

Comments on the Biennial Report on the Implementation of the Child Guarantee in Romania

The Romanian Government, through the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoptions, released its Biennial Report on the Implementation of the Child Guarantee (CG) in Romania. The report is divided into 7 chapters, with chapters 3 (Roll-out of services) and chapter 4 (Indicators, targets and monitoring) being the ones that provide data on the implementation of the CG and on its results up to date.

The report highlights the progress achieved by Romania in the implementation of the CG, describing the measures that were taken up to date and the way these measures will be continued, together with a brief description of the measures to be taken in the near future. In most situations, the measures are presented on three levels: (a) measures that improve and/or strengthen the existing legal frame, (b) investment and/or infrastructure-related measures and (c) programmes and/or strategies that were either initiated or continued.

A. Early Childhood education and care

The report presents two main achievements for this chapter:

The construction of 110 nurseries, out of which one is completed and 51 are currently being built. The implementation of this programme is funded through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. An addition to this investment is the National Program for the Construction of Public or Social Interest Buildings, whereby, according to page 13 of the report, "the following investment objectives are being realized: 83 small nurseries, 31 medium nurseries, and 14 large nurseries". However, there is no indication of the progress of the implementation of this sub-programme.

b. The construction of 358 kindergartens, with another 31 kindergartens currently in progress and with procedures for 10 kindergartens scheduled to be launched. It is very important to mention that this was done under the Early education Reform Project, which started in 2019 and finished in December 2023, meaning that it preceded the Child Guarantee and had not been linked to it.

The soft measures include training provided to 2,184 preschool teachers, through an EU funded programme called E.T.I.C. It is worth mentioning that the implementation of this programme also started at the end of 2019, therefore precedes the Child Guarantee.

2. Education and School-based activities

The report mentions the following achievements:

- a. The implementation of an educational programme called "The Second Chance", allowing children and youngsters to pursue secondary education following a school dropout. However, it is worth mentioning that the programme itself had been in place as early as 2011 in Romania and that the year 2022 brought about changes in methodology, preparing the school year 2023-2024 (which the report mentions). Therefore, the programme precedes the Child Guarantee.
- b. The continuation of annual national social programs such as Euro 200 (for purchasing computers for school), High School Money, School Supplies, Scholarships, and the School Program. The report mentions an increase in the budget of almost all these programmes, but we can notice that in the programme High School Money, there were 28,588 beneficiaries in 2020-2021 school year,¹ 22,853 beneficiaries in the following year² and 20,509 beneficiaries in the 2022-2023 school year.³ Regarding

¹ Data available at https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fișiere/Bani%20de%20liceu/situatie%20finala%20beneficiari%20Bani%20de%20liceu%202020-2021.pdf

² Data available at https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fișiere/Bani%20de%20liceu/2021/Beneficiari%20Bani%20de%20liceu%202021%20-%202022_final.pdf

³ Data available at https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/Lista%20finala%20numar%20beneficiari%20Bani%20de%20Liceu_2022_2023_Dupa_contestatii.pdf



the School Supplies programme, during the school year 2021-2022, a total of 258,356 children received free supplies⁴, while in the 2022-2023 school year, 167,674 students received free school supplies, according to page 16 of the report. One can notice that while the expenditure for these programmes may have increased, the number of beneficiaries decreased every year. Also, we must note that all these programmes have started before the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

3. Healthy Meal each School Day

The report mentions an increase in the number of beneficiaries of the programme called “One hot meal”, which was later re-branded to “A healthy meal each school day”. While the number of schools where the programme is implemented was indeed increased from 350 to 450 schools by the government for the 2022-2023 school year (with plans to expand it even further) a study published by World Vision shows that only one third of the selected schools were actually implementing the programme. Also, 63% of the schools have opted for a cold meal (a sandwich/pastry and an apple).⁵ Also, the Law of Educations states that from the current school year, there should be 1,000,000 children included in the programme, but the provisions were changed and the target was postponed for 2025, therefore the programme started with around 500,000 children. It is thereupon worth noting that this constitutes a failure in reaching the set target, being an underachievement.

