedagogical approaches and teaching methods so that children with special needs can join mainstream classes. We are also investing in hospital kindergartens in 11 Slovenian hospitals.

The Ministry of Education estimates that about 5% of 5-year-olds are not enrolled in preschool care in Slovenia, including a sizeable number of Roma children (around 35% in South-East Slovenia). The inclusion of Roma in the preschool system therefore remains a major challenge. The state offers general financial relief from nursery fees for Roma children, promotes recruitment of Roma assistants and provides additional resources for materials and services. In addition, nursery classes with Roma children are smaller and the ratio of children to teachers is more favourable. Free transport is organised where a large number of Roma children attend kindergartens. Despite all these programmes and efforts, preschool attendance of Roma children remains patchy. To improve inclusion of Roma children, we will soon amend child benefit legislation since the benefit is currently 20% higher for each child under 4 not enrolled in a publicly subsidised preschool programme. This is a major reason why some low-income families do not take advantage of (free) nursery places.

Another contributing factor is that most mothers of Roma children are unemployed (childcare is their main occupation) and are attached to their children (GRS 2017). An important step in promoting Roma inclusion was the recruitment of Roma assistants to help Roma children overcome emotional and language barriers to attending nursery (GRS 2022a). In 2023 the state funded 13 Roma assistant positions in 19 nurseries, and an increasing number of nurseries with Roma children wish to recruit a permanent Roma assistant. This trend is likely to continue in the coming school years. In 2023 preschool programmes for children not enrolled in nurseries were also offered in some multifunctional Roma centres, most of which are located in Roma settlements and cofinanced by the European Social Fund.

Shorter programmes of 240 hours, which are entirely free of charge for parents regardless of family income, are also increasingly being offered. They target 5-year-olds and their 4-year-old siblings (children starting school late may also be included). The actual cost of financing and organising classes following shorter programmes in 2023 was EUR 136.6 million.

3.2 EDUCATION AND SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Textbooks and workbooks in Slovenia are free of charge for all children in the first 3 years of primary school (which lasts 9 years). In all public primary schools, textbooks can be borrowed free of charge for the remaining 6 years. Workbooks for pupils in years 4 to 9 are free of charge for children from low-income families. They are purchased from school funds or other resources.

Extra-curricular activities may be free of charge for children from low-income families, but this is not guaranteed by any regulation. The Ministry of Education contributes additional funds for 1 (compulsory) week of extracurricular classes, which allows all children to take part in at least 1 week of school in nature ('šola v naravi'), cofinanced from public sources. Children from low-income families have an additional right to subsidised school excursions and sports or cultural activities that form part of the curriculum, based on certain criteria (receipt of cash social assistance, income per family member, level of child benefit, parental unemployment, long-term illness in the family, longer-term social problems and other family circumstances). While the existing rules do not provide for a 100% reduction in contributions for extracurricular activities for (all) children from low-income families, extra funding from municipal budgets, school funds and donations mean that in practice they are likely to be free of charge for a large proportion of AROPE children in primary schools. Lack of data means it is not possible at present to analyse the ratio of eligible groups to the child AROPE population, but access to additional extracurricular content largely depends on a municipality's willingness to cover the related costs for children from low-income families, on school resources and on the efforts and success of school staff in collecting donations for these purposes (ESPAN 2023).

Primary school children have the right to free school transport if they live more than 4 km away from school. However, regardless of distance, all children in the first year of primary school have a right to free transport, as do older children if the competent authority assesses that their journey to school is dangerous. Pupils attending a school outside their school district have a right to reimbursement of the cost they would have incurred by attending school within their district (ESPAN 2023).

School uniforms are not worn in Slovenia. IT, sports or musical equipment is not required in primary schools in Slovenia. The need for new textbooks and teaching and learning aids was analysed in 2023 to guide future provision. Based on these analyses, the Ministry of Education increased funding for textbooks in 2024. A number of projects and activities to digitise the Slovenian education system and equip schools with ICT also continued in 2023.

Access to education and extracurricular activities in Slovenia is above the EU average, but 20.3% of AROPE children still live in households that report difficulties in paying formal education costs; in the general child population this figure is 3%. The share of AROPE children who cannot afford all paid school activities is estimated at 3.8%, which is six times higher than in the general child population (0.6%). 14.2% of AROPE children cannot afford regular leisure activities; this figure is 3.1% in the general child population.

According to 2019 data (Eurostat), public spending on primary education was 22.2% of GDP per capita, slightly above the EU average. It was 27.9% for lower secondary education and 23.4% for upper secondary education.

