

# SLOVENIA

## Key contextual data

*Compiled by*

**Inge Schreyer, Pamela Oberhuemer,  
and Jerneja Jager**

**Citation suggestion:**

Schreyer, I., P. Oberhuemer, and J. Jager. 2024. "Slovenia – Key contextual data." In *Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe. 33 country reports with key contextual data*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer. Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy. [www.seepro.eu/English/Country-Reports.htm](http://www.seepro.eu/English/Country-Reports.htm)

Funded by:



Federal Ministry for  
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,  
Women and Youth



State Institute for Early Childhood  
Research and Media Literacy



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## Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

### Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the term chosen in this report for the main form of centre-based ECEC settings is **kindergarten** (*vrtec*, 0–5)<sup>1</sup>, sometimes referred to as **ECEC centre**. Any additional forms of provision are described where appropriate.

### Historical milestones in ECEC in Slovenia

1756	First kindergarten on Slovenian territory, in Maribor.
1834	First “children's shelter” is established in Ljubljana and financed by charities and church organisations (mainly for children of working parents from poorer backgrounds).
1863	First kindergarten established according to Froebelian principles (mainly for children from wealthier families)
1869	The Public School Act determines that children's shelters and recreation centres, which had become the concern of the state and municipalities and were only organised in larger cities and industrial areas, can be attached to elementary schools.
1872	Three documents relevant to kindergartens are published. They state that pre-school education is an important part of education for everyone.
1883	The Gorizia Association “ <i>Sloga</i> ” introduces a course for kindergarten management at the Women's Teacher Training College.
1914-18	During the First World War, refugee kindergartens and shelters are established for parentless Slovenian children. Besides taking in orphans, the kindergartens are attended by children whose fathers are in the army and whose mothers are employed. The emphasis is on child protection rather than early childhood education.
1929	The National Schools Act (1929), in Article 7, states that kindergartens, now called “amusement centres,” are also part of the national school system. Municipalities are obliged to establish amusement centres in the larger towns and cities, or, at the request of parents or the municipality, in other places, provided that at least 30 children are enrolled. Boys and girls aged 4 are admitted. Beyond these centres, there are “day shelters for infants and children” up to the age of 4, “day shelters with an amusement centre for children aged 4–7”, and “school day shelters” for children up to the age of 16.
1933	The Ministry of Education issues a Decree that amusement centres and shelters had to work according to specific programmes; each child had to have six to eight square metres of space, and groups of thirty to forty children had to have at least two rooms, one for the amusement centre, the other for dining and resting. Children up to the age of 4 were educated by female carers, older children by kindergarten/school teachers, and the rest of the time by nannies (children started compulsory schooling at the age of 7). Younger children were kept in shelters, from where they were sent to day-amusement centres.
1939-1945	During the Second World War, when what is now Slovenia was divided between Germany, Italy and Hungary, the kindergartens were characterised by a period of alienation. From 1941 to 1945, kindergartens were opened at harvest time for children

<sup>1</sup> **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 years. For Slovenia, the relevant format is **0–5**.

