

The Contribution of the Czech Republic to the Preparation of the EPSR Action Plan

Courtesy translation



Introduction

Context of the public consultation

The proposal for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was presented by the European Commission (EC) on 26 April 2017 and the document was subsequently approved on 17 November 2017 by a joint proclamation at the Gothenburg Summit. The EPSR is based on 20 fundamental principles, which can be divided into three categories: equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; social protection and inclusion. Since the approval of the EPSR, the EC has presented several initiatives that aim to fulfil some of the EPSR principles. On 14 January 2020, the new College of Commissioners presented a roadmap for action in the field of employment and social policy through the communication *A Strong Social Europe for a Just Transformation*. In its communication, the EC promised, among other things, to prepare an implementation action plan for the EPSR, which the EC plans to present in 2021. The EC envisages the adoption of the action plan (similar to the adoption of the EPSR itself) at European Council and European Parliament level in May 2021.

As part of the preparations of the Action Plan, the EC launched a broad consultation with all Member States and EU regions and other partners. The EC called on social partners and authorities at EU, national, regional and local level to present their views on further measures by 30 November 2020 and to introduce their own specific commitments to implement the pillar. Following the call of the EC, the Government of the Czech Republic decided in coordination with the Office of the Government - Section for European Affairs and in cooperation with responsible ministries and interested partners, to draft a contribution of the Czech Republic to the preparation of the EPSR Action Plan.

Government position

For the Government of the Czech Republic, upward economic and social convergence towards the most developed EU countries is a priority. The government's manifesto states: "*We will promote greater use of EU instruments and policies to converge wages, living standards and social standards across Member States.*"¹

In line with the government position on the Communication *A strong social Europe for a just transformation*², the Czech Republic welcomes the Communication itself and the launch of a wide-ranging European consultation as a way to draw up an EPSR Action Plan. However, individual social policies and social protection systems of Member States need to be taken into consideration and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality upheld. Social partners must be consulted and involved in the process.

As a part of the Czech Republic's contribution to the preparation of the Action Plan, the chapters below specify in detail, which further measures are needed from the Czech Republic's point of view at European level, including in the context of economic recovery and employment after the COVID-19 crisis. In this context, several measures have been listed below by which the Czech Republic already contributes to the fulfilment of the EPSR principles at national level. Other initiatives at national level are described in the annual National Reform Program of the Czech Republic and in relevant ministerial strategic documents. The Czech Republic supports the notion that the EPSR Action Plan should include several measurable goals in the area of employment, social inclusion and poverty reduction. The action

¹ Government Program Statement, approved by the Government on June 27, 2018, chapter Foreign Policy and the European Union.

² The Government Position for the Communication was approved on 25 February 2020 by the EU Working Party.

plan would thus follow on the corresponding objectives set in the Europe 2020 strategy, for which there is no apparent successor as of yet.

The contribution of the Czech Republic follows the structure of the EPSR. For full clarity and the reader's comfort each subchapter includes a citation of the relevant principle of EPSR.

Chapter I.: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

1. Education, training and lifelong learning

Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and to cope successfully with changes in the labour market.

Measures at EU-level that should be part of the EPSR Action Plan, should include the strengthening of programs that promote the quality of education, which is in line with the development and strengthening of the Erasmus+ budget. The EPSR Action Plan should be further linked to the activities of the forthcoming update of the Digital Education Action Plan, as reducing the so-called digital divide and increasing the digital literacy of pupils and teachers is a necessary prerequisite for improving the quality of education. When drawing up the EPSR Action Plan, it is also appropriate to take into account the opportunities for the implementation of the new European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Justice and Resilience, presented by the EC on 1 July 2020 and accompanied by a proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social justice and resilience. Both of these tools are essential to overcome market failures and provide a workforce with the necessary skills. These initiatives bind the implementation of some measures with drawing on the new EU Next Generation financial instrument.

On 19 October 2020, the Government of the Czech Republic approved the Strategy of the Czech Republic's educational policy until 2030+, which is the main document for fulfilling this principle. The strategy aims to modernize education in such a way that children and adults can better adapt in the dynamic and ever-changing world of the 21st century and to set up an education system that does not contribute to social inequalities but allows access to quality education for all, regardless of their social status. The document contains two objectives. The first is to focus education more on acquiring the competencies needed for active civic, professional and personal life. The second is to reduce inequalities in access to quality education and enable the maximum development of the potential of children, pupils and students.

