

*Real Discussion.*

It is no secret that organizing this conference with such a challenging agenda was not easy. The Commission considered it important that this conference results in an actual discussion. In this regard, we can thank the Czech Presidency. We have participated in a high quality discussion, not only thanks to contributions from various spheres, but also thanks to high level of mutual listening, however limited our time was. Emotions were displayed several times during this listening. It could not be otherwise, because this is an agenda that implicates us all deeply, since we are not only experts or state officers, we are also men and women, many of us parents, even grandparents.

*Consensus on the Importance of Family Life*

The consensus of our discussion was recorded, which we need to remember, since it is of the recent *acquis* EU. Opinions on tools and methods for supporting families with children differ, however we agreed on the importance of family life, both from the family members' viewpoint and society's viewpoint. This is also the purpose of the *European Alliance for Families*, which was established during the German Presidency and which the Commission considers to be of great importance. Also this consensus must take into account the demographical development and changes in behaviour of Europeans, who more often stop living in families at a particular point in time and start to live separately. This also implies the necessity for *new forms of solidarity* to support the continuation of families.

*Another Consensus: To know our differences and to respect them*

Thanks to this discussion, the European Commission got to know better our national differences and historical influences that affect our preferences and choices in the existing society. As we were reminded by Minister Nečas, presidency opinions are perceived in the light of special experience, which thirty years ago excessively prioritized institutionalized care for young children at the expense of relations between parents and children. A very important conclusion is implied from this, which was already mentioned by Commissioner Špidla: with the Barcelona targets and guidelines on harmony (these two elements should never be separated), the EU provides directions and points of concurrence, within which *member states and European societies must be able to find their own paths*.

*First conclusion: Very Beneficial Viewpoint, the Well-being of Children*

The actual benefit of this conference was that it emphasized the viewpoint of children. Thus, the discussion was enriched with the "good" policy, and at the same time we avoided being, unawares, prisoners of the vision in which the viewpoints of adults, men and women, prevail when the issue is in the preparation of the future.

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1 Conclusions of the Czech Presidency conference of February 5-6 2009 in Prague, which were presented by Mr. Jérôme Vignon, Director for Social Protection and Integration, General Directorate for Employment.

It seemed to me that this perspective of the well-being of children resulting in contracts between the modern and traditional visions of family policy emphasized the importance of the choice of life of couples and the scope of freedom they need to have available. From the viewpoint of the well-being of children parental childcare and nursery or kindergarten childcare cannot be compared without taking into consideration this parameter of the choice of a lifestyle of the parents: the choice of sharing parental responsibilities, the choice of a professional life. The issue of the well-being of children led us to a discussion on the *basic topics of choice and quality*. I will come back to this.

*Second conclusion: Good Reasons to Continue the Current Orientation of the European Committee.*

With regard to the discussion core (shall we and shall not we develop the accessibility of kindergartens?) You will not be surprised by my conclusion, i.e. the Commission has not modified its stance on its general orientation, which was also confirmed during debates in the meeting of ministers. *Barcelona Target and Legislation for reconciling professional and family life* are still the frameworks, within which each member state must discover its own path.

However, I must react to the criticisms that the Commission has received: it is not true that it conforms only to the perspective as dictated by the labour market and employment opportunities. Debates have proven that there are at least two reasons which exceed this framework:

1. The EU is following the direction of European societies, thus the great development of family forms and the needs and interests of women in employment activities. In this sense, failure to support the agreement or missing out on access to preschool childcare services would mean a refusal of equality of opportunities, which is one of the fundamental values of the Treaty. This would also result in deepening one of the main causes responsible for Europeans giving up their wish to have children. Up to 2050, 8 European countries will succeed in significantly decreasing the level of dependence due to their demographic dynamics. 7 out of these 8 countries have implemented family policies that we consider to be modern since they recognize the equality of opportunities.
2. This very orientation for the benefit of reconciliation and access to services is an answer to the situation of extraordinary poverty faced by incomplete families in Europe. As Mrs. Hostasch said, our question is not the well-being of children only it is also the well-being of poor children. Currently, because of insufficient services or difficult employment access almost 10% of European children live in families in which none of the adults has paid employment: without denying the importance of parental care, there is still the question: will such parental care be sufficient to prevent these children from suffering from the poverty in the future?

*Third conclusion: Childcare in Facilities and Parental Leave Must Not Oppose Each Other, Precisely the Reverse*

The echoes of this conference will not leave the Commission intact. The Commission has been listening. I was personally interested in the presented analyses, which reflected that in order for parents, men and women to be able to actually make a choice, we need to increase the quality of *parental care and provided childcare services* so that these correspond both to the development of children as well as to the well-being of parents. *There is, possibly, a great lesson hidden deep within this attention paid to the quality of care, including parental care, which I will take with me from this conference.* I will conclude several operational directions from this.

- To acknowledge the importance of parental care means not only being interested in the length of parental leave but also in **financial benefits** claimed during the leave. The commission and European social partners are currently orienting their work in this direction. Civil society must also react to the expectation of families themselves and fathers, in order to help them find answers to questions that they are currently putting forward in relation to their parental task.
- In the same way, appreciation of the time a parent spends with his/her children; the EU should definitely focus more on **adapting the regime of social protection and the pension regime**, which should be looked at as an investment in society. The mission of the Committee for Social Protection is to be involved in the dimension of this "third pillar" of the open coordination method in pensions, which has been overly neglected up to now.
- Being more interested in the quality of the work of parents, men and women, in its flexibility and working hours, could emphasize the objective of the future Lisbon strategy to the benefit of multiple work places and multiple **quality work places**. Yesterday, we had a psychologist talk to us about the importance of the behaviour of parents to their children. How do we look at our children after a twelve-hour shift or if we are stressed due to our insecure work place?
- Last, but not least, to be more interested in the **quality of childcare in preschool facilities**. **Many useful comments were made about this topic during this conference.** We should emphasize sharing good practices in this area while depending on a group of demographic experts or even mobilizing various sharing tools (open coordination methods for schools and social integration, European Alliance for Families).

### *Conclusion*

Briefly, we can say that this conference has given the European Commission new courage to act so as not only social policies, but all Union policies, take into account significant areas such as the quality of family life, and in its core childcare quality, thus relations between parents, the mother and father of children. Social and family issues have been and will be very close. Social Europe, a Europe of equal opportunities and a Europe of employment are closely linked with a Europe that cares about the quality of childcare and thus the quality of family life. In this speech I emphasized as much as possible chastity, delegation to lower levels, and respect for a

variety of cultures, expanding the choice of parents, this *responsibility and independence* that belongs to parents.