

Czech National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004-2006: Did it Matter?

Paper prepared for the conference “Changing European Employment and Welfare Regimes. The Impact of the Open Method of Coordination on National Labour Market and Welfare Reforms“. University of Bamberg, February 23 and 24, 2007.

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Summary

There are enduring uncertainties about conceptual, political, and administrative capacities of EU's policies relying on "soft" instruments, namely the Open Method of Coordination. This paper offers an example of how it was applied in fulfilling one of the Lisbon strategy goals - strengthening social cohesion - in the Czech Republic. It does so by analyzing the content and implementation capacities of the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion for the Czech Republic 2004-2006. This case is associated with the ways of the same task' solution in selected other EU member states. Neither the process of its preparation nor its content itself and its political and administrative implementation milieu allows for the conclusion that it has significantly influenced the real decision making in the country.

Introduction

The EU's effort in strengthening social cohesion – as one of the pillars of the EU Lisbon Strategy - is anchored in the Common Goals of Fighting Poverty and Social Exclusion, adopted by the European Council's December 2000 meeting in Nice. These goals should namely:

- facilitate participation in employment and the approach to all resources, rights, goods and services;
- prevent the risk of social exclusion;
- help the most vulnerable subjects;
- mobilize all relevant actors.

All then-Candidate and now new Member States undertook to implement these goals in 2002. National Action Plans of Social Inclusion 2004-2006 have become the instruments for implementing these goals.

National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004-2006 (2005a) ensued from the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion of Czech Republic (2004), a joint document of the Czech Government and the European Commission adopted in December 2003. In accordance with this Memorandum, the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion should project the common goals in fighting poverty and social exclusion into the national policies and programs.

According to its authors, the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion was above all a national strategy the aim of which is to attract sufficient interest in and help solve the problems of poverty and social exclusion. The ambition of this first National Action Program was to formulate a comprehensive strategy, which would include all areas of likely social

exclusion and slump into poverty. (Beránková 2004). It was endorsed by the Czech Government on 21 July 2004.

The National Action Plan on Social Inclusion was therefore the core program document of implementing the given goal of the Lisbon Strategy in the Czech Republic.

What follows is the analysis of the aforementioned document from the angle of its position within strategic management in the Czech Republic. This is done through the analysis of the process of preparation of that document itself, its content, the content of other documents and, in a limited extent, also by way of involved observation (this author took part in some stages of preparation and evaluation of the working version of the document) as well as interviews with involved actors. The conceptual foundation of this approach was developed in Potůček (2006).

1 Characteristic and contexts of the instrument

The Czech National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004-2006 (2005) is a mix of carefully and transparently processed Research Reports (Chapter 1 – Main trends and Statistical annex), the evidence of all adopted and prepared policies; action plans, strategies, programs, measures taken by the government, and other bodies as well as legislation directly or indirectly associated with social inclusion (Chapter 3: Policy measures targeted at attaining objectives, and Chapter 4: Institutional support) and an attempt to classify in a comprehensive manner the whole range of strategic intentions, goals and solutions (Chapter 2: Strategic approach). In addition, Chapter 5 offers interesting examples of good practice.

2 Identification of actors – initiators of the analyzed instrument

The European Commission and the Czech government were the key actors. The European Commission had been instrumental in the adoption of common goals of fighting poverty and social exclusion, which were subsequently embraced by the December 2000 Council Session in Nice and endorsed by all the EU accession countries in 2002. In the last few months before the Czech EU entry, the government was anxious to be seen as a good negotiator and competent administrator if this operation.

The Government of the Czech Republic adopted, by its Resolution 476, the decision to establish a Committee for the preparation of a Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion and a National Action Program of Social Inclusion. The appropriate Committee was established on 15 September 2003 by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic (MSPV ČR). Its 40 members represented:

- selected government ministries (labour and social affairs; education, youth and physical education; health, regional development; the interior; transport; industry and trade; information; the environment; and agriculture);
- other public administration institutions (Government Committee for the Handicapped; Government Council for Roma Affairs; Czech Statistical Office; Ombudsman's Office; Association of Regions of the Czech Republic; and the Association of Cities and Municipalities of the Czech Republic);
- civic sector including social partners (Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions; Industry and Transport Union; Czech and Moravian Production Cooperative Union; Czech Catholic Charity Association; People in Need; National Council of Handicapped Persons);
- academic community (Charles University Faculty of Social Sciences; Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic).