Most measures on greater inclusion of vulnerable children in education and extracurricular activities set out in the action plan were already implemented in 2022 and 2023. The only exceptions are a measure to create easy-reading materials for children with special needs at different levels for various target groups with recommendations for use in teaching, a measure promoting social inclusion of children and young people with special needs in the local environment and a measure to create easy-reading materials at different levels for various target groups with recommendations for use in teaching. These measures are still at the planning stage, as they will be cofinanced from European funds.

Most targeted measures were designed to make the education system more accessible for the main vulnerable target group identified: migrant children, children with a migrant background and children from ethnic minorities. Substantive share of the measures covered Roma children, where the Ministry of Education has introduced a number of systemic upgrades. In accordance with the Rules on norms and standards for implementing the primary school curriculum, for the 2022/23 school year the state ensured:

- reduced classroom hours for a second specialist in first year classes with at least three Roma pupils;
- a lower norm for creating a class with at least 3 Roma pupils (the norm is 28 pupils for a class and 21 for a class with Roma pupils);
- funds for an additional 88 posts for specialists working with Roma pupils;
- a lower norm for creating a combined class from two classes with at least three Roma pupils (the norm is 21 pupils and 16 for a class with Roma pupils);
- a lower norm for creating a combined class from three classes with at least three Roma pupils (the norm is 14 pupils and 10 for a class with Roma pupils).

Cofinancing for Roma in primary schools in 2023 is estimated at EUR 4.83 million, of which EUR 3.4 million for specialists working with Roma pupils, EUR 1.23 million for 66 Roma assistants in 53.5 FTE posts and EUR 200 050 for materials for Roma pupils.

In addition, the project on multipurpose Roma centres as innovative learning environments ran from September 2021 till the end of August 2023. Its main goal was to strengthen the general and professional skills and knowledge of Roma children by enhancing their inclusion and performance in the education system and society. The project was cofinanced under the European Social Fund and by the Ministry of Education and involved not only Roma children, but also their parents, teachers and specialists.

A measure involving beginner Slovenian lessons for migrant pupils from other countries was launched. Over the past 2 years it has included activities to support schools with the highest share of migrants and to upgrade integration models in nurseries and schools and work with migrant children whose first language is not Slovenian. In line with a comprehensive migration policy, the Strategy to integrate non-EU foreign nationals into the cultural, economic and social life of Slovenia was also adopted in November 2023. As regards integration of migrants into the Slovenian education system, it involves plans to create standards for successful linguistic integration and inclusion of migrant children, and primary and secondary school pupils in the educational environment, further development of teaching materials and quality teaching of Slovenian as a second or foreign language, as well as training of educators to promote the social and cultural integration of migrant children, and primary and secondary school pupils.

In 2022, 12 professional training programmes were also implemented to strengthen the skills of specialists to work in a multicultural environment, 10 of which were cofinanced. 237 specialists took part in programmes on Slovenian as a second language, Roma, migrants, minorities and intercultural understanding. In 2023, 19 professional training programmes were carried out, 11 of which were cofinanced. 438 specialists took part in the programmes. The result of this measure is awareness and empowerment of specialists to identify and successfully integrate children from vulnerable groups into the educational process, and to promote social skills, tolerance and solidarity in the classroom.

With a view to more inclusion of children with special needs, a project was launched to test models for introducing interpretation and teaching of Slovenian sign language for deaf and hard-of-hearing users in educational institutions that offer tailored programs for those users. One of the activities that will continue in the coming school years is improving each student's vocabulary of words and gestures.

In 2022 and 2023, ZRSŠ continued activities to raise awareness about the possibility of switching between educational programmes in primary school and to support children with special needs and their parents in doing so. Activities were focused on ensuring equal educational opportunities and creating a supportive environment for the successful

development and integration of children with special needs, as well as upgrading individual and group support and extra classes for learners needing additional help.

A measure for dropouts, named Production school for dropouts, continued and was enhanced in 2022 and 2023 with individualised programmes for adolescents, involving continued provision of individual assistance and support for exams still to be passed and completion of secondary school under a pedagogical contract.

3.3 HEALTHY MEALS EVERY SCHOOL DAY

Under Slovenian law, every (primary and secondary) school must provide a morning snack on school days to all children registered for it and may also offer breakfast, lunch and/or an afternoon snack. Primary school pupils⁶ from low-income families receive a free snack every morning and can also get a free hot lunch if they register for it. Secondary school pupils from low-income families⁷ can also get a free morning snack if they register for it. Secondary school pupils whose net monthly income per family member is between EUR 516.77 and EUR 652.12 are entitled to a 70% discount on the price of a morning snack, and children with a net monthly income per family member between EUR 652.13 and EUR 787.44 are entitled to a 40% discount. Primary school children from low-income families whose monthly income per family member does not exceed EUR 442.94 are eligible for free school lunches. The monthly income ceiling for a free morning snack for primary school children is EUR 2 608.48 for a household composed of two adults and two children and EUR 2 067 for secondary school pupils. The monthly income ceiling for a free lunch in primary school is EUR 1 771.76 for a four-person household, which means that children from families with an income (well) above the AROP threshold are also entitled to free meals, as the 2021 AROPE threshold for a family with two children was EUR 1 618.58 per month (ESPAN 2023). In addition to the economically deprived, secondary school pupils in foster families have a right to a free healthy morning snack and primary schools' pupils also to a free lunch. Primary and secondary school pupils seeking asylum, those placed in educational institutions for children and adolescents with special needs and those in dormitories who attend school outside the institution also receive a free morning snack.