4. Healthcare

The report mentions information and awareness raising campaigns, one assessment of the general status of population health conducted with the support of WHO and “765,847 preventive and prophylactic medical services that were reimbursed for insured individuals aged 0-18”. However, we believe that these remains a silo-type of approach and that no real integrated health-related measures have been implemented up to this point. Also, the construction of regional hospitals in Romania is a subject which is still debated, but no actual construction works have started yet.

5. Healthy nutrition

The report mentions the provision of “of fresh fruits and/or vegetables, natural drinking milk and/or dairy products without milk powder additives, as well as bakery products for preschoolers and students.” This initiative started in 2000, well before the Child Guarantee and while it is a very welcomed programme per se, the reality shows that there are instances when the actual distribution begins four or even five months after the start of the school year, due to the lengthy tender procedures and the lack of interests from providers/distribution companies.

6. Adequate housing

The report mentions studies and assessments undertaken in order to get a picture of the housing conditions in Romania, as well as a mapping of informal settlements in Romania. From the experience of Hope and Homes for Children Romania, these informal settlements, built mainly at the outskirts of cities, are poverty pockets, where children are at high risk of physical and psychological abuse, where they benefit from poor education or no education at all and where they are often used for labour and/or begging. At page 22, the report states “the continuation of measures provided in Government Decision 1237/2008 regarding the implementation of the pilot program “Social Housing for Roma Communities” can be mentioned. This program represents an experimental component of the social inclusion program in Romania aimed at improving Roma communities' access to decent housing, in the context of implementing projects for the construction of up to 300 social housing units in the 8 development regions of Romania. According to publicly available data as of April 30, 2023, a number of 11 investment objectives had been completed, comprising 239 housing units, while funds had already been allocated for increasing the number of housing units in the following period.” While this programme had started before the Child Guarantee, it has not been completed yet and needs to be extended in order to include a wider range of beneficiaries.

⁴ Data available at <https://www.edupedu.ro/creste-cu-140-suma-pentru-rechizitele-acordate-gratuit-elevilor-defavorizati-ligia-deca-anunta-ca-noile-pachete-de-rechizite-mai-scurte-vor-fi-primate-de-elevi-in-anul-scolar-viitor/>

⁵ Info available at <https://www.edupedu.ro/programul-masa-sanatoasa-aplicat-in-doar-o-treime-dintre-scolile-selectate-si-asa-sunt-prea-putine-fata-de-cat-cere-legea-deca-iohannis-raport-world-vision-sunt-prea-putini-b/>



Conclusions

The Biennial Report on the Implementation of the Child Guarantee presents a series of evolutions both in the legal frame and in terms of concrete actions/interventions, with the aim of supporting the implementation of the Child Guarantee plans at national level. While these measures are welcomed and needed, most of them are either the result of pre-existing initiatives or the continuation of existing programmes, which therefore does not lead to the conclusion that they were set up in order to support the implementation of the CG. At the same time, the report shows that the implementation of the measures presented relies heavily on EU funds rather than being a mix between EU funds and national budget.

Based on the data available in the biennial report and on the status of the implementation of the Child Guarantee in Romania, we recommend that the European Commission encourages the Romanian Government:

1. To increase the pace of implementation of the reforms which it has taken on within the National Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee. While we are aware that there are certain stages that take time (amending the legal frame, tenders, launching calls for projects), the pace of the implementation needs to be increased. In our opinion, this can be done by: (a) a coordinated approach of all stakeholders (National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoptions, Ministry of Investments and European Projects, county authorities and local authorities responsible for children) and (b) simplifying certain procedures that are currently lengthy and can hinder the implementation of the programmes
2. To ensure funding from a mix of sources, using not only the EU funds, but also the national budget (currently the actions implemented rely heavily on the EU funds)
3. To start activities that were specifically designed to be applied within the implementation of the Child Guarantee. While the current activities are welcomed and useful, supporting the implementation of the Child Guarantee, the majority of them have started before the implementation of the CG, and were/are not specifically aimed for it. There are activities that are specifically aimed for the CG and they need to start as soon as possible.

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