This committee was tasked to look after the coordination between the various ministries and ensure that all the relevant institutions share in inter-ministerial coordination in processing the Joint Memorandum (2004) and National Action Plan (2005). This committee was also tasked to implement a comprehensive policy in fighting poverty and social exclusion. The limited potential of this coordination that visibly lacks a strong political authority and enforcement mechanism were analyzed in other papers (Potůček 2002, 2004).

3 Role of public administration in creating and implementing the instrument

The 2002-2006 Czech coalition governments with a dominant position of the Social Democrats attached great importance to social inclusion and devoted special attention to this issue.

Public administration obviously had a dominant position in the process of preparation and implementation of the National Action Plan of Social Inclusion. Its form of participation did not differ very much from the preparation and implementation of other crosscutting agendas in the given stage of developing the Czech State. Horizontal coordination was provided, in analogical cases, by interdepartmental committees supervised by the Office of the Government or selected government ministries.

4 Level of external influence on the instrument – group interests, lobbying etc.

As indicated by the list of actors directly involved in the preparation of the National Action Plan of Social Inclusion, due respect was paid to the traditional position of social partners in the social dialogue, representatives of employees and employers as partners to the government, in the regular meetings of the tripartite body – the Council of Economic and Social Agreement. The National Council of Disabled Persons had retained its traditionally strong status vis-à-vis the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs even on this agenda.

As indicated by that document's authors, its preparation involved also the participation of other partners, notably representatives of the nongovernmental not-for-profit organizations centering on homeless people and seniors (National Action Plan 2005:62).

5 Assessment of the methodological and material level of the document

5.1 Position of social inclusion as a development goal in the country's long-term orientation

From *circa* 2000, the Czech Republic has begun to adopt an unprecedented amount of strategic and conceptual documents. This was mainly due to the aforementioned importance attached by the European Union to the processing and use of this type of instruments, and a more favourable approach to the use of such instruments in the administration of public affairs on the part of Social Democrat-dominated governments.

Without an institutionalized system of strategic management it would not be possible to coordinate the various projects so as to achieve material and methodological consistency. It was therefore no surprise that not even the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion did clearly define its links with the other developmental priorities of the country. This document describes itself as a national strategy “the aim of which it is to canvass due publicity to the problems of social exclusion and to help solve them” (National Action Plan 2005:8). The only explicit reference to the other development goals is: “The important condition of the success of the strategy of social inclusion is its close relationship with the economic policy of the state. The present economic situation is characterized, on one hand, by economic growth and

virtually zero inflation but, on the other, by a growing public finance deficit. Improvement is therefore perceived as the main political priority.” (ibid.)

5.2 Public debate

The fourth chapter of the National Action Plan of Social Inclusion, entitled Institutional support states that structures of participation in the field of social inclusion have been established at all levels – national, regional and local – independently of the strategy of social inclusion. As indicated by the content of his chapter, they are the Council of Economic and Social Agreement, the Government Council for Non-state Non-profit Organizations, the Government Council for Roma Affairs, the Government Committee for Disabled Citizens, the Government Council for Ethnic Minorities, and cooperation with the Association of Cities and Municipalities and the Association of Czech Regions. Regional and municipal bodies can establish committees of relevance to social inclusion policy – social committees and committees for disabled citizens.

In an effort to involve the broad public in the preparation of the National Action Plan of Social Inclusion, its various chapters have been posted on the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs website www.mpsv.cz. Other website, www.ngo.eu-cz, was opened in favour of nongovernmental not-for-profit organizations. (National Action Plan 2005:62) There were organized several conferences for actors involved, too.

5.3 Level of specificity

The strategic framework defined by the Joint Memorandum has the following five goals:

- React to ongoing structural changes that lead to changes in the labour market and boost unemployment notably by giving structural long-term support to the creation of sustainable new jobs;
- Stimulate and encourage long-term unemployed to go back to work and reduce their dependence on social protection;
- Support the removal of conditions leading to discrimination in the education of groups threatened by social exclusion; define a system of lifelong education by law; create conditions to secure links between the education system and labour market requirements;
- Adjust social protection and health care systems so as to better respond to social changes, especially to population aging;
- Improve access to affordable and quality housing.

A comparison of the aforementioned goals with the structure of the second chapter and the structurally identical third chapter (Policy measures targeted at attaining objectives) reveals that large portions of Chapters 2.3 and 3.3 on securing an adequate level of minimum income, access to transportation services and equal access to legal services; as well as the whole Chapters 2.4 and 3.4 on the prevention of social exclusion (preservation of family solidarity, prevention of negative social phenomena, prevention of domestic violence, and E-inclusion) are not directly compatible with them.