According to the Ministry of Education, 97 163 primary school pupils were provided with a free morning snack in 2022/2023, which is 49.8% of all children in primary education registered for it and 48.8% of all children in primary education. 15 439 children were provided with a free morning snack in secondary schools, which is 19.84% of all children in

⁶ Primary school children from families, whose monthly income per family member does not exceed EUR 652.12 (as of 1 February 2023).

⁷ Secondary school children from families, whose monthly income per family member does not exceed EUR 516.76 (as of 1 February 2023).

secondary education (October 2022 data). 43 006 children were eligible for a free lunch in primary schools, which is 25.6% of all children registered for school meals and 21.6% of all children in primary education. This shows that free morning snacks and lunches are most likely available to the majority of children below the AROP threshold (ESPAN 2023).

(Free) lunches are not provided in secondary schools because they are not properly equipped to provide hot meals. Another (non-financial) barrier may be personal taste, with children unwilling to eat school meals (i.e. they do not register for them) even if they are available free of charge.

As already mentioned in the preschool section, kindergartens provide children with at least four meals per day, including a warm lunch. Food is included in the price of preschool, which means that it is also fully financed or cofinanced by the state. Children who have free kindergartens attendance, also receive all meals free of charge. Nutritionists ensure that menus are as diverse, healthy and balanced as possible, meeting a child's physiological and psychological needs in line with the applicable guidelines for child nutrition in nurseries.

In addition to ensuring access to snacks and (hot) meals in schools, food quality measures were implemented under the child guarantee action plan in 2022 and 2023 to provide even healthier and more balanced nutrition for preschool and primary and secondary school children. Various awareness-raising activities were also continued on the importance of proper nutrition for the health and well-being of children in nurseries and schools in cooperation with ZRSŠ. Activities included drafting professional guidelines, implementing educational programmes for teachers and monitoring and evaluating nutritional plans in nurseries and schools. In 2023, ZRSŠ updated the guidelines on school nutrition, also covering food loss and food waste prevention. The guidelines are designed to empower specialists and others dealing with children's nutrition in schools to take more effective measures with regard to proper nutrition, and raise awareness among teachers, parents and children about the importance of it. The updated guidelines take an integrated approach to nutrition, including health, educational, economic, social and agricultural aspects. Training seminars and workshops were also held to educate teachers about preparing healthy meals and ways of promoting healthy eating habits among children. The training included practical workshops on preparing balanced menus tailored to the needs of children in different age groups.

Parents were also key partners in efforts to improve child nutrition in nurseries. In that context, ZRSŠ organised information sessions and workshops for parents, to inform them of the latest healthy eating guidelines and give them practical advice on preparing healthy meals at home. Parents were also involved in planning menus and monitoring their

children's dietary habits, which helped increase understanding and acceptance of healthy eating practices.

3.4 HEALTHCARE

Access to health care programmes is well regulated in Slovenia since all children (including the AROPE child population) under the age of 18 (or 26 if they are in education) are fully covered under the compulsory insurance scheme (= free access to healthcare). The latest legislative changes in 2023 classified payment of complementary health insurance among other contributions, which means that all Slovenian citizens are fully covered free of charge. Children are thus exempt from paying for GP services, visits to nurses, specialist and hospital care, dental care, prescribed medicines, medical devices and other health technology services. Regular preventive screening of newborns⁸, preschool children and primary and secondary school pupils is included in free treatment, which covers vaccination, regular dental checks and health education.

Preventive medical checks are carried out in compulsory (primary) and (four- or five-year) secondary education in years 1, 3, 6 and 8 of (9-year) primary education and in years 1 and 3 of secondary education, with all children in the same year attending a check-up on the same day. All children thus have equal access to preventive healthcare. Check-ups are optional and include a general medical examination, a visual and hearing test and vaccination. Regular dental checks are also organised and are free of charge for all schoolchildren.

Health education is also provided in Slovenia by qualified nurses during check-ups in primary health care facilities or nurseries and schools. Dental education is also organised every year in kindergartens and schools. We have no data on the share of the most vulnerable groups using preventive programmes where children need to attend a health centre. School dropouts do not have regular medical and dental check-ups.

