



COUNCIL OF THE BALTIC SEA STATES EXPERT GROUP ON CHILDREN AT RISK 2025-2026

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE POLISH PRESIDENCY 2025-2026





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The CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk consists of senior officials appointed by ministries or agencies responsible for children’s issues in the Member States of the Council of the Baltic Sea States: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, and Sweden.

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THE CBSS & CHILD PROTECTION



CIVIL
SECURITY



ANTI-
TRAFFICKING



CHILDREN
AT RISK

Under the Safe & Secure Region long-term priority, the CBSS works to strengthen security and societal resilience across the Baltic Sea Region. In response to the changing security environment, cooperation increasingly focuses on enhancing preparedness, addressing emerging and cross-border risks, and building resilient societies and communities.

The work under this priority is mainly carried out by the CBSS Civil Protection Network and two specialised groups focusing on countering trafficking in human beings and child protection.

The CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk works to protect children and strengthen their rights across the region, including by sharing experience and good practices to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children.



CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk

The CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk (EG CAR) promotes children's rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and strengthens national child protection systems across the Baltic Sea Region through regional dialogue and practical cooperation. It operates under the CBSS long-term priority Safe & Secure Region. The Expert Group consists of senior officials from the ten CBSS Member States. Its 2025–2030 Strategy places regional exchange on children at risk of harm at the core of its work, alongside four thematic areas: multidisciplinary services for child victims and witnesses of violence, non-violent childhoods, prevention of sexual violence, and inclusion and equity.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND FOREWORD

by Ms Beata Kulig,
Head of the Family Support and Foster Care Unit, Demography Department, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy

DURING THE POLISH PRESIDENCY, the Expert Group on Children at Risk (EG CAR) the special theme of the work was priorities around unaccompanied children, children with refugee experience, foreign minors and foster care. These areas reflected experience with the protection of children affected by displacement and the need for strengthened regional cooperation on cross-border child protection challenges. The selected topic was in line with EG CAR Strategy 2025-30 in the area of prevention and addressing risks of harm to children in the Baltic Sea Region. EG CAR discussed the very issues in close collaboration with the CBSS Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings (TF-THB) during the first in person meeting in Warsaw, October 2025. In March 2026 the meeting in Wrocław was structured around the theme “Children with refugee experience”. Two other meeting hosted by The Polish Presidency were on-line. In May 2026 Expert Group meeting was dedicated to trauma-informed care, with a focus on psychosocial and psychological interventions for children affected by conflict, displacement and crisis.

During the Polish Presidency, the Children at Risk Unit conducted a structured consultation with Member States to identify regional priorities and Member State interest in engagement under the 2025-2030 Strategy. The findings pointed to prevention and early intervention as the main priority area among respondents and to unanimous support for exchange of practice and experience between Member States as the strongest form of EG CAR added value.



POLISH PRESIDENCY AND CHILDREN AT RISK EXPERT GROUP

POLISH CHAIR OF THE CBSS EXPERT GROUP ON CHILDREN AT RISK

The Polish Presidency of the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk was chaired by **Ms Beata Kulig, Head of the Family Support and Foster Care Unit, Demography Department** and **Mr Michał Guć, Head of Demography Department**, both representing the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy. The Presidency set its priorities around unaccompanied children, children with refugee experience, foreign minors and foster care. These areas reflected Poland’s experience with the protection of children affected by displacement and the need for strengthened regional cooperation on cross-border child protection challenges.

CBSS EXPERT GROUP ON CHILDREN AT RISK TRIO

The Polish Presidency Trio consisted of the preceding Estonian Presidency, the Polish Presidency and the incoming Icelandic Presidency (EE–PL–IS).

The Trio system is the continuity mechanism of the Expert Group, bringing together the preceding, current and incoming Presidencies. It ensures coherence across the annual rotation by enabling the outgoing Presidency to hand over ongoing work, the current Presidency to consult on direction, and the incoming Presidency to prepare its priorities in dialogue with its predecessors. The Trio meets at least twice per Presidency and supports decision-making between Expert Group meetings.