The goals of the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion are divided to five areas:

- Reducing regional inequalities
- Facilitating participation in employment
- Improved access to resources, rights, goods and services for all
- Prevention of social exclusion

- Assistance provided to the most vulnerable groups.

The way it addresses employment and employability support is amply characteristic of the whole document: “The employment policy issue is not discussed in detail in this Strategy as it receives a separate treatment in the National Action Plan of Employment for 2004-2006, which is in preparation.” (National Action Plan 2005:28)

The document lists about 100 goals expressed in vague terms that commit no one to support, react to, ensure, improve, increase, specify, adapt, motivate, create, eliminate, delineate, strengthen, develop, adopt, establish or stipulate almost anything. Painfully absent are indicators that would lend more objectiveness to public control.

According to Beránková (2004), the National Action Plan was but a summary of programs, plans and measures that have either been already implemented or their launching was imminent, and which therefore were allotted funds (mostly from the budgets of the various government ministries). The European Structural Funds were another major source of money. The new measures in favour of the disadvantaged and fighting poverty and social exclusion were envisioned namely by programming documents on tapping money from the Structural Funds.

Surprisingly, too, this document fails to reflect the national strategic initiative, the “Social Doctrine of the Czech Republic”, conceived in the course of preparations for EU entry as a basis of social policy under the coalition treaty of the government produced by the 2002 elections. (Social 2002)

5.4 Responsibility and method of checking implementation

Chapter 3 of the National Action Plan of Social Inclusion, entitled Policy measures targeted at attaining objectives, is relevant. Its structure is the mirror image of the previous chapter and it addresses goals in five spheres. It presents a quality probe into about 85 variously adopted or prepared *laws, strategies, concepts, white papers, policies, programs, projects, other plans, campaigns or specific instruments*. The plan is actually a recycle bin for anything which it is possible to interpret in some way as an instrument influencing various problems, situations or target groups in the process of social inclusion in the Czech Republic.

The selected approach makes it possible in specific agendas to refer to the carriers of (thus adopted or prepared) instruments. However, they cannot be called to task on specific objectives of social inclusion, nor is it possible to check the progress and success of implementing the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion as a whole.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion sets neither deadlines nor specific responsibilities for the realization of (rather vaguely formulated) goals or measures.

6 Implementation potential of instrument

To establish whether the analyzed instrument is implementable or not, requires:

- Explicit formulation of goals and implementation deadlines
- Delineation of responsibilities of the various actors
- A mechanism of continuous evaluation of its realization and provision for drawing appropriate conclusions in the event of non-implementation.

None of these conditions has been met. Therefore it is not possible to assess the level of its implementation. Putting the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion in practice was basically an unguided, spontaneous process, resembling at best an application of the *learning by doing* method in terms of both its content and the method of its creation and realization.

7 Institutional framework of strategic management

Without an institutionalized system of strategic management, it is not possible to coordinate various projects so as to achieve their mutual material and methodological consistency. Not surprisingly, therefore, not even the National Plan of Social Inclusion does clearly define its links with the other development priorities of the country. It describes itself as a national strategy “the aim of which is to help give due publicity to and help solve problems of poverty and social exclusion”. (National Action Plan 2005:8). The only explicit reference to the further development goals reads: “The necessary condition of success of the strategy of social inclusion is that it be closely interconnected with the economic policy of the state. The current economic situation is one of economic growth and virtually zero inflation but also constantly growing public finance deficits. Their improvement is therefore perceived as the main political priority.” (ibid.)

The fact that this document did not envisage the allocation of targeted funds – something which is corroborated by the absolutely astonishing absence of the Ministry of Finance from the Committee to Prepare a Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion and National Action Plan on Social Inclusion was arguably one of its softest spots. The authors of the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion candidly complained that “... the non-participation of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Finance might have an unfavourable impact on the volume and effectiveness of proposed measures” (Joint Memorandum ... 2004:45).

In the context of the reform of public finances that wants to reduce public budget deficits, and in an atmosphere when many commentators and some analysts summarily dismiss social spending as counterproductive, obsolete and not conducive to economic competition, this complaint might well point to the potential ineffectiveness of this document as measured against the competing strategies, formulated with the explicit delineation of goals, delegation of responsibilities and allocation of funds.