To better link prevention programmes to reduce obesity among children and young people with other services and programmes in local communities, a project was launched in 2023 through the EU technical support instrument on the well-being and mental health of children and young people as a priority – towards a healthy lifestyle for children and young

⁸ Every baby is entitled to six home visits by a nurse in the first year, with the first visit within 24 hours of returning home after the birth. All children are invited to regular check-ups with a paediatrician at a local primary health care centre. These periodic check-ups, which include screening programmes for 18 diseases, take place at 1, 3, 6, 9, 12 and 18 months, 3 and 5 years, and before starting school. They include vaccinations and general health checks. Children are also examined at 3 years by a psychologist and at 5 by a speech therapist.

people in Slovenia. Activities will focus on improving links between health, psychosocial and other support services to strengthen healthy lifestyles and the mental health of overweight children and young people. The project will enable state bodies, local communities, schools, sports organisations, social services, health education centres, youth organisations and other key stakeholders to improve their knowledge of the causes of excess weight and obesity and to acquire relevant skills to strengthen policies and programmes related to healthy lifestyles and mental health.

There are several free clinics in Slovenia for those who do not wish to go to the doctor or are not Slovenian citizens, where they can obtain health and social assistance and, if they are Slovenian citizens, help with arranging health insurance.

In some regions, children from some low-income families (especially Roma children) do not attend regular medical check-ups in primary school. According to research (NIPH 2016a, p. 62), the health of newborns varies significantly depending on the socio-economic status (education) of the mother. The research also shows that quality mental health support is not equally available to children from low-income families (especially migrants and Roma). In some areas, depending on the level of urgency, the waiting time for the first appointment with clinical and child psychologists can be very long due to staff shortages (ESPAN 2024, MZ [Ministry of Health] 2023). For that reason, additional funding is now available for training clinical psychologists and increasing the number of child psychiatrists. To improve accessibility of mental health services, an interdepartmental working group on mental health has been set up to coordinate system improvements; it meets at least once a month.

In line with the Resolution on the national mental health programme, the related action plans pay particular attention to the mental health of children and adolescents. As already mentioned, many mental health services have been extended and new ones introduced, funded under compulsory health insurance as part of primary healthcare activities, i.e. the network of mental health centres for children and adolescents at health centres in all Slovenian regions and in hospitals. There are currently 22 centres and more will be set up in the coming years so that there is a centre in every region, covering the needs of 15 000-17 000 children and adolescents in each geographical area.

Given the high demand for psychological counselling for distressed adolescents and young adults aged 14-29, the Ministry of Health is funding services between 2023 and 2025 within a network of counsellors to help those in mental distress at the psychological counselling centre POSVET, which is part of the Slovenian association for the prevention of suicide. The programme offers psychological counselling to adolescents who need professional support to cope with the emotional distress they are experiencing. The programme offers easily and

quickly available professional help and is important especially since the existing services for these adolescents have been overstretched in the post-Covid period. Funding for the programme will ensure that waiting times for this group do not increase and their distress is not aggravated.

Counselling is an important addition to public health services. The programme is free of charge and does not require a referral or health card, with waiting times of up to 3 weeks and a phone line available 12 hours every working day for acute cases⁹. As regards strengthening the mental health of children and adolescents, we would also highlight the partly established network of advisory centres for children, adolescents, and adults, which offer ongoing professional support to school counsellors, while also providing interdisciplinary assistance to children with specific learning difficulties and other associated mental health problems.

The Ministry of Health regularly cofinances other programmes, including primary mental health prevention programmes for children, adolescents, young people and vulnerable groups, through public calls for cofinancing health protection and health promotion programmes, complementing the services provided in the healthcare system. The programmes are implemented in the school environment, family and community. In addition to the psychological counselling programmes for children and adolescents already mentioned, important initiatives include parenting programmes, pupil and teacher programmes, programmes on caring for children with behavioural disorders, support programmes for families with psychosocial risks, etc. Programmes addressing the problem of bullying are also cofinanced on an ongoing basis.

The latter includes an effective primary programme on prevention of violence in schools (NEON – Varni brez nasilja), which promotes an integrated approach to prevention, contributes to better information for target groups about the problem, prevention options, appropriate responses and the types of assistance available. The programme is based on training for specialists and is implemented by numerous nurseries, and primary and secondary schools in different regions, which are integrated into the NEON network.

It is worth mentioning several activities in the field of non-chemical addiction to increase awareness, knowledge and skills (psychoeducation) among the general and/or professional public in 2022 and 2023. One of the most important in this field is the programme 'Logout

⁹ Counselling centres for children aged 14-18 are available at the following locations: Ljubljana, Celje, Portorož, Kranj, Velenje, Idrija, Zagorje ob Savi, Slovenj Gradec, as well as counselling for young people aged 19-29 at 19 locations in all Slovenian regions.