	whose parents were at work. By the end of the war, 69 kindergartens and 34 auxiliary kindergartens had been opened.
Post-1945	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Expansion of early childhood provision in the light of increasing maternal employment</li> <li>– Immediately after the war, the Ministry of Social Policy of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is responsible for ECEC institutions and, as early as 1945, organises a course for educating female teachers.</li> </ul>
1946	The kindergartens are transferred to the Ministry of Education, and in the same year a course for Kindergarten Teachers of one year's duration is established at the Ljubljana Teacher Training College.
1948	Legislation is adopted to regulate nurseries and kindergartens. Nurseries are for children up to the age of 3, and kindergartens from the age of 3 up to the start of school. Companies, public offices and institutions can set up nurseries and kindergartens. Kindergartens, which also start admitting school children after school, are renamed "play and work homes". In these institutions, children are cared for and educated during the day, and sometimes also cared for at night.
1949/1950	A four-year secondary vocational school for female educators, a one-year school for assistant educators and a five-month course for auxiliary educational staff are established.
1950–1960	During this period there is little progress in the field of early childhood education. Maintaining kindergartens becomes expensive, as education is taken over by state institutions. Parents remove their children from kindergarten in large numbers because of the high costs. Even meals are abolished to cut costs.
1958	ECEC settings come under the auspices of the Secretariat for Family and Social Protection.
After 1960	After 1960, the situation in early childhood education begins to improve. In 1961, the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia adopts a Resolution which foresees a unified system of childcare, laying down the basic principles of childcare, the roles of parents and other social factors. The number of kindergartens grows, as the number of children increased dramatically between 1950 and 1960 (from 12,700 to 22,500). Nurseries were staffed by nursery carers trained in two-year vocational school courses.
1961–1972	From 1961 to 1972, vocational secondary schools are set up in Ljubljana, Koper, Celje and Idrija.
1965/66	School preparation activities (so-called "small school") are explicitly included in curricular guidelines, but are not compulsory.
1970s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– First moves towards decentralisation</li> <li>– Due to the high level of maternal employment in socialist Slovenia, the need for ECEC provision for children increases</li> </ul>
1971	First legislation comes into force providing for age-integrated kindergartens. The Act on Educational and Care Activities for Pre-school Children is adopted. The basic tasks of pre-school education in kindergartens are: to promote the intellectual, personal and physical development of children; to prepare children for school; child nutrition, care and health; and to combine family and social education. In the kindergarten groups with children up to 2 years of age, the educational-care work is conducted by paediatric nurses; in the groups with children aged 2–3 years by nurses and pre-school teachers; and in groups with children over 3 years of age, by Kindergarten Teachers.
1979	The first national Curriculum for the Education and Care of Preschool Children is adopted, introducing uniform and compulsory guidelines for work in kindergartens.
1980	– Act on the Education and Care of Preschool Children is adopted.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 4 sections are established in kindergartens: up to the age of 2, 2–3 years, 3 years up to one year before school entry, and school preparation activities. Age-combined sections are also possible (from 2 years to the age of one year before school entry).</li> <li>– Developmental groups are established for children with special needs.</li> <li>– Teachers have to qualify at upper secondary or higher education institutions.</li> <li>– A vocational school for Childcare Workers is established. In the under-2 sections, either teachers or paediatric nurses are employed.</li> </ul>
1979/80	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Kindergartens become part of the general education system by law.</li> <li>– The final year in kindergarten is made mandatory.</li> <li>– The first early childhood curricular framework particularly emphasises preparing children for school.</li> </ul>
1981	The Educational Programme for the Preparation of Children for Primary School, aimed at children aged 6–7, or one year before entering school.
1985	The initial professional education (IPE) of early childhood core pedagogues for work with 4 to 6 year-olds is raised to university level.
1987	Children have a legal entitlement to a kindergarten place from the age of 11 months.
1993	ECEC centres (0 to 6 years) are placed under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.
1995	A White Book sets out conceptual strategies for a reform of the entire education system, including early childhood education and care.
1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– School entry age is lowered from 7 to 6 years.</li> <li>– The final kindergarten year is no longer compulsory.</li> <li>– The legal basis for the ECEC sector is set out in the Kindergarten Act and in The Organisation and Funding of Education Act.</li> <li>– According to the 1996 Act on the Organisation and Financing of Education and Training, public kindergartens are established by local authorities.</li> </ul>
1999	Introduction of the first national curricular framework for early childhood education.
2002–2006	<p>Following documents are adopted by the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Supplement to the Kindergarten Curriculum in ethnically mixed areas (19.12.2002)</li> <li>– Supplement to the Kindergarten Curriculum for work with Roma children (19.12.2002)</li> <li>– Curriculum Guidelines for Kindergartens in Programmes with Adapted Provision and Additional Special Needs Support for Children with Special Needs (17.4.2003)</li> <li>– Curriculum for adapted programmes for pre-school children (22.6.2006)</li> </ul>
2008	Act on Amendments and Additions to the Act on Kindergartens introduced the position of childminder/home-based childcare provider for pre-school children.
2011	The White Paper is updated, including e.g. organisational aspects of the kindergarten, revising the curriculum, more emphasis on language development.
2012	Abolishment of free kindergarten for second and subsequent children as a result of government austerity measures.
2015	A new Kindergarten Act comes into force.
2016	Amendments to The Organisation and Funding of Education Act
2017	Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs
2018 – 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Short-term educational programmes (240 hours/year) for children not enrolled in a kindergarten are subsidised by the state.</li> <li>– From January 1, 2018, all employees working as an Early Childhood Teacher's Assistant continue their work in the position of "Early Childhood Teacher – Teacher's Assistant".</li> </ul>
2021	A parent of two children is entitled to free kindergarten if both children are enrolled in kindergarten. The parents are exempt from paying for the younger child.

	Parents of three or more children are entitled to the benefit in any case, i.e. if the first and second children are enrolled in primary school and the third child is enrolled in kindergarten, the parents are exempted to pay the kindergarten fees for the last child (and each child thereafter).
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 4<sup>th</sup> promotion title is adopted: “senior councillor”. The purpose of this fourth title is to establish additional motivation in the career development of professionals, extend the period of career advancement and enable the expansion and deepening of knowledge. Only Early Childhood Teachers can be promoted to the 4<sup>th</sup> title.</li> <li>– Early Childhood Teacher – Teacher’s Assistant can be promoted to the title “mentor” and “advisor” for the first time.</li> </ul>
2023	The ministry and the relevant union agree on raising the salaries of Early Childhood Teachers – Teachers’ Assistants from the 22nd to the 26th salary grade. Meanwhile, the Institute March 8 (NGO) announced that more than 20,000 people had signed their petition to further raise Early Childhood Teachers – Teachers’ Assistants salaries.

