

V.A

Draft of the Minister's speech at the Conference

Your Eminence,

Dear Ministerial Colleagues,

Dear European Commissioner,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please let me welcome you to today's conference, "Family Policy and Employment Policy – Collision or Complementarity?" on behalf of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

It is no secret that Europe is dying. Predominantly, the demographic scenarios are catastrophic. Changes associated with the 'second demographic transition' have resulted in the majority of European countries halting their population growth followed by a population decrease. This decrease arouses justified fears of future social and eventual, political development. Until recently, family policy has been the Cinderella of political discussions. But not today – the family or population policy is now regarded as an issue of the future by many, as a justified recipe for the disaster we are facing.

However, is family policy capable of managing demographic problems? Is it in fact acceptable to justify family policy only by our attempts to restart population growth? Should public opinion have the right to intensively intervene in the social sphere and influence birth-rates by specific measures? In the past, similar steps were somewhat

characteristic of totalitarian regimes. A high birth-rate was the mantra for both Nazi Germany and Romania under the reign of Ceausescu and many of us can remember the same under communist Czechoslovakia. On the contrary and in my opinion, a democratic country must transfer the decision for family behaviour to free social development. The justification for family policy lies elsewhere. In the past, the country took away some of the natural functions from families, especially the socially-ensuring function. Parental care for children and then children in turn for their ageing parents has been a survival recipe as well as a cultural and civilization transfer between generations throughout human existence. To a certain extent, this mutual care is today adopted by the state. Birth grants, “pencil grants”, benefits and allowances, homes for pensioners, death allowances... today, the state accompanies us from the cradle to the grave and replaces our family.

... have put families at a massive disadvantage. Costs invested by everyone in the family and raising children have ceased to return immediately. Having children is an expensive luxury today; a luxury that cannot be paid off. Many people see families as an unnecessary “burden”. In my opinion, the legitimacy of family policy lies directly in the removal of the structural disadvantages of families in a modern political system. Therefore, the public opinion which caused that must compensate for the disadvantages.

This definition of the grounds for the existence of family policy stems from the basic contours of its measures. The goal of public opinion is not to interfere in families or define an ideal model. It is definitely not another transfer of the family functions under the slogan of “lessening the burden” which family life endures. It is not the role of the state to dictate

to mothers how to take care of their children by putting them in a day nursery or with a childminder, or to stay at home with them. It should not determine how and where parents should raise and educate their children. The goal is to assist with those functions which make a family, while retaining the principle of family freedom to the maximum. In other words, it is not “nationalization” of the family and its function but retaining its autonomy without any social or economic disadvantage for the family.

If the goal of family policy is nothing more than the freedom and development of families then family policy should be regarded as an independent political area. In my opinion, primary orientation depending on demographic goals is not acceptable. This does not necessarily mean scepticism about the possibilities of future population development. If family policy is successful in implementing the basic goal – i.e. removing those disadvantages caused by the state to families – the state can be certain that people will have the number of children they really want, not the number they can financially afford. Therefore, a successful family policy can have its demographic consequences. Freedom of individuals and families should primarily be respected. Not to define, in numbers if possible, the target population growth. Increased prestige for parenthood and the family will help population growth more than any directives written at a table.

If a family policy is a population policy, it can even less be an employment policy. Surely, nobody doubts that high employment contributes to business development. However, the development goal should be the well-being of our citizens and families. Employment is not the goal itself. Should achieving a high employment rate be at the expense of the freedom of families? The meaning of such a policy would

be head over heels in advance. The term of employment in relation to family policy is disputable. Isn't all-day parent child care equal to a full time job? The vast majority of mothers would say "yes"! This is work relevant not only for the family but for society as well. Or do we really want to say the only socially relevant activity of the family is the conception of a child? And the rest is a private and more or less burdening activity? I suppose we don't. Should parental childcare be a fully valued job? Those parents doing such a job must not be regarded as unemployed and treated with contempt. Through family policy the employment policy acquires a new dimension; it complements family policy.

Increasing employment goes hand in hand with family and job compatibility policy. However, the assumption fully respects the freedom of families and the openness of all available options. If a family decides to stay home with small children it equally conforms to the goals of high employment as a family deciding that both parents should return to their jobs quickly. Therefore, the employment policy should not be used to justify either compatibility model. Growth argumentation will fail here as well – domestic childcare can be included in the economic product despite this work being unpaid.

I am convinced that we need a change of perspective. On one side, family policy is a specific area with its own legitimacy foundation and on the other side it should be one of the benchmarks for other policies. Therefore, the Czech Presidency has decided on horizontal support of the family in all policies as its priority. This is about accomplishing a principle that the family must not be seen by people as a barrier that the

state is there to “relieve”. On the contrary, a family is one of the basic pillars of individual and societal life.

The existing problem of the EU family policy was that family policy became the subject matter of discussions on other policies where the EU executes its competencies. These policies were – and still are – the employment policy and gender equality policy. As a consequence, the goals contained in them became an input for family policy negotiations. It should be the other way around. In addition, specific cultural and historical differences were overlooked contrary to the subsidiarity principle. For example, a known request that 33% of children under 3 years old should have access to collective care by 2010 appeared among the Barcelona goals for economic growth defined in 2002. This however, assumes that at least that number of children will be sent to these arrangements - regardless of the wishes of parents, regardless of the freedom of families, without anybody asking what’s best for the children. I can fully and responsibly say here that the Czech Republic will not attain this request and will not achieve that goal. Family policy remains in the full competence of member countries and the Czech Republic has a legitimate right to its standpoint.

Let me send a message to all reviewers of the attempt by member countries to make the Barcelona goals highlight that demand and that national differences should be taken into account while achieving the goals. The long-term experience of our country with the developed system of collective care during the totalitarian era is against it, as equally is the interest of parents in individual care. Today, there are 2% of children in day nursery centres and the interest of families in nurseries is falling.

Similar goals resembling central planning from the communist era should be reviewed. The principle of the freedom and autonomy of a family should take precedence before the short-term goals of the employment policy. The sense of family lies also in intermediating values in education and preparing a child to enter society. EU policy should respect these fundamental imperatives standing by the core substance of democratic society. At the same time, the request must not mean denying an attempt to harmonize family and work life.

In future, family policy may not be the subject of Community discussions. Where else than right here is the collision with the subsidiarity principle most obvious! This is also reflected by the Lisbon Treaty making the conditions of the family policy legislation process stricter. Despite of or because of this, it is possible and necessary that all measures adopted at EU level are viewed from the point of family policies. This is particularly the goal of member countries and their governments as well as national parliaments. The goals of employment, non-discrimination and the free movement of people can be assessed and changed depending on the priorities of family policy. If society wants to survive, there is no alternative but to put a strong and functioning family at the centre of its focus!

Thank you for your attention.