



Confédération des Organisations Familiales de l'Union européenne
Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union

National, supranational and international responsibilities for family policy

**Conference on Parental Childcare and Employment Policy
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Yves ROLAND-GOSSELIN

President

**Confederation of Family Organizations in the European Union (COFACE)
(COFACE)**

Deputy Prime Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the government of the Czech Republic, and in particular yourself Mr. Petr. Necas, Minister for Labour and Social Affairs, for inviting COFACE to take part in this major two-day meeting.

I am highly appreciative, not for myself but for the millions of European families whom it is my privilege to represent here in Prague, the capital of the Member State that currently holds the Presidency of the European Union.

I shall begin if I may by briefly introducing the Confederation of Family Organizations in the European Union (COFACE). I shall then look at what responsibilities the European Union does or does not have for family policy. Finally I shall outline the main activities and broad issues on our current agenda, insisting on the importance of taking them into account also at EU level.

I. The Confederation of Family Organizations in the European Union

COFACE is a pluralistic organisation which sets out to promote family policy, solidarity between generations and the interests of children within the European Union.

COFACE advocates a policy of non-discrimination and of equal opportunities between persons and between family forms, and specifically supports policies aiming at equality between women and men.

Founded 50 years ago now, immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Rome, the Confederation links together general and single-issue national family organizations. It currently has 54 member organizations across 20 Member States, thereby speaking for many millions of parents and children.

In this way, we are “the voice of families” – and I say “families” in the plural advisedly, to embrace social, economic and sociological differences – to the Community institutions (the Council, Commission, European Parliament, Economic and Social Committee, Committee of the Regions).

COFACE’s presence here is a practical representation of civil society, already in evidence this morning through a member of the European Economic and Social Committee, then again this afternoon through the NGOs that will come after us.

Thank you, Deputy Prime Minister, for having invited civil society, a building block of the debate in a modern democracy, to take part in your programme of work.

II. The European Union and Family Policy

A) To put it bluntly, the successive treaties contain no legal basis on which to build a family policy.

Each time the Treaties (Maastricht 1992, Amsterdam 1997, Nice 2000, Lisbon 2007) came up for amendment, COFACE’s member associations individually pressed their national authorities and jointly the Community institutions to get the concept of “families” included in the new text. Not once in fifty years did that urging get a result!

And I would like to pay tribute here to all my predecessors and the elected voluntary officials of the many family organizations in the different Member States who worked relentlessly for families, often against the tide of social and political circumstances.

These men and women believed in the family, in Europe, and in the marriage of these two concepts, in short in the need for a people-centred European policy with the family as a cornerstone. And yet family policy remained an entrenched responsibility of States, even regions (the Länder in Germany, the Belgian regions and communities, etc.).

B) There have been some positive steps forward, however, that we can trace along the timeline of the EU's development.

A COFACE Declaration put out in 1978 for the first European Parliament elections was to feed through into developments within a matter of years. It asserted that, "The family group is a biological, emotional, educational, cultural, social, consuming unit... It is necessary both to the happiness and self-actualisation of individuals, and to the balanced development of society".

On 9 June 1983, the democratically-elected European Parliament adopted a Resolution on European family policy based on a draft written by the then President of COFACE.

It said, "Many political choices have repercussions on the family and therefore all relevant policy sectors should take into account their implications for the family ... Family policy should therefore become an integral part of all Community policies."

After several meetings of Family Ministers under the auspices of the Council of Europe, plus a Commission Communication of 8 August 1989 on family policies, which took its cue from the EP's Resolution, the EU Council of Ministers of Family Affairs adopted Conclusions on 29 September 1989.

As part of the groundwork for the Nice Treaty (2000), the fifteen Member States of the time drew up a European Charter of Fundamental Rights which refers at many points to the concept of families. Indeed, the Charter very frequently cites the family as a basic element of European society.

Sadly, as the Charter was not annexed to the Nice Treaty, it remained just a declaration, and so unable in any way to give a legal basis to pro-family measures by the Community.

Subsequently, however, the Charter was written into the draft Constitution as an integral part of that unfortunately ill-fated instrument. Now again it is included in the Lisbon Treaty, which is at the forefront of the agenda...

C) Throughout all this time, therefore, COFACE argued not for a family policy, but a family dimension to the common policies (free movement of people, health, consumer protection, housing, energy, transport, etc...).

The first big issues dealt with from this angle in these far-off days were consumer policy and the directives on parental leave and family responsibility leave.

