



HUNGARIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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The Hungarian Presidency wishes to emphasise the role of family policy when addressing demographic challenges, Minister for National Resources, Miklós Réthelyi, declared at the Informal Meeting of Ministers for Demography and Family Policy Issues, in Gödöllő on 1 April 2011.

Mr Réthelyi reminded that the Hungarian Presidency has organised a series of thematic events on demography and family policy, under the title “Europe for families, families for Europe,” and the present informal meeting is one of them.

The minister stressed the reconciliation of work and family life is a key priority of the Presidency in this field. At the end of the informal meeting, the Presidential Trio (Spain, Belgium, Hungary) and Poland, signed a declaration about the impact of that factor, on demographic changes. The Presidency also suggested that the European Union should declare the year 2014 as the European Year for Families.

Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, opened the meeting by asking for stronger support for family policy, and expressed his view that the EU should not build its future on immigration, and therefore, it has to reverse the demographic trends in order to remain internationally competitive.

Adverse processes

Gabriella Vukovics, President of Hungary’s Central Statistical Office, also addressed the ministers. She stressed that eight countries of the EU already have shrinking populations, and immigration is the only factor that prevents statistics from indicating demographic decline in several other Member States. Calculations show that the population of the EU will start to shrink in 2035, regardless of immigration.

Encourage to having children

Ministers gave account of their family support programmes and experiences. Representatives from several Member States agreed that to reverse adverse trends would be a great challenge, indeed, but families have to decide how many children they want to have, while governments have to create encouraging conditions for fertility. Ministers also dwelled upon the need for intervention at European level, even though demographic issues fall within national competence. Several Member States argued that fighting poverty was the first step towards tackling demographic problems. Ministers agreed that the matter required a multi-faceted approach: it needs flexible working conditions, gender equality in the family and adequate funding systems.

Response to challenges

At the meeting, EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor, welcomed the Presidency's choice of topic: "Europe's demographic future is a key issue; we get warnings and even alarming data at times." The EU supports Member States in the field of family policy in a variety of ways, and by doing so, it serves the interests of Europe as a whole, Andor added.

Mr Andor mentioned that the third report on demography published recently by the Commission and Eurostat, makes it clear that Europeans live longer and better, but the number of citizens of active working age will start to shrink next year; and birth rate is also extremely low. Andor suggested that "immigrants and a rise in the retirement age are equally needed, in order to respond to these highly complex challenges."

In his speech, the Commissioner raised his voice to support two current initiatives, geared to put a stop to these adverse trends. Both of them are flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 Strategy. The Agenda for new skills and jobs, proposes actions designed to raise the rate of employment among men and women aged 20-64 to 75 percent by 2020. The European platform against poverty and social exclusion, first seeks to ease the situation of poor families, and secondly to combat child poverty.

The Commissioner also mentioned that the work was in progress at the Commission, in respect to reconsidering the European Social Funds.

A new process set in motion

"We are delighted to note that even though family policy is the competence of the Member States, common thinking has been set in motion about addressing this matter also at Union level," Miklós Réthelyi said, in assessing the proceedings at the subsequent press conference. László Andor also spoke highly of the event, and said, "The Hungarian initiative was instrumental in enabling us to continue our efforts at a new level, and upcoming Presidencies, will also be able to deal with these matters."

Minister of State for Social, Family and Youth Affairs of the Ministry of National Resources, Miklós Soltész, highlighted in the press briefing that countries "Are now forced to adopt proper family policies, as they have also come under economic pressures." Miklós Soltész reminded that the Hungarian Presidency was the first in the EU, to engage in ongoing discussions with non-governmental organisations, about demographic issues, "Politicians cannot resolve problems of family policy on their own; it is very important that we involve NGOs into these efforts," the politician stressed. The Minister of State said it was in that spirit that the Presidency is looking forward to the participation of NGOs in the closing event of the thematic week: "Europe for families, families for Europe," also called "Family Feast with Europe". The event is to take place on 2 April at "Millenáris" event centre in Budapest.