Increase of the quality of education will be achieved through the revision of framework educational programs and support for individualization and innovation in education. At the same time, emphasis will be put on strengthening the digital competencies of pupils and teachers. Improving the quality of vocational education will be implemented through the innovation of the secondary and higher vocational education system as well as the revision of vocational education curricula. Emphasis is also placed on the development of further education, for example by supporting secondary schools and universities in particular in their role as providers of further education, and on career guidance.

Equal access to quality education will be supported by reducing the external differentiation of education and also by improving the quality of teaching at the second stage of primary schools. Reducing regional disparities in the quality of education, which will be supported by a number of tools, is also crucial. It is necessary to strengthen the regional and financial accessibility, especially of kindergartens, especially in structurally disadvantaged regions, where there are a higher number of areas affected by social exclusion. In these regions and in schools with poorer educational outcomes, the focus should be on strengthening and improving the teaching staff. In regions with long-term lower educational outcomes, it is also crucial to develop teachers' competencies in areas that lead to the ability to educate diverse groups of children and to develop the potential of pupils with social and other disadvantages. The emphasis on reducing the so-called digital divide in education shall also contribute to strengthening equal access to education.

The aim of the prepared Operational Program Jan Ámos Komenský in the programming period 2021-2027 is also to support the development of an open and educated society based on knowledge and skills, equal opportunities and a development of a potential of each individual.

2. Gender equality

Equal treatment and opportunities for women and men must be ensured and promoted in all areas, including the labour market participation, employment conditions and career development.

Women and men are entitled to equal pay for equal work.

The Czech Republic supports the elimination of existing inequalities between men and women at national and European level. From the Czech Republic's point of view, the main challenges in the field of gender equality are inequalities in the employment rate of women and men (in the Czech Republic caused mainly by the fall in women's employment at the time typical for motherhood), the difference in average wages unadjusted pay gap 18.8% to the detriment of women), the difference in the average amount of old-age pension (currently 18% to the detriment of women in the Czech Republic) and the related higher risk of poverty for older women, low representation of women in decision-making positions and persistent shortcomings in systemic solution to domestic and gender-based violence. These priorities are in line with the current EU priorities in the field of gender equality and should be reflected in the EPSR Action Plan.

The EC has already submitted and the EU Council and the European Parliament have approved a directive on reconciling family and professional life. The EC will also address the issue of pay and pension differences. Due to a lack of transparency, many women do not know or cannot prove that they are being remunerated inadequately. The EC plans to present binding measures on remuneration transparency by the end of 2020. Based on the outputs of the 22% Equality Project, the Czech Republic is ready to support the forthcoming draft directive on salary transparency. In accordance with the conditions formulated in the relevant framework position, the Czech Republic also supports the accession of the EU to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

The Czech Republic supports the notified EC initiatives within the framework of fulfilling this EPSR principle. The Czech Republic may also consider support for the follow-up Action Plan to Combat the Elimination of the Gender Pay Gap (the current AP was valid for the period 2017-2019).

In accordance with the relevant framework position, the Czech Republic generally supports the adoption of the Directive on improving the gender balance of management and supervisory bodies of listed companies and related measures, which was submitted in 2012, but has been blocked in the EU Council since 2017. The Czech Republic supports the resumption of dialogue on this directive.

As part of the public consultation on gender equality in the EU in 2019, the Czech Republic supported the adoption of an independent European strategy for gender equality, which would focus not only on the usual topics (labour market, gender-based violence, women's participation in decision-making positions, gender stereotypes) but also on new challenges (gender impact of labour market digitization, climate change impacts). These issues were included in the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2020-2025, presented by the EC in March 2020³. The Czech Republic supported the adoption of this strategy.