Sources: Oberhuemer et al. 2010; Batistič Zorec 2012; Devjak et al. 2012; Naumann et al. 2013; Ministry of Education, Science and Sport 2017; Vonta und Jager 2017; Official Gazette 2018, 2023; Government Office for Legislation 2022

## ECEC system type and auspices<sup>2</sup>

Early childhood education and care in Slovenia is organised as an integrated system in the education sector. Since 1993, ECEC provision for children from 11 months to 6 years has been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education<sup>3</sup> (*Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje*).

The government is responsible for legal foundations and general regulations as well as for the curricular framework of early childhood education. It is the task of the municipalities to provide sufficient places and implement the curriculum.

## General objectives and legislative framework

The seminal White Paper of 1995 (with amendments of 2011) laid down a fundamental reform of the education system, including early childhood education. Above all, equal opportunities and equal treatment of all persons were emphasised.

The main objectives of kindergartens (*vrtec* = "little garden") are to provide age-appropriate learning and social experiences for every child. Kindergartens are seen as complementary to the family; they support families in creating appropriate developmental conditions for children. Not only learning mutual respect is important for children, but also developing their imagination and independence. The most important principles are democracy, pluralism, equal opportunities and diversity.

The overarching legislation in early childhood education are (1) the Kindergarten Act (*Zakon o vrtcih* 1996/2021) and (2) the Act on the Organisation and Financing of Education (*Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja* 1996/2023). The latter describes the principles of democracy and pluralism, autonomy, competences and responsibilities of professionals, and equal opportunities for children and parents. It emphasises diversity among children, the right to free choice and various aspects of children's motor and intellectual development. The law describes, among other things, the optimal development of an individual regardless of gender,

<sup>2</sup> The Eurydice country report on ECEC in Slovenia provided orientation on legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the references section.

<sup>3</sup> Until June 2022: Ministry of Education, Science and Sport

ethnicity or social or cultural background; education for mutual tolerance; the development of linguistic competences, especially in the Slovenian language and the promotion of national identity.

## ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

Since 1987, all children aged 11 months and over have a legal entitlement to a place in full-day ECEC provision. However, many municipalities have problems providing the necessary places. Children who have to be placed on the waiting list of a public kindergarten can be cared for in groups of six children by childminders (*varuh predšolskih otrok*), who are legally entitled to funds from the municipality (20% of the price of the programme in a public kindergarten) to co-finance parents' fees (Kindergarten Act 1996/2021).

Attending an ECEC setting is not compulsory. Compulsory primary schooling starts at the age of 6.

## Main types of provision

According to national statistics, there were 992 kindergartens in Slovenia in 2022/23, attended by a total of 86,177 children (including 27,204 under 3 year-olds). They were cared for by 13,564 professionals (SiStat 2023c).

**Kindergartens** (*vrtec*) are early childhood education settings for children until they enter school. The youngest children are usually 11 months old and are admitted after the end of Parental Leave. Educational activities in full-day kindergartens usually last six to nine hours per day, in half-day settings four to six hours. 98% of children are enrolled for a full day (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 50). As a rule, kindergartens are open between eleven and 12 hours a day to accommodate parents' working hours. During holidays, some units may close. During this time, children are either cared for in a mixed-age group or attend a unit associated with the kindergarten.

Private kindergartens, including those with a specific educational approach such as Steiner or Montessori, must adhere to the same structural regulations and hygiene standards as public settings. In 2020/21 there were 45 such institutions. Bilingual facilities also exist on the Italian and Hungarian borders (Eurydice 2023, 4.5).

**Short-term education programmes** (*krajši programi*) are offered mainly in remote areas. They comprise 240 to 720 hours of ECEC per year and are primarily intended to increase the enrolment rates of 5 year-olds who do not otherwise attend an ECEC setting. Since 2018/19, the government has been subsidising attendance for 240 hours/year (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 62).

A maximum of six children can also be cared for in an **education and care family** (*vzgojno-varstvena družina*) registered with the Ministry of Education. In 2022/2023 however, there were only 22 children in four groups. Children can also be cared for temporarily at home by registered (334 in 2022/2023) childminders (*varuh predšolskih otrok*) whose training does not entitle them to implement the education programme, but who have a short-term training in childcare. However, they must be registered with the Ministry of Education. For children who cannot attend an ECEC centre due to illness, there is also the option of ECEC provision at the child's home (*predšolska vzgoja na domu*) (Eurydice 2023, 4.4).

## Provider structures

Kindergartens can be run by public (municipalities) or private providers (established by individuals or legal entities). Sometimes concessions are granted by public provider networks to private providers to meet demand. The majority of early childhood centres (kindergartens) in Slovenia are public.

Almost all enrolled children (94.3%) attended a public kindergarten in 2022/23 (SiStat 2023d).

