

## ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

### *Promoting the rights and well-being of children left behind in transnational families*

*Brussels, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2013, 4pm – 6pm  
European Parliament, Room ASP 5E3*

### **Background document**

#### **About the phenomenon**

Freedom of movement is a fundamental right of all EU citizens. However the growing number of intra-European migrants has important social, political and economic consequences both in countries of origin and of destination. In countries with intense migratory outflow hundreds of thousands of children are being left behind by parents who migrate in search of economic improvement for their family. The main **intra-European migration flows** are: from Romania towards Italy and Spain, from Poland towards UK and Germany and from the Baltic countries towards the United Kingdom, Ireland., Germany and Sweden.

Data about the European phenomenon were first shared by the ChildrenLeftBehind.eu network in 2011, estimating about 500.000 children left behind by one or both parents in the European Union. The recent **study** “*Social impact on Emigration and rural –urban Migration in Central and eastern Europe*” by the European Commission also addressed the issue of children left behind, but estimates seem much higher than 500.000<sup>1</sup>. An overwhelming majority of children are in Romania and Poland and smaller numbers in Lithuania and Latvia, about Bulgaria and Estonia there are no statistics but it is known the phenomenon is there<sup>2</sup>.

In 2008 a study by UNICEF and the Alternative Sociale Association estimated some 350,000 children in **Romania** had at least one parent working abroad representing about 7% of the total population under 18, with more than one third (126,000) having both parents abroad, half of them under 10 years of age. By contrast official figures from the National Child Protection Authority indicated a total of 82,464 children whose parents left abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> Considering mentioned statistic thereafter of children left behind in Romania and Poland together -

<sup>2</sup> GVG on behalf of the European Commission – DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: “*Social impact on Emigration and rural –urban Migration in Central and eastern Europe*” - Synthesis Report – p. 97. 2012. [Downloadable in the EC Commission website](#) (first report in the list).

The study identified higher levels of low school achievement, early school leaving, youth criminality, alcoholism, and psychological problems among those children with one or more parent working abroad.

According to national statistics in **Poland**<sup>3</sup>, there were more than 1, 5 million Poles living abroad in 2009. A study<sup>4</sup> commissioned by Polish Ombudsman for Children in the same year suggests that between 1.1 and 1.6 million children aged 9-18 experienced some separation, from at least one parent within a three year period. Given that in 40% of cases the separation lasted less than 2 months, the true figure is below 1 million. Based on the teachers' opinions, the study provides also some information on the share of students with various problems at school, such as lower grades, absences, misbehavior, etc. (Walczak, B., 2008b, 2009, Balicki et al. 2009). But it also shows that schools are not well aware of the scale of the issues and are not prepared to handle them properly. A particular cause for concern are older children, aged 14-18, with both parents abroad, who appear to be at higher risk of school drop-out and of problems with the criminal justice system.

A survey carried out in 2007 by the **Lithuanian** Office of the Ombudsman on Children's Rights found out that 5% of all Lithuanian children aged under 18 have at least one parent living abroad. Evidence shows that these children can suffer emotional, intellectual and behaviour problems.

In **Latvia** there is a lack of accurate data, but the phenomenon of children left behind is a growing concern, and is thought to be one of the factors causing children to drop out of school. **Estonia** has the peculiarity that many parents work in Finland during the week and return home at the weekends. There are no statistics from **Bulgaria** but it is known that there are places in the mountains and in the North where the majority of children live with relatives because their parents work abroad or elsewhere in Bulgaria. Whilst there has been little or no policy attention to the issue in the Slovak Republic the scale and nature of migration means there are likely to be a significant number of children affected<sup>5</sup>.

## Raising visibility of the issue at EU level

The **2008 Unicef and Alternative Sociale** Association study on children left behind in Romania brought the issue to the attention of the EU institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> See website of Central Statistical Office of Poland, [Migration Report 2004-2009](#).

<sup>4</sup> Walczak, B., Społeczne, Edukacyjne i Wychowawcze Konsekwencje Migracji Rodziców i Opiekunów Prawnych Uczniów Szkół Podstawowych, Gimnazjalnych i Ponadgimnazjalnych, Warsaw 2009.

<sup>5</sup> GVG on behalf of the European Commission – DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: “*Social impact on Emigration and rural –urban Migration in Central and eastern Europe*” - Synthesis Report – p. 99. 2012. [Downloadable in the EC Commission website](#) (first report in the list).

In December **2008** the **European Parliament** requested that the European Commission take action to better understand the issue and to inform and support the families affected. On 12 March **2009** the **European Parliament** voted a **resolution**<sup>6</sup> that highlights the need of action and “(a) calls on the Commission to undertake a study to assess the extent, at EU level, of the phenomenon [...]; (b) [...]proposes to all interested parties the adequate application of the already existing means to help migrants and their children who remain in the country of origin; (c) calls on the Commission and the Member States to actively involve the social partners and NGOs in actions targeting the improvement of migrants’ children”.