³ In March 2020, the EC issued a Communication on Equality Union: Strategy for Equality between Women and Men for the period 2020–2025, which the Czech Republic welcomes and supports. In order to eliminate structural inequalities between women and men based on traditional gender roles in work and private life, the EC plans to develop guidelines for Member States on the possible impact of national tax and benefit systems on financial factors that motivate the second employed person to take up employment or discourage her from doing so. The

Promoting gender equality in the labour market (including career growth) is one of the priorities of the current Government Strategy for Gender Equality in the Czech Republic for 2014-2020 and will also be one of the priority areas of the forthcoming Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030. The Government Council for Gender Equality plays an important role in this effort, as serves as an advisory body to the Government in the area of ensuring equality between women and men in all areas of social life.

3. Equal opportunities

Regardless of gender, race or ethnic group, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities in employment, social protection, education and access to publicly available goods and services. Equal opportunities for under-represented groups must be promoted.

Existing and planned activities in this area at EU level correlate with the objectives of already implemented policies at the national level in the field of education, equal opportunities for people with disabilities (PWD) or the elderly. The Czech Republic supports the extension of the anti-discrimination directive proposed by the Commission. The Czech Republic agrees with the direction of the draft directive on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States relating to accessibility requirements for products and services (anti-discrimination directive). The act on the accessibility of PWD to services and goods in the internal market has already been approved (see subchapter 17 below). The EC also plans to issue an initiative for equality and inclusion of Roma in society (at the end of this year), which the Czech Republic welcomes.

In order to achieve the objectives of this principle of EPSR, it is necessary to continue to ensure sufficient capacity and expertise of all involved actors: an independent equality body (in the Czech Republic an ombudsman), relevant public administration bodies including oversight bodies, and civil society organizations promoting and defending equality; the provision of services to disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities. There is a need to strengthen the principles of participation of persons at risk of unequal access to decision-making and to support bodies and mechanisms at all levels that ensure such participation (e.g. at government level the Government Council for National Minorities, the Government Council for Roma Minorities and the Government Committee for Persons with Disabilities). There is a need to strengthen the implementation of the relevant national strategy papers adopted at national level and to use EU funds and other EU resources effectively for this purpose.

4. Active support to employment

Everyone has the right to timely and personalized assistance to improve employment prospects or to become self-employed. The right to assistance for job search and for training and retraining is included. Everyone has the right to the transfer of social protection and training rights during the transition between jobs.

Young people have the right to further education, apprenticeships, traineeships or to an offer of a good quality job within four months of losing their job or leaving school.

The unemployed have the right to personalized, continuous and consistent assistance. The long-term unemployed have the right to an in-depth individual assessment of their situation no later than 18 months after losing their job.

implementation of the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2020-2025 will also emphasize the empowerment of women in the labour market, the promotion of women's representation in decision-making positions and the achievement of equal participation of women and men in the various economic sectors.

Given the limited legislative power of the EC in this area, the proposed coordination role at EU level and the proposed non-legislative activities are particularly welcome, with regard to the sharing of good practice and financial intervention through EU funds. In the area of unemployment benefits and active employment policy, a system of benchmarks was developed in cooperation between the EC and the Member States (within the Employment Committee).

The approved revision of Council and EP Decision No 573/2014 on enhanced cooperation between public employment services, as well as the further strengthening of the role of the EURES network, can also lead to improvement.

On 1 July 2020, the EC has already issued a package to support youth employment, which contains a proposal for measures to address the situation of young people in the labour market, also with regard to the effects of the pandemic and the deterioration of the situation of young people in the labour market. A key part of the package is a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the reinforcement of employment security for young people (*Bridge to Jobs - Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee*), which should replace the current Council Recommendation on the introduction of the 2013 Youth Guarantee. The Czech Republic is in favour of it and has supported its adoption.

In November 2019, the Council Recommendation on the access of all workers and self-employed persons to social protection was approved, which includes, inter alia, the right to transferability of rights already acquired. In February 2016, the Council Recommendation on the Integration of the Long-Term Unemployed into the Labour Market was adopted, and in April 2019 the EC issued a report on its implementation. Within the European Semester, the issue of employment support is regularly addressed through thematic reviews and recommendations for individual countries (for the Czech Republic, for example, regarding the effectiveness of active employment policy).

In this regard, the Czech Republic no longer expects further EU activities in support of active employment policy, which remains within the competence of Member States. However, the Czech Republic emphasizes the need to support anti-discrimination measures in the labour market in the framework of the Council Recommendation on the Integration of the Long-Term Unemployed into the Labour Market, especially in relation to national or ethnic minorities, which are often excluded by employers and thus their opportunities for satisfactory reintegration into working life are reduced.