Table 1

**Slovenia: Number of children in ECEC settings (kindergartens) by age-group and provider type, 2022/23**

Provider type	Under 3 year-olds	3 to 6 year-olds	Total	
			Number of children	Relative share by provider type, in %*
Public	42,260	38,958	81,218	94.3
Private	2,879	2,080	4,959	5.7
Total	45,139	41,038	86,177	

Source: SiStat 2023d; \*own calculations

## Participation rates in regulated ECEC settings

The youngest children attending an ECEC centre are usually 11 months old, marking the end of parental leave. The proportion of under 3 year-olds enrolled in an ECEC setting has increased significantly since 2005: While in 2005 24% of this age-group attended a kindergarten, by 2022/23 the attendance rate had reached 71,1%. The enrolment rates of children between the ages of 3 and 6 years also increased considerably: from 77% to 93.1%. The overall enrolment rate was 84.6% (SiStat 2023a).

According to Eurostat data, in 2022 almost half of the under 3s and almost 90% of the children over 3 years spent more than 30 hours in an ECEC setting (see Table 2).

Table 2

**Slovenia: Enrolment rates in ECEC centre-based settings by age-group and duration of attendance, 2005–2022**

Year	Weekly hours of attendance	Under 3 year-olds in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	2	10
	Over 30 hours	22	67
	No enrolment in ECEC	76	23
2010	1 to 29 hours	4	14
	Over 30 hours	33	77
	No enrolment in ECEC	64	9
2015	1 to 29 hours	2.5	8.8
	Over 30 hours	34.9	82.1
	No enrolment in ECEC	62.6	9.1
2022	1 to 29 hours	2.6	6.4
	Over 30 hours	49.7	89.1
	No enrolment in ECEC	47.7	4.6

Source: Eurostat 2023b



Table 3

**Slovenia: Number of children and enrolment rates in kindergartens by age, 2022/23**

Age	Number of children in kindergartens	Enrolment rates in kindergartens, in %
1 year-olds or younger	11,237	58.5
2 year-olds	15,967	83.9
<b>Under 3 year-olds</b>	<b>27,204</b>	<b>71.1</b>
3 year-olds	17,935	90.5
4 year-olds	18,860	93.5
5 year-olds	19,888	95.2
6 year-olds	2,290	10.9
<b>0 to 6 year-olds</b>	<b>86,177</b>	<b>84.5</b>

Source: SiStat 2023a, b, d

### Financing and costs for parents

In 2022, 5.69% of GDP was spent on education, 1.10% of this for the early education sector (0 to under 6 years) (SiStat 2023g).

Parents' fees for kindergarten vary greatly across the country. This is primarily due to staff costs, which are based on qualifications and working hours and account for more than 80% of the costs. A survey showed that the costs for the under-3s are currently highest in Brežice (€624 per month), Radovljica (€609.04), Ig (€598.94), Žalec (€591.34) and Ormož (€588.47) (Celje.info 2022).

For all children, at least 23% of the costs are subsidised by municipalities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 61). The costs are covered by public funds, funds from the providers, donations and income-based parental contributions. Parents with two children attending a kindergarten pay only for the older child, each additional child is then free of charge.

Short-term educational programmes are also free of charge for parents. Otherwise, fees are set according to income: In 2022/23, parents in lowest income bracket (up to €221,46 per month) receive €135,44 childcare allowance for the first child and have to pay nothing for the programme, whereas parents in the highest income bracket (from €1.008,94 to €1.218,08 per month) receive €27,11 and have to pay 77% of the programme price (Gov.SI 2023a, 2023b, Eurydice 2023, 3.1).

In 2023/24, the average cost of all-day provision for under 3 year-olds in a public kindergarten is €585.37, for over 3 year-olds €451.91, in multi-age groups €473.82, in developmental classes €1,130.07 and in Education and care families €512.90 (Gov.SI 2023c). Private kindergartens set the fees themselves and receive funds from the municipalities amounting to 85% of the costs of public kindergartens. This means that the parents' fees are subsidised, but can still differ from those of a public institution in the same municipality.

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 7–8% of their net household income on childcare costs<sup>4</sup> (OECD.Stat 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The calculation is based on the following fictitious model: two parents in full-time employment (average income); two 2 and 3 year-old children in full-time care; relevant care allowances taken into account.

## Staff to child ratios and group size

The number of groups and the number of children per group are determined by the kindergartens in agreement with the provider and legislative requirements. Children are divided into two age groups: the first with children from 11 months to 3 years and the second with children from 3 to 6 years or until they start compulsory school. Children of one age group, children only from the first or second age group or mixed groups from both age groups can also be combined.

The group sizes vary depending on the age composition: in same-age groups with children under 3 years of age there are nine to 12 children, in mixed-age groups there are at least seven and a maximum of ten children. Same-age groups of children between 3 and 4 years have a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 17 children; groups between 4 and 6 years have a minimum of 17 and a maximum of 22 children. Mixed-age groups between 3 and 6 years have a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 19 children. A group with all age groups has a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 17 children. Group size is reduced when children with special needs are present – a maximum of two children with special needs may be in a group (Eurydice 2023 4.2, 12.1).

In certain circumstances, the maximum number of children in a group may be increased by two, which is already regular practice in many cases (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 86).