On 2 March **2011** Fondazione L’Albero della Vita organized the first **European conference “Left Behind”**<sup>7</sup> in collaboration with Fondazione Patrizio Paoletti (as education partner) and Eurochild. It launched the **ChildrenLeftBehind.eu European network**<sup>8</sup> comprising non-governmental organizations, centers for social studies, universities and individuals. The conference attracted members of the European Parliament, representatives of the European Commission as well as from the Council of Europe<sup>9</sup> and brought forward a call for action<sup>10</sup>.

**The European Commission responded by commissioning a detailed study of emigration trends and patterns** among EU members, candidate countries as well Eastern Partnership countries. The study explores the impact of migration on the labour market and on particularly vulnerable groups including children. It also provides an in-depth description of the existing policy responses to the social impacts of migration on vulnerable groups, points out the challenges and suggests the directions that countries involved should implement to face the current situation properly<sup>11</sup>. The study was published by **DG Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion** in June **2012** including 25 country reports.

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<sup>6</sup> See [Resolution text](#) in European Parliament website.

<sup>7</sup> See more about the [European Conference “Left Behind” of 2 March 2011](#), held at the European Parliament, on the network website.

<sup>8</sup> See more about the [ChildrenLeftBehind.eu network](#) on the network website.

<sup>9</sup> See [interventions in video](#) during the European Conference “Left Behind” of 2 March 2011, held at the European Parliament.

<sup>10</sup> See [Call for Action](#) to Institutions of the European Conference 2 March 2011 at the European Parliament.

<sup>11</sup> GVG on behalf of the European Commission – DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: “*Social impact on Emigration and rural –urban Migration in Central and eastern Europe*” - Synthesis and Executive report, as well as the Policy brief and the 25 country reports and summaries. 2012. in the EC Commission website. [Downloadable in the EC Commission Website.](#)

## Relevant EU policy developments

The economic crisis, rising unemployment, and macro-economic imbalances continue to drive economic emigration. Children are being disproportionately affected by the crisis and government austerity measures<sup>12</sup>. Children's rights are threatened daily by the lack of access to adequate protection, healthcare, housing, education, nutrition or family support. This situation is exacerbated by the continued contraction of the social sector spending and austerity measures introduced with too little regard to the long-term impact on future generations<sup>13</sup>.

In February 2013 the **European Commission** adopted a comprehensive **Recommendation "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage"** as part of its Social Investment Package for Growth and Cohesion (SIP). It proposes an integrated approach that places children's rights at the centre of policy development, as well as equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged whilst ensuring quality universal provisions for all. The Recommendation clearly mentions the need to make full use of EU financial instruments, in particular the Structural Funds, to support children and families.

Current negotiations on the next **EU Multiannual Financial Framework** will determine the direction and **priorities of EU expenditure** in all policy areas for the years **2014-2020**. **Eurochild and Children's Rights Action Group (CRAG)** are following these developments with the aim to bring a **child-rights perspective**<sup>14</sup>: resources must be invested in protection, access to health and education, in inclusive growth, fundamental rights, security and citizenship, as well as in promoting social inclusion and lifting children out of poverty. Heading 1, 3 and 4 of the MFF 2014-2020 are earmarked to provide essential direct investments in children. It is expected that the budget ceilings determined by the EU Commission will be respected.

Whilst **there is no specific funding for migrant children or children of transnational families foreseen**, these groups are important beneficiaries of interventions that prevent and reduce exclusion, marginalization, poverty, discrimination. The **European Anti-Poverty Network** is leading a campaign to ensure that 25% of the cohesion policy budget goes to the **European Social Fund** and that 20% of the ESF is ear-marked to poverty reduction and social inclusion. This ring-fencing of resources is essential if the EU is to respect its commitment to lifting 20 million people out of poverty by 2020 (one of the 10 headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy).

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<sup>12</sup> See [Eurochild website](#).

<sup>13</sup> See [CRAG Statement of Multi Financial Framework of November 2012](#)

<sup>14</sup> See [CRAG Statement of Multi Financial Framework of November 2012](#).



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Another important budget line may be the new **Fund of European Aid to the Most Deprived** which will (if approved) support Member State schemes providing food to the most deprived people and clothing and other essential goods to homeless people and materially-deprived children.

### A guide to discussion during the Round Table

On the 24 April, after the contribution of the speakers in the program, the discussion time of the Round Table<sup>15</sup> aims at ensuring that the phenomenon receives necessary attention by EU institutions – considering also the national level - and an adequate place in the European policy framework, in terms of:

- knowledge and awareness at EU and national level among institutions and all relevant stakeholders;
- affected European policies (existing and new ones needed), as well as national policies;
- EU funding programs related to the issue (existing and new ones needed).

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<sup>15</sup> See [Round Table Program](#), 24 April 2013, European Parliament.