- Estonia: **Ms Kristina Laul**, Head of Child Protection Support Unit, Children’s Welfare Department, Social Insurance Board
- Poland: **Ms Beata Kulig**, Head of the Family Support and Foster Care Unit, Demography

Department, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy

- Iceland: **Ms Ólöf Ásta Farestveit**, General Director, National Agency for Children and Families

The Trio met twice during the Polish Presidency, in February and June 2026, with the June meeting focused on handover to the incoming Icelandic Presidency.

THE CBSS EXPERT GROUP ON CHILDREN AT RISK

The CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk (CAR) operates under the Safe & Secure Region priority area of the CBSS. This priority aims to strengthen the safety, resilience and well-being of communities across the Baltic Sea Region through cooperation between authorities, experts and organisations working to prevent risks and respond to crises. The Expert Group works to advance the rights of every child in the Baltic Sea Region as recognised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), with a particular focus on protecting children from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and harm.

The CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk consists of 10 Member States: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden.

Authorities in the CBSS Member States dealing with children’s issues, including Ministries and State Agencies designated to children, have appointed representatives to the Expert Group. The European Commission Coordinator for the Rights of the Child has an open invitation to take part in the meetings and in other expert meetings organised by the Expert Group.

More information on the Expert Group on Children at Risk can be found at: <https://cbss.org/cbss-bodies/expert-group-on-children-at-risk/>.

THE CHILDREN AT RISK UNIT AT THE CBSS SECRETARIAT

The implementation of the strategy and annual activity plans, approved by the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, is supported by the Children at Risk Unit in the Permanent International Secretariat of the CBSS. The Unit provides secretarial and professional support to the Expert Group, facilitates cooperation with strategic partners, prepares reports and policy documents, and contributes to communication, financial management and documentation related to the Expert Group’s work.

The Polish Presidency period coincided with a transition at the Children at Risk Unit. Following the end of tenure of the previous Head of Unit in August 2025, Ms Kadi Lauri took up the position of Senior Adviser and Head of the Children at Risk Unit in January 2026.

The Unit was supported by colleagues in the CBSS Secretariat, including in the areas of communications and finance.

Finance

The Children at Risk Unit operates on a designated budget, financed through annual contributions from CBSS Member States. In 2025–2026, all Member States contributed to the Children at Risk Unit and the operating budget was in balance.

The externally funded project portfolio implemented by the Children at Risk Unit concluded during the first half of the Polish Presidency, with the final project, PROMISE Soteria, concluding in September 2025.

While no new externally funded projects were initiated during the transition period, the Children at Risk Unit pursued new partnership opportunities during the Polish Presidency. In cooperation with the CBSS Civil Protection Network, the Unit contributed to two project proposals submitted under the EU Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) “Knowledge for Action in Prevention and Preparedness” call: Ready for Kids and Safe at School. Both proposals position EG CAR as a regional dissemination and knowledge-sharing partner. Outcomes of the calls were pending at the close of the Polish

Presidency and will fall to the Icelandic Presidency to take forward. The Unit will continue to identify further opportunities for grants and project partnerships in line with the Expert Group’s mandate and strategic priorities.

Mandate and Regional Strategy

The Polish Presidency was the first to operate under the new EG CAR mandate and regional strategy 2025-2030, both adopted under the preceding Estonian Presidency. The Polish Presidency activity plan was structured around the new strategic framework. The Mandate sets out the role, structure and working arrangements of the Expert Group, including the Presidency Trio system, decision-making procedures and the role of the Children at Risk Unit in supporting the work of the Expert Group.

The Regional Strategy defines the overall direction of the Expert Group’s work and establishes regional exchange on children at risk of harm in the Baltic Sea Region as its core strategic priority and four priority areas:

- Promoting multidisciplinary and interagency services for child victims and witnesses of violence
- Non-violent childhoods
- Prevention of sexual violence
- Inclusion and equity

The strategic framework provides continuity for the work of successive Presidencies and supports cooperation between Member States on emerging risks and challenges affecting children in the region.

Communications

During the Polish Presidency, the Expert Group took a decision to consolidate its communications channels. At its meeting in March 2026, the Expert Group agreed to close the standalone Children at Risk website and LinkedIn account and to bring all Expert Group content and communication under the main CBSS website and channels. This consolidation supports a more coherent CBSS communications presence and a more sustainable approach to maintaining the Expert Group’s visibility going forward.