In a full-day programme, two professionals are present at the same time in a group with under 3 year-olds for at least six hours, and for over 3 year-olds for at least four hours. In half-day programmes, the times of joint attendance are reduced to three or two hours. During shared attendance, the staffing ratio is 1:7 in groups with 3 year-olds and 1:11 or 1:12 in groups with over 3 year-olds.

According to national statistics for 2022/23, a kindergarten was attended by an average of 86.9 children, and the staff to child ratio averaged 1:6.8 (SiStat 2023e).

## Curricular framework

In 1999, the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education introduced a national curriculum for early childhood education. It was created – in cooperation with experts – as an open and flexible document, which contains possibilities for adaptation to different circumstances. The curriculum is not prescribed in detail: With reference to the national curriculum, each institution develops its own individual educational plan. Since then, the Council of Experts has published various amendments and supplementary documents, e.g. on working with Roma children, working in ethnically mixed areas, guidelines on caring for children with special needs and guidelines for the inclusion of immigrant children in kindergartens and schools (Expert Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Education Institute of the Slovenian Republic 2012). Also, the kindergarten curriculum to be used in developmental groups was adapted in 2006 and in 2016 the supplement for children with autistic disorders and children with a long-term illness (Expert Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education 2006, 2016a, 2016b). The curriculum is mandatory for both public and private kindergartens. It is based on the principles of democracy and pluralism, equal opportunities and diversity, and emphasises cooperation with parents and the community.

The National Curriculum applies to work with both the under 3 year-olds and older age groups and covers six areas of learning: (1) physical activity, (2) language, (3) the arts, (4) society, (5) science and (6) mathematics. Separate objectives and illustrative examples are given for each of these learning areas. The content can be adapted to the daily routine and care is taken to alter-

nate guided activities with free play. However, no specific time frames are given for the individual areas; the professionals are expected to use their own methods. They draw up an annual work plan (on which monthly and/or weekly plans are developed) in which their activities in the group are recorded.

The curriculum's overarching goals are: learning to understand and respect others and oneself; developing emotional competence; fostering perception, expression, curiosity, inquisitiveness and imagination; intuition and independent thinking; communicative skills and artistic expression; initial reading and writing skills; motor skills. Overall, the education plan emphasises the individuality of the children and their freedom of choice as well as the importance of play.

Although Kindergarten- and Basic School curricula were created in the same comprehensive reform in the 1990s and include similar topics, they differ considerably. The Kindergarten curriculum is more flexible with an open structure while the Basic School curriculum is subject-based with compulsory areas.

## Digital education

Even though the acquisition of digital knowledge and skills usually begins in primary school, the area of technology does feature in the early education curriculum. When the curriculum was created in 1999, examples were included to motivate children to handle digital objects (at that time digital scales, thermometers etc.) (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport 2021a). Today, children take their first steps into the digital world by playing computer games, drawing digitally or taking digital photos (Wechtersbach 2008).

Since Slovenia is in the middle of national curricular renewal, the Kindergarten Curriculum will also undergo this process. The starting points for a revised Kindergarten Curriculum (Cotič Pajntar, Marjanovič Umek and Zore 2022, 14) highlight "digitally supported learning, which makes sense to include thoughtfully and professionally in work with children, but only in cases where the use of modern technology also means added value to the use of other approaches to promote children's development and learning. This also requires greater digital literacy of professionals in the kindergarten".

## Monitoring – evaluation

### *Child-related evaluation*

The curriculum does not specify knowledge or skills that children should master by a certain age. However, the professionals observe the children and encourage them to learn. They communicate progress verbally to parents. Individual records of the children's development are in most cases kept for children with special needs, however more and more core practitioners tend to use formative monitoring for all children in a group.

### *Centre-based international evaluation*

The head/leader of each ECEC centre is legally obliged to carry out one self-evaluation per year. This serves the quality development of the setting itself and is not forwarded to higher authorities. It is up to each ECEC setting to decide exactly how self-evaluation is carried out. This is challenging for the staff as there are no guidelines for implementation which are focused on process quality in kindergarten. Only some uniform tools (reference frameworks and indicators) for carrying out self-evaluation and introducing improvements in pedagogical work exist, with

no focus on specifics of the work in kindergarten. As a rule, the staff, the parents' board (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 40) and children take part. The kindergarten council, which exists in every institution, learn about the results and can propose measures. The focus should be primarily on the evaluation of the educational process and the findings can be compared with those of the external evaluation. Instruments, methods (e.g. questionnaires, rating scales) and the areas that are evaluated can be chosen by the ECEC settings themselves. In most cases, the professionals assess the implementation of the curriculum and the management assesses structural aspects, team cooperation and the area of staff CPD. Depending on the institution, parent surveys are also conducted.

### *External evaluation*

The external evaluation of the educational system and educational organisations in Slovenia takes place in parallel with the self-evaluation of educational institutions.