& Restart' (a programme for safe, healthy, and balanced internet use and treatment of digital addiction). Five other programmes on preventing non-chemical addiction among children and adolescents were also cofinanced by the Ministry of Health in 2023.

In addition, two addiction treatment programmes were launched in 2023 for children and adolescents up to the age of 18 by Ljubljana university psychiatric clinic (UPK Polje) as part of its programme for adolescents at the drug addiction treatment centre, which aims to treat up to 40 adolescents a year. The digital detox programme at the youth health resort in Rakitna is designed for 40 users a year.

In 2022-2023, a measure on integrated mental health enhancement and primary prevention of suicidal behaviour was implemented for adolescents, as well as a parental skills measure, which involved 10 organisations and 450 parents in 2023 in the prevention and early treatment of emotional behavioural problems and autistic developmental disorders in children. The activities under both measures will be stepped up in the coming years of child guarantee implementation.

A measure on the first 1 000 days of a child's life (intensive psychosocial support programme for vulnerable pregnant women and families at risk with substantial health risks at home during pregnancy and post-birth) and a measure upgrading services for children with disabilities with EU cofinancing has not yet started in 2022-2023.

3.5 HEALTHY NUTRITION

According to research on the health behaviour of school-aged children in 2013/2014 (Inchley et al., 2016), family property is an important factor affecting excess weight and obesity among boys and girls in Slovenia. Even though it is possible to eat healthily on a relatively low income, healthy meals tend to cost more than unhealthy (or less healthy) ones especially because of relatively high fruit and vegetable prices. The Nutrition Institute and National Institute of Public Health report that bad eating habits (including poor meal choices and fast-food consumption) expose children at a very early stage to persistent overconsumption of harmful fats, sugars, salt and artificial additives.

All children are offered a healthy diet in schools and kindergartens, regardless of economic status. Economically disadvantaged children and some other groups (see section 3.3) receive meals free of charge, while others pay cost price. Dietary standards in schools take into account the needs of growing children. Children with special nutritional needs due to a medical condition are provided with nutrition in accordance with their special needs.

The School Nutrition Act Monitoring provides ensures that menus in educational institutions comply with professional guidelines. Advising is also very important activity that is based on the abovementioned act. In addition to the monitoring of food quality it enables dissemination of current expertise in nutrition, physical activity and health of children and adolescents, which can provide a basis for teachers in their educational and health work with children and adolescents. In 2022 and 2023, the Ministries of Health and Education played an active role in drafting the revised national school meal guidelines, which were endorsed by the expert council for general education on 23 November 2023. The guidelines also cover food waste reduction and promotion of sustainable practices. They aim to ensure an integrated approach to child nutrition, covering health, educational, economic, social, and agricultural aspects. The Ministry of Health provided support in the form of studies on and recommendations for healthy eating, while the Ministry of Education engages in implementing the guidelines in schools and ensuring that menus meet dietary guidelines. The guidelines set out limits for highly industrially processed foods, sugary beverages and salt. They recommend moderate meat consumption and encourage consumption of whole foods, grains and vegetables, which are lacking in children's diets. The new guidelines place greater emphasis on sustainable nutrition and the importance of eating locally produced and processed foods.

Marketing of food and beverages in schools is discouraged. Vending machines with drinks and snacks are banned in schools under the School Nutrition Act Monitoring.

The Ministry of Health cofinances ongoing updates to the 'Šolski lonec' portal, which supports the provision of food in nurseries and schools in line with the guidelines. Under a Ministry of Health programme, the National Institute of Public Health is also developing a computer application allowing food suppliers to better plan school diets in line with the guidelines. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health enables operation of the national portal 'Prehrana.si', which provides professional and verified information on healthy eating for different target groups.

Since 2017, a fruit and milk scheme has been implemented in Slovenian schools providing an additional free meal of fruit and vegetables or milk and dairy products to increase consumption of these foods by children, with a focus on local production, and improve their eating habits. In 2022, 84.8% of Slovenian primary schools took part in the scheme. Cross-sectoral cooperation also took place in 2022 and 2023 with the introduction of a traditional Slovenian breakfast at schools, including a selection of recommended locally produced food and accompanying activities in schools, and a strong focus on increasing the share of organic food in school meals.