POLISH PRESIDENCY 2025-2026

POLISH PRESIDENCY JULY 2025 - JUNE 2026

THE POLISH PRESIDENCY set its priorities around unaccompanied children, children with refugee experience, foreign minors and foster care. The Presidency's activities were structured around the core strategic priority of regional exchange and the four priority areas of the 2025–2030 Strategy. The Children at Risk Unit at the CBSS Secretariat supported this work through the preparation of meetings, reporting, financial management, communication and documentation.

REGIONAL EXCHANGE ON CHILDREN AT RISK OF HARM IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

The core strategic priority of the Expert Group on Children at Risk is to promote and facilitate the exchange of information, practices and initiatives among Member States to prevent and address risks of harm to children in the Baltic Sea Region.

Under the Polish Presidency, four Expert Group meetings were organised — in Warsaw (October 2025), online (November 2025), Wrocław (March 2026) and online (May 2026). The meetings provided opportunities for Member States to exchange experiences and address emerging challenges affecting children, particularly in the context of war, displacement and migration.

The March 2026 meeting, hosted by the Polish Presidency in Wrocław, was structured around the theme “Children with refugee experience”. This topic is of particular importance for Poland and the wider Baltic Sea Region given the ongoing displacement of children from Ukraine and the protection challenges arising at the EU's external border, including the Poland-Belarus border. The first day featured a

panel discussion with representatives from Lithuania, Norway and Sweden, who shared case studies and examples of national responses to supporting refugee and displaced children. The second day featured a tour de table in which all Member States exchanged updates on developments, good practices and challenges in refugee child protection, building a shared regional understanding of emerging trends and priorities.

During the Polish Presidency, the Children at Risk Unit conducted a structured consultation with Member States to identify regional priorities and Member State interest in engagement under the 2025–2030 Strategy. Six of ten Member States responded. The findings, which were presented to the Expert Group at the May 2026 meeting, pointed to prevention and early intervention as the main priority area among respondents and to unanimous support for exchange of practice and experience between Member States as the strongest form of EG CAR added value. Emerging risks flagged by some respondents included AI and online sexual harms, children in displacement, children in emergencies, and mental health and system coordination challenges.

REGISTRY OF PRACTICES

Registry of Practices was updated with the TeamUp psychosocial support methodology. The Registry documents promising practice from across the region and serves as a shared reference for Member States seeking transferable approaches to strengthen national child protection systems. The inclusion of TeamUp reflects the Presidency's thematic focus on children with refugee experience and trauma-informed care.

PRIORITY AREA 1: PROMOTING MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND INTERAGENCY SERVICES FOR CHILD VICTIMS AND WITNESSES OF VIOLENCE

The Polish Presidency held a joint meeting in Warsaw with CBSS Task Force Against Trafficking in Human Beings (TF-THB) in October 2025. The meeting focused on strengthening responses to trafficking and exploitation, including risks affecting children in the context of crises and migration. Discussions brought together representatives from law enforcement, prosecution, child protection authorities and international organisations to examine challenges in identifying and supporting victims, including children affected by displacement.

The programme also included a study visit to Łódź, where participants visited a foster family and small group homes caring for Ukrainian children and the “Lighthouse” centre run by the NGO Foundation DOBROdzieje się, which provides psychological, therapeutic and educational support to children living in foster and alternative care. The visits highlighted practical child protection responses in Poland and the importance of multidisciplinary cooperation in supporting vulnerable children.

Regional exchange in this area also benefited from the outcomes of the PROMISE Soteria project, which concluded in September 2025. As part of the project, the Barnahus Quality Standards on Child Protection were released and disseminated in July 2025, providing guidance for the development of integrated services for child victims and witnesses of violence.

The EG CAR also contributes to broader European cooperation on multidisciplinary approaches to child protection. The Expert Group participates in the work of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on access to child-friendly justice through multidisciplinary and interagency services (CDENF-ENF-JUS) and acts as an observer to the Barnahus Network, supporting continued exchange on multidisciplinary responses to violence against children.