The external evaluation of the educational system takes place in the following ways:

- Through national evaluation studies that last from 12 to 24 months
- Through large-scale international comparative assessments carried out under the auspices of the OECD and the International Association for the Study of the Effects of Education (IEA)
- Through formal procedures for updating educational work in Slovenia
- Through the external evaluation of schools, which is carried out by the Inspectorate for Education and Sports. The aim of the school inspection is to ensure compliance with the law and thereby protect the rights of the participants in education.
- Through the external evaluation of educational organisations responsible for assessing the quality of work in kindergartens (space, staff, programme) and schools under the ministry of education (Gov.SI 2023d).

External evaluations also include the accreditation process that private institutions have to go through.

## **Inclusion agenda**

### *Children with special educational needs and disabilities*

The concept of inclusion in ECEC is underpinned by legislation (*Zakon o celostni zgodnji obravnavi predšolskih otrok s posebnimi potrebami*, 2019). The main focus here is on early identification of difficulties and support for families (European Commission 2020, 64). Children with special educational needs generally attend mainstream institutions.

Placement committees at the National Institute of Education Slovenia and counselling services decide on the best way to support children with special needs (including children with learning and physical disabilities as well as children with autism, speech disorders and chronic illnesses) and their parents. Children can be placed in regular or developmental groups (*razvojni oddelek*). In both cases, their needs are addressed individually. A separate educational plan is prepared for each child. Depending on the needs, an individual support worker is assigned to the child on a temporary or full-time basis. In addition, group size in developmental groups is limited to six children and one child is supported by a relevant specialist (European Commission 2020, 60f). In regular groups, a maximum of two children with special needs can be included.

The National Curriculum addresses in detail the concerns and support of children with special needs through several additional documents (European Commission 2020, 76).

In Slovenia, there are also several separate support institutions; these take in kindergarten children who cannot be adequately supported in mainstream institutions.

In 2022/23 there were 295 children under 6 with disabilities enrolled in a primary school setting; most common were multiple disabilities (93) and speech and language problems (109) (SiStat 2023h).

### *Children with a migration background – Children from Roma communities*

According to Eurostat, 8.2% of Slovenia's population in 2022 had a non-Slovenian citizenship, of which the majority (87.7%) came from countries outside the EU27(2020). In the group of under 5 year-olds, these proportions were 8.4% and 95.2% respectively (Eurostat 2023c).

National statistics indicate that in 2022/23, 8.2% of children (7,027) in kindergartens had a non-Slovenian citizenship; 47.5% of these were children under 3 years of age, 52.5% were between 3 and school entry age (SiStat 2023d, f, own calculations). 15.4% of the non-Slovenian children held a Kosovan citizenship, followed by those with Macedonian (8.7%), Serbian (5.3%) and Bosnia-Herzegovina citizenship (5.2%). 4.8% were citizens of other EU countries (SiStat 2023i, own calculations).

The rights of ethnic minorities are enshrined in law and included in supplements to the curriculum. The Roma Community Act in the Republic of Slovenia (*Zakon o romski skupnosti v Republiki Sloveniji*, 2007) sets out the rights of Roma. In the Roma Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport 2021b), the measures are mainly focused on increasing the participation of Roma children in kindergartens through the introduction of free and shorter kindergarten programmes in the year before school entry for children who are not enrolled in kindergarten; revision of the Kindergarten Curriculum; cooperation with parents; inclusion of Slovene and Roma culture and language in all programmes; providing organised transportation for all Roma children who are enrolled in full-day kindergarten programmes; employing Roma parents as drivers or children's companions; providing quality children's literature in the Romani language. There is also a call to consider co-financing informal preschool education activities (e.g. TOY library).

To strengthen the connection with Roma communities, home visits are also carried out to emphasise the importance of early childhood education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 120). The *TOY for Inclusion* project, implemented in nine EU countries, including Slovenia, focuses primarily on younger children from Roma families, from families with a migrant background or from ethnic minorities. It focuses in particular on flexible solutions to reach these families and their children through low-threshold meeting centres (European Commission 2020, 76, 92). The recent National programme of measures of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Roma for the period 2021-2030 (Gov.SI 2021) defines the following strategic goals to be achieved by 2023: higher enrolment rates of Roma children in ECEC programmes, with sub-goals: acquisition of basic social and language skills before entering primary school; strengthening the knowledge of the Slovenian language, as well as the Romani language and culture among Romani children; regular participation of Roma children in learning processes and completed primary school education.

On the borders with Italy and Hungary there are bilingual ECEC settings where children learn Slovene either as a first or second language. For such ethnically mixed areas, a supplement was made to the curriculum so that these institutions receive extra funding for the further training of professionals. In addition, they usually have smaller group sizes and the staff have higher qualifications. For children with a migrant background, it is also generally recommended that they should be able to speak their family language in the ECEC settings (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 115f).



## Parental leave arrangements<sup>5</sup>

**Maternity leave** (*materinski dopust*) is granted for 15 weeks, four weeks before and 11 weeks after birth. 15 days are compulsory. The full average salary from the previous 12 months is paid. Allowances and extras are not included. There is no upper limit, the lower limit is at least €628.61. If the mother is unable to care for the child, a maximum of 77 days of Maternity leave after the birth can also be transferred to the father or another person caring for the child.