In addition to providing healthy meals and raising awareness of healthy diets in schools, the Ministry of Health also seeks to raise awareness through one-off measures, such as cofinancing a programme for young people to acquire healthy eating skills run by the NGO Caritas Slovenia. Another cofinanced programme is 'Specialni Zdravko' of the NGO Društvo za kulturo inkluzije to promote healthy eating and regular physical exercise for children and young people with special needs (especially intellectual disabilities) and the 'active to school and healthy city' programme run by the Institute for spatial policies, which encourages children to walk or cycle to school and focuses on the health benefits of doing so. In 2023, under the ESF+ programme addressing material deprivation in Slovenia 2021-2027, MDDSZ started to help poor families through a new project providing eight food products: flour, pasta, long grain rice, milk, sunflower oil, canned beans, canned peeled tomatoes and marmalade/jam. Membership of Slovenian and EU food quality schemes was one of the criteria for selection of the suppliers to ensure better food quality offered to economically deprived families.

3.6 SUITABLE HOUSING

Compared to the EU average, the severe housing deprivation rate is low in Slovenia. We are not aware of any homeless children, but a high level of housing deprivation is evident due to poor housing conditions. 17.8% of all households lived in unsuitable housing in 2022 (IRRSV 2024).

The housing cost overburden rate is relatively low in Slovenia due to a high share of owner-occupied housing. It was 4.1% in 2022, well below the EU average of 8.3%. Housing costs are more of a burden on tenants paying market rent, but their overburden rate has also fallen below the EU average in recent years. The highest overburden rate is among people in households with incomes below the AROP threshold, 29.6% of whom lived in low quality housing in 2022, also contributing to higher energy costs. While the share of households in Slovenia unable to afford to properly heat their home has been lower than the EU average for many years, it increased from 1.7% in 2021 to 2.6% in 2022 (IRRSV 2024).

The Slovenian government set high targets for housing policy in the 2022 coalition agreement. Some of those targets were also covered in the child guarantee action plan. It was agreed to establish a stable, predictable and development-oriented housing policy focused on building more public rental housing throughout the country, thereby pursuing a policy of balanced regional development. The state budgets for 2023, 2024 and 2025 each set aside EUR 25.5 million for the National Housing Fund, the first EUR 25.5 million having already been transferred to the fund in 2023. Funds will be earmarked for own construction and financing projects by local housing funds, municipalities and non-profit housing

organisations, as well as municipal projects involving favourable long-term loans. Systemic funding is planned for 2026, providing EUR 100 million a year for public residential construction.

In 2022, a call for tender was published under the recovery and resilience plan for EUR 60 million in grants to build, purchase and renovate public rental housing to be rented out at social rents. Thirty-four projects were selected, involving a total of 1 036 additional homes across the country.

Given the severe lack of public rental housing, a system of grants is in place for socially disadvantaged families and individuals to address their housing issues. Social rents are subsidised by municipalities, while market rents are subsidised by the state. Spending by municipalities to subsidise social rents increases with new housing, while the amount needed to subsidise market rents is stable. Given that the existing system does not encourage municipalities to promote construction of new social housing, activities started in 2023 to improve the Housing Act in this area, shifting the full burden of subsidising rents to the state budget. The 2025 budget allocates EUR 100 million to building rental housing.

In 2023, a contract was also concluded between the ministry responsible for housing and the Geodetic Institute to establish in the long term a register of public rental housing in Slovenia, as there is no centralised recording of the extent of such housing.

Activities related to the fight against homelessness were also stepped up in 2022 and 2023, with a group being set up to formulate an anti-homelessness strategy.

4. INDICATORS, OBJECTIVES AND MONITORING

To measure the effectiveness of the measures, we have set up indicators with the Slovenian Social Protection Institute relating to the targeted measures set out in the Council recommendations within the selected priority areas or services, specific measures and their objectives. In the second stage of drawing up the indicators, we coordinated the proposals with action leaders and representatives of the ministries. Creating indicators to monitor child guarantee measures in Slovenia was a challenging process and is not yet fully completed, as the child guarantee action plan 2022-2030 is not a typical action plan found in other strategic documents, since it explicitly mentions only measures and objectives, not activities. For this reason, the current evaluation of the first two years focuses on overall implementation of the plan, with a more comprehensive performance assessment of the child guarantee being developed over a longer period.

Various types of indicators have been drawn up: indicators of inputs/resources (financial, human, technical) needed to implement a measure, output and process indicators linked to activities giving a clear picture of progress in implementing actions, result indicators reflecting immediate (short-term) effects on service users, and impact indicators reflecting the impact on achieving global or general objectives and referring to medium- and long-term consequences/effects of the measures implemented. We recorded the indicators under the individual measures in the monitoring and survey table, where we tried to classify the areas, sub-areas, objectives and actions based on the data source, implementing body / action leader and the baseline and target value of the indicator. The indicators were designed to take the fullest possible account of specificity, measurability and (time) accessibility.

Given that not all measures in the action plan have been started and some are at an early stage of implementation, we expect some changes to the indicators. The updated action plan has thus not yet been sent to the Commission, but some of the indicators are already part of the annex to the Report on implementing the child guarantee 2022-2023. While some are already useful for monitoring the progress of individual measures, they will have a more prominent role in monitoring (increased) accessibility of services in the next process report.