In March, the Head of Unit attended the Council of Europe Child-Friendly Justice Project’s launch of the Child-Friendly Justice Assessment Tool, contributing to EG CAR engagement with European frameworks on child-friendly and multidisciplinary services.

PRIORITY AREA 2: NON-VIOLENT CHILDHOODS

Promoting non-violent childhoods remains an important objective of the Expert Group’s work, supporting efforts by Member States to prevent violence against children and strengthen protective environments for children.

During the Polish Presidency, this priority was addressed in connection with the focus on protecting children affected by conflict, displacement and migration. The Expert Group recognised that displacement and crisis are significant drivers of risk and harm to children.

The March 2026 Wrocław meeting’s focus on children with refugee experience (described above) contributed directly to this priority area, supporting Member State exchange on national responses to protecting children affected by displacement.

The Expert Group also contributes to the work of the Council of Europe Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF), supporting broader European cooperation on strengthening children’s rights and promoting safe and supportive environments for children.

PRIORITY AREA 3: PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Preventing and responding to sexual violence against children remains a priority area within the Expert Group.

During the Polish Presidency, discussions related to this priority were linked to broader conversations on protecting vulnerable children, including children affected by trafficking, exploitation and displacement. The October 2025 joint meeting with the Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings provided an opportunity to discuss risks of exploitation affecting children in crisis contexts and to examine how cooperation between different authorities can strengthen prevention and protection efforts.

In March 2026, the Head of Unit participated in the online launch of the research report *Protecting Children Online: New Evidence on CSAM Perpetrators and Digital Platform Use*, produced by Protect Children (Suojellaan Lapsia, Finland). The research draws attention to the role of mainstream and dark-web platforms and search engines in enabling access to child sexual abuse material, to the emerging risks posed by AI-generated

content, and to the potential of platform design measures and point-of-risk interventions to support prevention. The findings are relevant to ongoing regional cooperation on online child sexual abuse.

The Expert Group also participates in the work of the Lanzarote Committee, which monitors the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Participation in this mechanism supports regional exchange on preventing sexual violence against children and strengthening national responses to sexual exploitation and abuse.

PRIORITY AREA 4: INCLUSION AND EQUITY

Ensuring inclusion and equitable access to protection and support services for vulnerable children is one of the priority areas of the Expert Group’s work.

The May 2026 Expert Group meeting was dedicated to trauma-informed care, with a focus on psychosocial and psychological interventions for children affected by conflict, displacement and crisis.

Presentations introduced the TeamUp psychosocial support methodology (an evidence-based approach using structured play and movement activities for children aged 6–17 affected by conflict and displacement), presented by representatives of War Child and SOS Children’s Villages Poland, and a systemic psychological intervention approach for children affected by war trauma, presented by the Dolnośląska Fundacja na rzecz Pieczy Zastępczej “Przystanek Rodzina”.

The meeting supported Member State exchange on trauma-informed responses for children in vulnerable and marginalised situations, including children deprived of parental care and children with refugee experience, and showcased the contribution of Polish civil society to regional practice in this area.

SELECTION OF EVENTS AND MEETINGS UNDER THE POLISH PRESIDENCY

EG CAR MEETINGS UNDER THE POLISH PRESIDENCY

9-10 October 2025, Warsaw
 18 November 2025, online
 25 February 2026, online Trio meeting
 12-13 March 2026, Wrocław
 27 May 2026, online
 10 June 2026, online Trio meeting

ADDITIONAL EVENTS

18 March 2026: The Head of Unit participated at the online research launch event “Protecting Children Online: New Evidence on CSAM Perpetrators and Digital Platform Use” (Suojellaan Lapsia / Protect Children Finland).

27 March 2026: The Head of Unit participated in Council of Europe Child-friendly Justice Project Launching event of the Child-friendly Justice Assessment Tool.

23-24 April 2026, online: The Head of Unit participated in Council of Europe CDENF-ENF-JUS, third meeting.

2-4 June 2026: Council of Europe CDENF 13th plenary meeting.



Concrete cooperation should promote [CBSS] Member States resilience and facilitate coordinated response to current challenges, including hybrid threats [...].

▲ Extract from the Sopot Declaration, adopted during the CBSS Ministerial Session 2026