Fathers are entitled to 15 fully paid calendar days of **Paternity leave** (*očetoovski dopust*), up to a maximum of 2.5 times the average gross salary per month of the previous year (€5,059,80). It can be taken full or part time until the child is 3 months old.

**Parental leave** (*starševski dopust*) is granted for 160 fully paid calendar days per parent under the same conditions as for paternity leave. 100 days may be transferred to the other parent. The specific use of the Parental leave must be recorded in writing 30 days before the end of Maternity leave. Parental leave must be taken as a continuous full-time or part-time leave: if taken in part time, the duration is not extended proportionately. One of the parents must take it immediately after Maternity leave. Up to 60 non-transferrable days per parent may be taken at any time until the child's age of 8 (full time or part time), but not more than twice a year, with each section lasting at least 15 days. If combined, Parental leave may be taken by both parents at the same time (20 hours per week for the mother, 20 hours per week for the father).

On average, roughly 93% of fathers took close to 15 days of Paternity leave in 2022. While most mothers take Parental leave, the share of fathers increased from 4% in 2021 to 9% in 2022. Reasons for fathers' persistently low participation may be found in the traditional division of tasks within the family.

## Current challenges for the ECEC system in Slovenia

### *Country expert assessment by Jerneja Jager*

1. The main challenge facing the ECEC system in Slovenia is the **lack of staff**, namely the lack of qualified Early Childhood Teachers and EC Teacher Assistants. Kindergartens from various Slovenian regions report that it is difficult to recruit suitable staff when they advertise vacancies. Very often, these are candidates without relevant qualifications and those who are qualified apply for vacant positions less often. The general reason is that salaries are too low for the very responsible work, although the Union of Education, Science and Culture of Slovenia (SVIZ) has agreed with the government on raising the salaries of EC Teacher Assistants. In general, however, field experts believe that the work of EC Teachers and EC Teacher Assistants is underpaid.
2. In 2021, with the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), Slovenia committed to **revising the national curriculum** documents. This began in 2022 with the adoption of the starting points of the renewal and is expected to last until the end of 2025, when all curricula will be revised. The Kindergarten Curriculum has not changed since it was adopted in 1999. The process of modernising early childhood education and care is likely to pose some challenges. Changes to curriculum documents usually take place after conceptual/theoretical foundations are developed and prepared, followed by changes in the system and only then by substantive (curricular) solutions. In the case of Slovenia, however, all three processes are

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<sup>5</sup> The brief overview in this section is based mainly on the country note for Slovenia by Nada Stropnik in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see *References*).

taking place at the same time. You could even say that we started at the end, which might result in inadequate and thoughtless solutions.

3. Modernising the Kindergarten Curriculum foresees that alongside schools, ECEC will also have a greater focus on **digitalisation**. However, it is not clear what this means: does it mean that staff will be educated to develop digital skills or that kindergartens will be digitally better equipped, or that young children will spend (more) time behind digital screens?

One of the aims of the *Revision of educational programmes project with the renewal of key programme documents* is: “to equip children in kindergartens and staff with competences important for facing current and future challenges (competences for sustainable development, digital competences, entrepreneurship competences that include financial literacy, creativity, collaboration and experiential learning), to strengthen the resilience of the education system (Education Institute of the Slovenian Republic 2022). There is vocal concern that the traditional focus on different kinds of play between children will be transferred to digital education/screens.

4. The enrolment of **vulnerable groups in ECEC programmes** is still a challenge, especially in the case of Romani and migrant/refugee children. ECEC centres started to offer hastily put together short programmes for children not enrolled in ECEC. There is a tendency to think that they were introduced only to increase the statistical data of enrolment of 4 and 5 year-old children in ECEC programmes, since Slovenia still did not meet the 95% Bologna target for of 4 and 5 year-olds (in the last 5 years, national data report somewhere between 93% – 94.5%).
5. The enrolment rate of under 3 year-olds is very high compared to other EU countries (71.1% in 2022/23, SiStat 2023a), however the **child: adult ratio** in these groups (under 3 years) remains too high.
6. **Parental fees** are among the highest in Europe, and Slovenia needs to do something in this respect in order to make early childhood education accessible to all children/families.
7. Legislation demands that each ECEC leader is responsible for annual **self-evaluation**. However, no clear instructions are given on how to do this. Therefore, it would be essential that the revised Kindergarten Curriculum include a chapter on self-evaluation.
8. There is a high number of deferred primary school enrolments: from 5.3% in 2014 to 11.1% in 2022/23 (*data received by email from Ministry of Education*). There are several challenges that lead to this situation. The most obvious is the lack of preparation on behalf of the school for children (and their families) starting school. The majority of schools are not very active in terms of getting to know their future pupils, in terms of getting to know about the work that kindergartens and what Kindergarten Teachers are doing, about the approaches kindergartens are using, and so on. There is low or no pedagogical continuity between institutions, inter-institutional meetings (professional learning communities composed of Early Childhood and Primary School Teachers) are very rare. There are also very few opportunities for staff of both institutions to observe a colleague in the other institution, and to reflect jointly on what they have seen, what could be transferred to the other educational level.  
In order to ensure a smooth **transition between one learning environment and another**, it would be necessary to advocate and find ways for the Kindergarten Teacher to move between schools<sup>6</sup> as this provides meaningful support for children in their first year of schooling, and (on the other hand) enables the Kindergarten Teacher to sustain contact with her primary professional role.