As regards monitoring progress in the accessibility of the services covered by the recommendation (preschool, education (including school activities), school nutrition, healthcare, healthy nutrition and suitable housing), the EU-wide monitoring framework for the child guarantee drawn up by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) was also useful in preparing the report, as were materials from the European Social Policy Analysis Network and statistics from Eurofound, Eurochild, UNICEF and the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia.

5. FUNDING

Measures under the child guarantee action plan 2022-2030 are financed from various sources, the main one being integrated resources, supplemented in some areas by local community budgets and European cofinancing. According to the national budgets adopted for 2022, 2023 and 2024, the estimated share of European cofinancing for actions implemented in the first 3 years of the child guarantee in Slovenia is 12.76%, a share which is expected to increase over time mainly as a result of the plan for implementing the European Cohesion Policy (ECP) programme 2021-27. In particular, the EU funding sources include the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD). The funding plan and budget items for some measures are being further coordinated under the plan for implementing the ECP programme 2021-27 and other European funding mechanisms.

In 2023, the indicative funding earmarked for implementing the measures amounted to EUR 196.999 million. This figure includes measures which, while not directly relating to specific and targeted services for AROPE children, are primarily aimed at preventing intergenerational transmission of poverty and improving social inclusion of families and are identified in the action plan as measures falling under an enabling policy framework. The estimated financial value of all measures in the child guarantee action plan for 2024 is EUR 214.8 million.

Broken down by service, EUR 46 914 360 was set for greater inclusion of vulnerable children in the preschool system in 2022 and EUR 53 147 509 in 2023. This does not include local community resources.

At least EUR 69 612 492 was earmarked for access to education services and school activities in 2022 and EUR 111 798 227 in 2023. This does not include local community resources.

At least EUR 706 104 was allocated for access to healthcare services in 2022 and EUR 1 010 751 in 2023, although some of the most expensive health services, such as running mental health centres (with an annual cost of EUR 7 700 601 in 2023) and medical treatment programmes for addiction, are covered by the Slovenian Health Insurance Institute and are not included in the figures. The upgrading of services for children with disabilities is funded under the European Regional Development Fund and totals EUR 5 523 902.76. The 'COOL Kids' programme is partly funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility, under a project on developing programmes for the mental health of children, adolescents and young adults totalling EUR 2 500 000.

EUR 10 883 333 was allocated for suitable housing for vulnerable families in 2022 and EUR

40 417 122 in 2023.

Spending on services linked to access to healthy diets and related awareness-raising activities, as well as dealing with and treating problems linked to unhealthy diets, amounted to EUR 6 016 649 in 2022 and EUR 6 539 499 in 2023. However, a significant share of the services linked to the interdisciplinary treatment of overweight and obese children and adolescents in hospitals and health education centres is covered by the Health Insurance Institute and is not included in total funding for these services.

The financial implications of each measure are set out in more detail in the annex.

6. LESSONS LEARNED AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

We have already pointed out that, despite the risk of poverty and social exclusion, some categories of children are not covered by the measures envisaged or are not addressed in an appropriate way.

Slovenia has one of the lowest school dropout rates in Europe at 4.2%. Although there is no legal basis for data collection based on ethnicity, local observations show that many **Roma children drop out** of primary school, so it is planned to increase incentives to make it easier for them to stay in school. Health monitoring is weakest for Roma children among all vulnerable groups, as they do not attend regular check-ups during primary school, also on account of their high dropout rates.

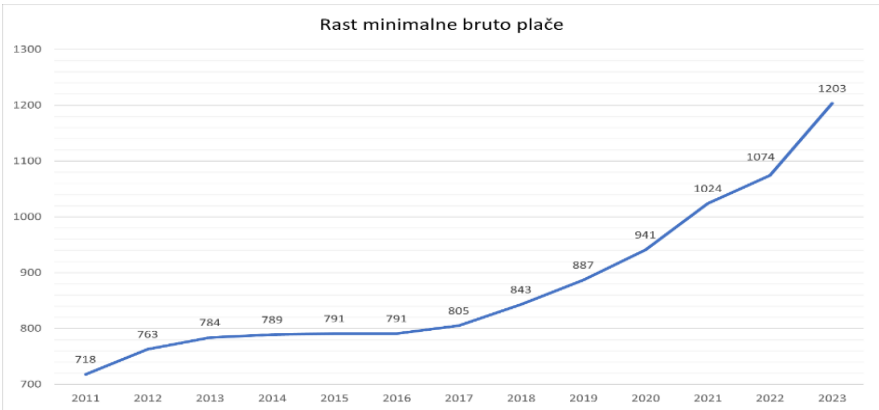
Support for single-parent families is insufficient, as single mothers are one of the most socially vulnerable groups in Slovenia after elderly single women. To find systemic solutions to comprehensively improve the situation of vulnerable single-parent families, we commissioned a study in 2023 on these families and the risks they face in their daily lives. The study will also identify gaps in legislation or areas where systemic improvements are needed in Slovenia. It will be completed in 2025.