When I say "far-off days", they are not so long-gone for the latter directive, which was blocked for ten years by one of the Member States, such that parental leave came in only in 1996, and is currently up for revision by negotiations between the social partners.

D) With the 2000s came a clear awakening to demographic realities. Two figures taken from the Commission's excellent second Report on Demography illustrate the dawning forebodings of the time:

- the over-65 population in the EU-27 will rise from 84 602 000 on 1 January 2008 to 151 474 000 in 2060;
- the old-age dependency ratio will rise from 25.4% on 1 January 2008 to 53.5% in 2060.

This led onto three major Commission Communications:

- the Green Paper on demographic challenges, March 2005;
- The demographic future of Europe, from challenge to opportunity, COM (2006) 571, October 2006;
- Promoting solidarity between the generations, COM (2007) 244, May 2007.

The Finnish then Austrian Presidencies in 2006 each used these as the bases for staging a “deep thought” conference. Then came the German Presidency of the first half of 2007, which deserves particular credit for its achievement.

E) The “European Alliance for Families” was established. Ms Ursula von der Leyen steered through major decisions in the European Council of 27 May 2007. The Council:

- “emphasized the low birthrates”
- “deemed better support for families crucial”
- “sustainable family policies”
- “Alliance: a sustainable commitment of the EU”
- “adapting the organization of work to the needs of families”.

These official pronouncements from the highest level of EU authority - the Heads of State and Government – are a very big step towards giving recognition to the family and its rightful place in the future development of the EU.

The European Alliance for Families therefore kindled great hopes among family campaigners.

III. COFACE’s agenda

As I said, COFACE engages with the family dimension of the EU’s common policies and actions.

It works on the basis of research and discussion done in several working groups purpose-designed as a mix of organizations from different Member States. The positions adopted by these working groups are then put forward for approval by the Administrative Council to take their place as COFACE positions.

Some of these positions are responses to consultations launched by the Commission. Better yet, some others are proposals derived from experiences, failings or successes observed by different associations.

COFACE therefore has a very practical agenda focused on taking a stance on EU-scale issues with a family aspect that has a decisive impact on families living in the European Union.

This has led us to take recent positions on 6 agenda-topping issues, while our COFACE-Handicap working group has put forward a European Carer's Charter.

Let me begin with the 6 positions, all of which are angled towards tackling poverty and social exclusion:

A) Reconciling family, private and professional life

Our position is based on two of the three standard elements of family policy at any level - local, regional, national or European - based on families' needs. What they need are financial resources, time and services. We first focused our sights on time and services.

On **time**, we advocate in particular for both men and women:

- leave that addresses the variety of family needs (maternity, paternity, parental and other leave); these issues are currently under negotiation at EU level, because the essential is to keep differences between Member States within limits;
- enhancing the value of part-time work (pay, status, social/employment rights, etc.);
- flexible working time arrangements that allow for different family circumstances while preserving strict protection of employment and social security rights.

Where **services** are concerned, families must have a range of services that meet their varied needs, especially a wide range of childcare and dependant care provision. For these services to contribute fully to tackling poverty and social exclusion, they must in particular:

- be of a sufficient supply and quality, with ambitious aims at European level;
- be accessible to everyone without discriminating against people with a disability, immigrant and ethnic minority communities in particular;
- be designed to cater to the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups.

The complex issues and wide range of policies involved demand an integrated approach to the problem of balancing family, private and working life. Thus far, most of the emphasis here has been on work. It is time to move the family and private life aspects up the agenda.

The key aspects of work-life balance - leave, flexible working time arrangements and services – need to be addressed by a **framework directive** at EU level. It also needs to be “**mainstreamed**” across all policies that affect employment, social security, social services and education at the European and national levels alike.

B) Preventing over-indebtedness, personal finance education and action against banking and financial exclusion

The family is a key force for all aspects of consumer education, particularly when it comes to developing a critical approach to advertising, borrowing, prices, etc.

Also, faced with an expanding range of choice, families who are on increasingly tight budgets – and particularly bearing the full brunt of the current crisis - have to make decisions. It is not always easy to find a way through the maze, nor resist the many temptations on offer, especially that of easy credit with its attendant danger of building up unmanageable debt.

It is very often a life crisis (unemployment, family break-up, illness, for example) that reveals people to be financially over-stretched.