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<sup>6</sup> Early Childhood Teachers accompany children from kindergarten to school, stay with them for one school year, and then return to work in the kindergarten. If the children are distributed between different schools, the EC Teacher works in the one admitting the majority of school beginners.



On the other hand, there are also many different parental experiences with their own schooling, and schools should be more sensitive when approaching towards parents.

- The final challenge – also highlighted in the 2017 SEEPRO study – is still relevant: **Initial professional education** will need to be more fully connected with practice and to include the changes occurring in contemporary ECEC, such as involving diverse families and communities in the life of ECEC settings. This demands intensive team working, critical reflective thinking, and a life-long approach towards learning and professional development. This kind of initial professional education needs to focus not only on knowledge transmission but also to strengthen the processes that support the construction of professional values and skills.

## Demographic data

*Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.*

### Total population

In 2022/23, the total population in Slovenia was 2,107,180. It has thus increased continuously over the last 20 years (2000: 1,987,755; 2005: 1,997,590; 2010: 2,046,976; 2015: 2,06,2874; 2020: 2,095,861) (Eurostat 2023a).

### Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total fertility rate in the EU27 was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate among the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries (EU27+6) was in France (1.84), and the lowest in Malta (1.13). At 1.64, Slovenia was above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023c<sup>7</sup>).

### Children under age 6

Table 4

**Slovenia: Number of under 6 year-olds in the total population, 2022**

Age	Number of children
Under 1 year-olds	18,968
1 year-olds	18,866
2 year-olds	19,582
3 year-olds	19,932
4 year-olds	20,685
5 year-olds	20,820
<b>Total 0 to under 6 year-olds</b>	<b>118,853</b>

Source: Eurostat 2023a

<sup>7</sup> Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).



The proportion of children under 3 years of age in the total population was 2.7% in 2022, and that of children under 6 years of age was 5.6%. While these shares were below the then EU15 average in 2000, they were slightly above it by 2015. In 2022, they correspond with the respective EU averages (see *Table 5*).

*Table 5*

**Slovenia: Distribution of under 6 year-olds in population by age-group compared with EU averages, 2000 to 2022, in %\***

Year	Comparison Slovenia/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Slovenia	2,7	2,9	5,6
	Ø EU15 <sup>8</sup>	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Slovenia	2,7	2,7	5,4
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Slovenia	3,1	3,3	6,2
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Slovenia	2,7	2,9	5,6
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, \* Own calculations, slight deviations due to rounding

## Single households with children under age 6

More than three quarters (77.3%) of households with children under 6 in Slovenia were couple households in 2021. Single parent households accounted for only 0.8% – almost exclusively single mothers (0.7%).

*Table 6*

**Slovenia: Households with children under age 6, 2021**

Household type	Total households	Share of all households, in %*
Total households	199,800	
Couple households	154,500	77.3
Other types of households	43,700	21.9
Total single households	1,600	0.8
Single households, women	1,400	0.7
Single households, men	200**	0.1

Source: Eurostat 2023k, \*Own calculations, \*\* data calculated

## Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Slovenia, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 79.2% and for women 72.9% (Eurostat 2023j).

In 2022, 79.6% of women and 91.3% of men (18-64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Among the 27 EU-countries (2020), both of the shares of employed fathers and mothers were well above the EU-average (63.6% and 87.2% respectively) (Eurostat 2023g, own calculations).

<sup>8</sup> The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

Table 7a

**Slovenia: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 and 2022**

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
<b>Slovenia</b>	78.7	91.1
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries <sup>9</sup>	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2022	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
<b>Slovenia</b>	79.6	91.3
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries <sup>10</sup>	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023g

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 7b*.

Table 7b

**Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023**

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)	75.6	92.1	++72.3	++79.2
with dependent children	72.4	93.1		
with children under 2 years	70.7	95.0	++72.1 (2023)	++79.4 (2023)
with children 3–4 years				

\*Eurostat 2023g, 2023j

\*\*[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

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<sup>9</sup> AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

<sup>10</sup> AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

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## Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>11</sup>

In 2022, 9.5% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which was significantly lower than the EU27 average (23.3%). The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 13.3%, compared to the European average of 21.6%. 3.8% of the under 6 year-olds and 3.1% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation in 2020 (EU averages 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023h, i).

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<sup>11</sup> 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material\\_deprivation](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation))

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