

A SPEECH BY VLADIMÍR ŠPIDLA, EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES^{*)}

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak at this forum. I am very proud that my country has assumed leadership of the EU and I wish the Czech Presidency great success. I believe that in these difficult times a successful Czech Presidency will also be a success for the Union.

This conference addresses a fundamental issue for our society: how best to support families and create the best possible conditions for our children? All parents want their children to be as prepared as possible for the tasks that await them in adulthood. On several occasions in recent years the European Union and its Member States have expressly designated this as a priority.

One of the ways in which to benefit families and especially children the most is through support for the development of childcare facilities, so that every family can decide whether to care for their children personally or whether to share this task with accessible and high-quality specialised services. This is a responsibility directed at progress and the wellbeing of our children and there is no neglecting it.

Surveys conducted by the Commission¹⁾, by OECD organisations²⁾ and by UNICEF³⁾ have found that the expansion of childcare facilities significantly contributes to the education and personal development of children. I will return to this point below (chap. **Childcare facilities – the benefits for children and more**). In recent years the European Union and Member States have repeatedly expressed their willingness to work jointly in this direction. The adoption and implementation of the Barcelona objectives have given concrete form to this political commitment. I will return to this further on (**chap. The EU and Member States: the sustained effort to advance childcare**).

Today's conference represents an excellent opportunity to summarise the progress that has been made in implementing the Barcelona objectives and to determine where we can improve our endeavours (chap. **The Barcelona objectives call for the expansion of childcare and employment policies**) in order to:

- help families achieve a work-life balance;
- design more effective employment policies.

^{*)} This speech was given by Vladimír Špidla at the international conference 'Parental Childcare and Employment Policy', which was held on 5–6 February 2009 in Prague. The conference was organised by the Czech Presidency of the EU Council in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic with the support of the European Commission (for more on the conference see *Demografie*, 2009, 51, pp. 139–141; Kamila Svobodová, A Report: Rodičovská péče a politika zaměstnanosti. Available at: http://www.demografie.info/?cz_detail_clanku&artclID=606.

This article was published in *Demografie*, 2009, 51 (4), pp. 231–234. The contents of the journal are published on the website of the Czech Statistical Office at: <http://www.czso.cz/csu/redakce.nsf/i/demografie>.

¹⁾ The costs of raising children and the effectiveness of policies to support parenthood in European countries: A Literature Review. A report of the European Commission by Marie-Thérèse Letablier, Angela Luci, Antoin Math, Olivier Thévenon. European Communities, 2009. Available at: http://www.ined.fr/fichier/t_publication/1436/publi_pdf1_158bis.pdf

²⁾ Early childhood services in the OECD countries: review of the literature and current policy in the early childhood field. John Bennett. Innocenti Research Centre. UNICEF. 2008.

³⁾ La transition en cours dans la garde et l'éducation de l'enfant. Bilan Innocenti 8. Centre de recherche Innocenti. UNICEF. 2008.

Childcare facilities – the benefits for children and more

Allow me first to emphasise the benefits that every family and every child can derive from childcare facilities. This is not about ideology or economic performance. This is an issue that has to be viewed from the perspective of children and their development, and also of course from the perspective of parents, who want only the best for their children.

The first benefit of childcare facilities from the perspective of children is greater equality. Childcare services provide the same level of support to all families equally and represent a form of enormous assistance, especially for poor children and for the children of foreigners. They open the doors to a successful education and to better opportunities for obtaining a good job in the future. Expanding these services is one of the best investments that a society can make in its future.

Childcare services can also help minimise social inequalities. As Professor Esping-Andersen has noted, the educational ‘competition’ is already half over by the time children start school⁴⁾. Children whose parents cannot pay for qualified tutors and educators will be unable to surmount the gap that separates them from their peers from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Affordable, universal childcare is therefore essential to maintaining solidarity in our society and to ensuring equal opportunities for all.

For the children of migrants, education is not just an instrument of social advancement, but also serves an opportunity to become successfully integrated into the host country, and this is a viewpoint of ever growing significance in Europe, as, according to data, we are going to have to rely on migration to ensure our demographic sustainability in the future.

Another benefit is the important role that childcare plays in the prevention of child poverty. This has been clearly reflected in the work of the Social Protection Committee:⁵⁾ all the Member States that have made progress in this area are ones that have improved the provision of childcare. Childcare gives parents more opportunities to work and increase their income. It is no secret that times are tough, and this is the only way in which parents can improve their and their children’s standard of living.

If we look past the child perspective of the benefits of childcare two facilities there are two more reasons for expanding these facilities:

- Childcare benefits individuals and society. An individual’s opportunities in life improve with the attainment of better education and the development of better social skills: both are acquired from the experience of being a member of a peer group in early childhood. And society as a whole benefits when its members are educated and well integrated.
- Childcare is essential for ensuring the equality of men and women. It gives both parents equal chances of finding and keeping a job and building a career. If we really want women to have the opportunity to choose whether to work or not, it is essential for them to be able to rely on good-quality and affordable childcare facilities.

The EU and Member States: the sustained effort to advance childcare

For a number of years the European Union has been committed to protecting the interests of children. The decision of the Czech Presidency to place childcare on the agenda of today’s conference is supportive of the work of the Commission and the efforts of all Member States in the past several years.

In 1992 the Council adopted a recommendation on childcare⁶⁾ in which it emphasised the

⁴⁾ Esping-Andersen, 2005: ‘If the educational competition is half over before children even start school then clearly we have to examine what goes on in the preceding years.’

⁵⁾ These studies, especially the report from 2008 on poverty and favourable living conditions for children, began in 2007 in connection with a meeting of the Council in March 2006, where Member States were called on to adopt measures to combat child poverty.