Children removed from their families on account of unsuitable family and living conditions face difficulties being placed in crisis centres and foster families, as there is a lack of capacity and staff in practice. For this reason, children and young people stay in crisis centres for children and youth for much longer than intended. It is also difficult to find suitable foster families for children. The problems are also reflected in placements in overcrowded institutions or specialist centres where children are occasionally placed but where they may not belong or where existing staff cannot provide proper assistance for various reasons. For this reason, we commissioned a study in 2023, which will run until the end of 2024, on

children and adolescents with emotional and behavioural problems and disorders. The study will shed light on the placement of children in various institutions and help us find systemic solutions to these problems. In the field of foster care, a broader working group has been meeting since 2022 to upgrade and improve existing foster care arrangements and draft a proposal for systemic changes to foster care in Slovenia.

Another area of social exclusion relates to the **digital environment**. Since the drafting of the national child guarantee action plan, the Ministry of Digital Transformation has been established and provided 13 000 of the most socially disadvantaged children with free access to computer equipment in their home environment. This is certainly an important measure for children under the Council Recommendation (EU) establishing a European Child Guarantee. An important question is how many children do not have access to the digital environment on account of material deprivation, due to lack of a network or computer equipment or the inability to maintain computer equipment.

We do not collect data on ethnicity in Slovenia, but data show that **children with one or both parents born outside Slovenia** are more likely to be at risk of social exclusion or poverty. In such families, even where the parents are employed, they are underpaid for their work and are not shielded from poverty. There can be no measure in this field directly targeting children. In recent years Slovenia has seen a considerable increase in the minimum wage, which now stands at EUR 1 253. However, this is not enough to equalise opportunities for migrant children, and we will therefore continue with the measures. In March this year, MDDSZ launched a call for cofinancing social activation+ projects, which will improve social inclusion and employment opportunities for vulnerable groups, including migrants in particular migrant women.



[Growth of minimum gross wage]

It is challenging to measure the effectiveness and impact of measures, especially non-monetary measures which are preventive or aimed at the entire family rather than just the child. The needs of vulnerable groups must be investigated quantitatively and through

qualitative methods that provide a better insight into the actual circumstances and difficulties faced by poor and socially excluded children.

Adequate staff is needed to work with children in need, in risky family situations and with wide-ranging needs. A sufficient number of professionals must be available at all times and must be properly trained and rewarded to prevent staff leaving. In Slovenia, we face this challenge in almost all the areas addressed by the Council Recommendation (EU) establishing a European Child Guarantee, reflecting the current labour market situation.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Slovenia has always been committed to fighting child poverty and social exclusion, as shown by the statistics, as Slovenian children grow up in relatively favourable conditions compared with other countries. Nevertheless, 41 000 children are poor or socially excluded.

The start of implementation of the child guarantee and, in the case of Slovenia, the final part of preparing the national action programme have been affected by four factors. First, in 2022, we faced the energy crisis and rising cost of living, which worsened conditions for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and for their families. Slovenia was also hit by widespread flooding. All of this required a swift and effective response by the state to avoid a drastic deterioration in people's material well-being. The fact is that crises are becoming a constant and rapid response is therefore crucial. The effectiveness of responses can be measured only afterwards.

The fourth factor affecting the start of implementation of the child guarantee is the delay in the start of the new European Cohesion Policy programming period, which, as the report shows, delayed implementation of a large number of measures, in particular preventive measures and those involving, in the case of Slovenia, the parents and families of children living in poverty and social exclusion. Some activities started this year, and some will be launched next year due to the delay.

In line with the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, resources must be earmarked for implementation. However, we would welcome it if the Commission set aside funds specifically for child guarantee measures. We believe this would further increase the accessibility of services for vulnerable groups, as budgetary resources are primarily aimed at the general child population. The funds could also strengthen the powers of child guarantee coordinators and those responsible for child guarantee actions in the relevant departments. For effective implementation, child guarantee coordinators should also be appointed in the ministries responsible for education, health and housing.

The experience of drawing up the action plan and reporting on implementation has shown that cross-sectoral cooperation would work better if the departments responsible for specific areas had a designated person to coordinate measures within their remit.

As coordination of measures and reporting on implementation are work-intensive and put a burden on participants, it would make sense to monitor the implementation of the child guarantee every 3 years.

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