Tackling exclusion and insecurity of the most vulnerable families is a central concern for the EU, not least because the free movement of capital and financial services makes it essential to protect family consumers at not just at national, but also at European, level.

Some of these financial problems can be prevented by giving families the knowledge and information needed before committing themselves or to objectively assess their situation.

C) Alcohol and families

We adopted a set of 18 recommendations to call the attention of the European Institutions, Member States and other stakeholders to the need to do more to tackle alcohol abuse. The damage that alcohol does to the family system and each of its members demands a vigorous, coordinated multilateral approach. The implications for industry and business make this an issue that must be addressed at EU level.

D) Health, nutrition and obesity

Where nutrition is concerned, we also adopted a 6-point agenda which we put forward to the *European Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health* which we are members of. Those points are:

1. Focus on disadvantaged groups
2. Fundamental importance of early childhood
3. Promote breastfeeding
4. Make labelling easier for consumers to understand
5. Provide balanced foods at affordable prices
6. Consider children in their family setting.

Each of these six points contains local, regional, national and European dimensions that play into one another and are an object lesson how the subsidiarity principle can work to positive effect.

E) Improved help for migrant parents to support their children in education

This is COFACE's response to the Commission Green Paper on *Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems* (July 2008).

Our position focuses particularly on what the European Union should do here:

- the need to develop a European integration policy and promote the targeted use of the European funds in the field of integration,
- strengthening the open method of coordination on education and training,
- making more specific use of the European Life-Long Learning Programme to support migrant children and their parents,
- mainstreaming of intercultural dialogue.

F) Tackling the digital divide between and within families

As well as supporting the EU's e-inclusion policy under the i2010 Strategy, COFACE calls for an integrated policy ranging from information society policies as such to social and education policies.

In particular there should be a clear link and smooth articulation between e-Inclusion policy and the Open Method of Coordination in the field of social inclusion.

But as well, more emphasis should be put on the family dimension of the e-inclusion policy. Families are primarily concerned by the digital divide. For most Europeans, the home is where they acquire their Internet skills in daily life.

And we expand more particularly on these other points:

- Bridging the digital divide among families:
 - o by supporting households' connection to the Internet
 - o by developing public Internet access points;
- Encouragement of E-accessibility for elderly/disabled people and/or immigrants;
- Tackling the lack of digital literacy:
 - o by promoting training in public access points and at home
 - o by adapting training to the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

In the final analysis, it can be said that e-inclusion is an inseparable element of a more comprehensive strategy to fight family poverty and social exclusion, and that a modern European Union has a real moral duty towards its citizens here.

This is why the crucial issue of keeping children and young people safe online is central to our work priorities this year under the European "Safer Internet" Programme.

G) Finally, a few words about the European Carer's Charter that COFACE-Handicap developed and adopted in 2007.

This 10-point Charter – which ranges from defining what a carer is through the need for national and family solidarity, the place, status, quality of life and training of carers, to needs and service assessment – aims to become a European reference for all those involved in working with disability and dependency (organizations, institutions, national public authorities, European authorities, etc.).

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have been afforded the opportunity today to sketch out for you the long road that family organizations have travelled in search of recognition for the family dimension of EU common policies and actions. I should again like to thank our Czech friends for allowing families to make their voice heard here.

The concrete examples I have just cited illustrate that quest and our fundamental approach: to mirror up national family policies with a number of concerns at the developing EU level when they can be better managed at that level, in particular to avoid discrimination between citizens of different States.

And I would like to conclude by calling your attention to the high hopes that many families have for Community action that gives them the full support they deserve; which they deserve in facing up to a worrying demographic future; which they deserve in facing up to major developments in technology and society; which they deserve in facing up to a severe economic and financial crisis.

These families have great expectations of the European Alliance for Families, not just in a national policy mix, but one supported by coordination, ongoing work by experts and especially the European Council's own demand mentioned earlier for it to be sustainable.

And these families also want to see the undertakings contained in the objectives laid down in 2002 by the European Barcelona Council being delivered; costed out and timelined social undertakings that refer specifically to services for families to bring about work-life balance and social inclusion.

Having now made these points to the policy-makers here today, we plan to take them to the candidates in the forthcoming European Parliament elections. On behalf of those hopeful families, let me beseech you: politicians from all regions, all States, members of all governments, do not let them down!

Thank you.

For more information, please contact the Secretariat of COFACE:
+32 2 511 41 79 secretariat@coface-eu.org

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