Materially, the document has been found to be in need of greater rapport with the development of the economy and there was no plan for improving the coordination of the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion and the government economic strategy. Surprisingly, too, no attempt has been made to address the issue of pension reform, one of the hottest issues at present. This is directly connected with social cohesion in that the best level of inter-generational solidarity needs to be sought and found.

The Lisbon Strategy was redefined in 2005. This was due to an unsatisfactory state of its implementation in most Member States and due also to the new composition of the European Commission, reflecting the outcomes of the 2005 European parliament elections that enhanced the representation of rightwing parties. Economic priorities came to the fore.

This shift coincided, in the Czech Republic, with the appointment of a new Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs in 2004, who was charged with formulating comprehensive strategic documents – Strategy of Economic Growth (Strategy 2005), and National Lisbon Program 2008 (National 2005b). The government adopted both documents and forwarded them to the European Commission in 2005. Not surprisingly, the latter document, a basic

guide of the country's strategic orientation in the next few years, came in three parts: macroeconomic (with emphasis on continued public finance reform), microeconomic (with measures to boost and further increase the economy's ability to compete), and employment (flexibility and openness of labour market and education). It is safe to say that the Social Democrat-led Czech coalition government favourably received the 2005 program reorientation of the Lisbon Strategy on the European Commission level. Under otherwise unchanged conditions, this further weakened the actual status of its endeavours in the field of social inclusion.

Consequently, the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (and other national strategies worked out in parallel) failed to reflect and enforce the dual nature of social inclusion in the social reproduction process. On the one hand, this requires considerable public funding, but on the other hand, it is resource-driven as an important source of political stability, and a precondition of sustainable economic development.

8 Can Czechs learn from other EU Member States?

Both Atkinson-Cantillon-Marlier-Nolan (2005:158) and Rákoczyová-Mareš (2005:42) have noticed that the absence of quantified goals sets the Czech Republic apart from not only the "old" EU Member States but also the majority of the "new" ones. As evidenced by the table below, quantified goals are quite present in the Hungarian, Estonian and Polish action plans. Moreover, Poland encloses to its document a summary table of specific goals.

Table 1: Use of quantified targets in the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion of the new EU Member States

Country	Direct outcome targets:				Indirect outcome targets (e.g. boosting employment or reducing the number of persons dependent on social benefits etc.)	Input targets (e.g. boosting help to the homeless, immigrant integration etc.)
	Income/ deprivation	Long-term unemployment/ employment of vulnerable groups	Education	Health		
Cyprus						
Czech Republic					+	
Estonia	+	+	+	+	+	+
Hungary		+	+	+	+	+
Latvia					+	+
Lithuania	+	+			+	+
Malta		+	+		+	
Poland	+	+	+	+	+	+
Slovakia					+	+
Slovenia		+	+		+	+

Source: Report (2005), p. 40

The publications EU’s evolving social policy (2006) and Hribenik (2006) offer a survey of experience of other countries implementing the Social Pillar of the Lisbon Strategy and national Action Plans of Social Inclusion in a broader political and administrative context. The following table sums up the most interesting cases. It appears that approaches within the EU fan broadly from an almost complete rejection of recommendations (soft policies) offered by the European Commission to identification with them, including their efficient implementation.

Table 2: Critical preconditions of efficient application of action plans of social inclusion. How are other EU Member Countries faring?

Criteria	+	-
Political support	Ireland Finland since 2003	Finland until 2003
Matching content and methodological standards	Hungary Estonia Lithuania Belgium Italy Ireland	Austria Netherlands
Sufficient strategic framework of institutional management	Slovenia	Greece

Source: own

Conclusion

The manner of processing Czech National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004-2006 reflected the home and foreign policy priorities of the then Czech government. It was an important part of its effort to successfully enter the EU. However, it was prepared and realized within a public administration system that was neither prepared nor equipped for efficient application of the strategic dimension of management.

Table 3: Critical preconditions of efficient application of action plans on social inclusion. How is the Czech Republic faring?

Criteria	Fulfilment
Political support	+
Matching content and methodological standards	-
Sufficient institutional framework of strategic management	-

Source: own

Czech experience from 2002-2006 has indicated a conflict between the endorsement of the Lisbon Strategy by the country’s political representatives during the preparation for EU membership and its first months and years, and policy as actually applied. It has manifestly

shown that the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), considered the basic tool for implementing the Lisbon Strategy in strengthening social inclusion, is toothless without:

- a. political endorsement
- b. sufficient institutional capacities and human resources for strategic management.

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