⁶⁾ Recommendation 92/241/EEC.

importance of expanding accessible, affordable, good-quality care facilities for children. The Council also adopted employment guidelines for 2005–2008 and 2008–to 2010, in which it again called for the expansion of such services⁷⁾.

The Renewed Social Agenda is the most current example of the commitment shared by all Member States. Last year, the Renewed Social Agenda was enthusiastically adopted at a meeting of the Council in Chantilly and established investment into children and youth as a priority.

The Barcelona objectives call for the expansion of childcare and employment policies

Almost seven years ago, the Member States reached an agreement in Barcelona on the importance of childcare and established ambitious objectives for themselves. They agreed by 2010 to secure the provision of formal care for at least 90% of children between the age of 3 and mandatory school age and for at least 33% of all children under the age of 3.

This deadline expires in a year and most of the Member States have already made significant progress, especially for the benefit of children. Although for many Member States achieving the objectives established in 2002 will be difficult, the number, quality, and accessibility of childcare facilities has increased substantially across the entire EU⁸⁾. It is already clear that the Barcelona objectives have led Member States to develop more intense strategies to provide parents with better childcare services.

- The Barcelona objectives are clearly conducive to improving access to employment for both parents, and they do so in conformity with the Lisbon strategy objectives, which include increasing the employment rate in general and the employment of women in particular. It must be clarified that these two strategic objectives are not in conflict. We can attain a higher employment rate, greater equality between men and women, and at the same time have children who are able to fully develop their potential. Some Member States have achieved this: two of them, France and Sweden, are part of a trio that includes the Czech Republic.
- The Barcelona objectives enhance women’s opportunities for participating in the labour market and thus they help narrow the gap between men and women in this area. The European Council drew attention to this in March 2006 in the European Pact for Gender Equality⁹⁾.
- They help solve demographic problems by enabling Europeans to raise their children while still going to work, which provides them with earnings and leads to a better-functioning society¹⁰⁾.

⁷⁾ With regard to the commitments stemming from the Barcelona objectives, the Council’s employment guidelines for 2005–2008 and 2008–2010 request Member States to work towards a ‘*better reconciliation of work and private life and the provision of accessible and affordable childcare facilities and care for dependants*.’ (Guideline No. 18). The Council also calls on Member States: ‘*To enhance a lifecycle approach to work and to promote reconciliation between work and family life, policies regarding childcare provision are necessary. Securing coverage of at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age by 2010 is a useful benchmark at national level...*’ (Council Decision of 15 July 2008 on Guidelines for the employment policies of Member States (2008/618/EC)).

⁸⁾ On average, 26% of children under the age of 3 receive a formal care. In the older age group the figure is 84% of children. If we look at the data for individual Member States only five have achieved both targets. Three provide care for more than 90% of children between the age of 3 and mandatory school age, but not for children younger than that. Two Member States meet the target for care for younger children but not for children over the age of 3. Seventeen countries – including all the new Member States – have met neither of the targets. In the Czech Republic only 2% of the younger age group receive care and 67% of the older age group.

⁹⁾ Presidency Conclusion, 7775/1/06/ REV 1.

¹⁰⁾ European objectives in the area of improving work-life balance were reconfirmed in a statement on 12 October 2006 about the demographic future of Europe. This statement in particular highlights the need to create more favourable conditions for the demographic recovery of Europe.

- These objectives were elaborated and ratified by all Member States and are now being implemented. The European Union does not have direct authority in this area, but it has responded to the demands of Member States and has provided support through:
- The European Social Fund,
- joint monitoring of the progress of Member States in fulfilling the Barcelona objectives,
- active support for the exchange of best practices between Member States.

Beyond the Barcelona objectives

The Barcelona objectives are one aspect of the modernisation of society across the EU, but we need to back them up with a comprehensive strategy. Allow me to briefly sum up whether the strategies put forward by the Commission are headed in the right direction.

- In the first years of life children need the greatest amount of care from their parents. The Commission proposed prolonging maternity leave to enable mothers to freely choose how much free time they want to have before the birth of a child and how long they want to remain at home with the child afterwards. Also, the issue of the allowance paid over the course of maternity leave will be addressed for the first time at the EU level, which could reinforce the effectiveness of these laws.
- The enactment of paternity leave is not being considered for now, but it may be dealt with during the discussions about parental leave that were initiated with social partners recently. Paternity leave is extremely important: any conflict that may arise between a woman's freedom and her participation in the labour force on the one hand and the interests of children on the other occur not because the woman is abandoning her children but because the man refuses to assume a fair share of the responsibility for caring for children.

Conclusion

This conference is a welcome initiative. It contributes to the debate that was opened many years ago and that is so necessary. Our policies will continue to focus on the interests of children. We will continue to attend to the welfare of children and think about how these services can be best set up to serve all families in the EU.

All Member States have already articulated this shared objective. I am glad that we share this common goal of giving every family a chance to work and **SIMULTANEOUSLY** raise children. I am also pleased that the Barcelona objectives have already helped us make some progress in this area.

Today's conference is an opportunity to look for new ways of fulfilling the Barcelona objectives and advancing complementary strategies to establish the best possible conditions for children and parents. It would be a tragedy if the conference just re-opened old disputes between women's rights advocates and the champions of traditional family models instead of helping us to move forward.

We live in a different world today, and in this new world, where men and women can attain the same level of education and have the same longings for fulfilment in life, we have to find the appropriate strategies.

But it is also a world in which the transmission of inequalities from one generation to the next can still divide society, deny many people the opportunities that our modern economy has to offer, impoverish us in the long term, and underpin social instability.

Let's turn this conference into an opportunity for reflection on making a better society for all.