Chapter II: Fair working conditions

5. Secure and adaptable employment

Regardless of the type and duration of the employment relationship, workers have the right to fair and equal treatment as regards working conditions and access to social protection and training. The transition to forms of employment of indefinite duration must be encouraged.

In accordance with legislation and collective agreements, the necessary flexibility must be provided for employers so that they can adapt quickly to changes in the economic situation.

Innovative forms of work ensuring quality working conditions must be encouraged. Entrepreneurship and self-employment must be enabled. Professional mobility must be facilitated.

Employment leading to precarious working conditions must be avoided, inter alia by banning the abuse of atypical employment contracts. The trial period should be of a reasonable length.

An element of this principle, which has the unequivocal support of the Czech Republic, is the support of occupational mobility within the EU and the removal of still existing obstacles to the free movement of workers in the internal market. The Czech Republic also agrees with the need to support innovative forms of work, entrepreneurship and self-employment, especially for those groups of the population whose entrepreneurial potential has not yet been fully exploited. The Czech Republic also emphasizes the need to adapt the organization of work to the possibilities of older people in terms of emphasis on the professional development of lifelong learning and supplementing qualifications and with regard to the health status and individual factors of each person. The Czech Republic will support the inclusion of this issue, for example, in the forthcoming Action Plan for Social Entrepreneurship, the Green Paper on Aging or another communication focused on the silver economy.

The Czech Republic respects the fact that a substantial part of EU law is devoted to labour law protection. In the future, it supports mainly non-legislative EU activities in this area, such as setting benchmarks within the European Semester, exchanging examples of good practice or interpretative EC communications to unify EU case law. In this context, it is necessary to pay attention to the cross-border aspect of this issue and to adhere to the principles of free movement of the four freedoms in the EU internal market. In particular, the protection of workers must not unduly restrict or impede the cross-border provision of services and create unjustifiable new administrative barriers to the posting of workers.

In June 2019, Directive 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union was adopted, which now runs for a three-year transposition period. A platform work summit was planned for the third quarter of this year, and in the fourth quarter, the EC intends to present a draft Digital Services Act. In her program statement, the President of the new EC promised to pay attention to the protection of working conditions of platform workers, especially with a focus on their skills and education, which the Czech Republic supports.

6. Wages

Workers have the right to a fair wage that allows for a decent standard of living.

An adequate minimum wage must be ensured to meet the needs of workers and their families, taking into account national economic and social conditions, while maintaining access to employment and incentives to look for work. In-work poverty must be prevented.

All wages must be set transparently and predictably in accordance with national practice, and the autonomy of the social partners must be recognized.

The Czech Republic considers the issue of wages to be essential, among other things, for achieving deeper integration and convergence of socio-economic conditions of Member States. Member States should not apply these principles separately and without taking into consideration convergence interests in the broader European framework.

The second phase of consultation of the social partners at EU level under Article 154 of the Treaty on ensuring a fair minimum wage for all workers in the EU ended on 4 September 2020. It did not lead to an agreement between the social partners within the meaning of Article 154 (4) of the Treaty. Therefore, on 28 October 2020, the EC presented a proposal for a directive on reasonable minimum wages in the EU. The Government is now preparing a government position on the EC proposal.⁴

In the Czech Republic's view, the formulation of minimum EU standards for the existence of national procedures for setting the minimum wage (without explicitly setting of the minimum wage) in the Member States can contribute to meeting the objectives of EPSR Principle 6 - ensuring a decent standard of living and eradicating worker poverty in the EU. However, the setting of a specific minimum wage should always fall within the competence of the Member State and take into account the national economic and social conditions of each Member State.

The Czech Republic agrees with the current political coordination of the issue of remuneration within the European Semester, where the EC calls on Member States (where it deems it desirable) to increase wage growth and at the same time supports the concept of making work pay. Work must be paid in such a manner so that workers find it beneficial to remain on the market and refrain from claiming unemployment benefits).

Beyond the discussion on minimum standards and existing activities within the European Semester, the Czech Republic does not see the need for further measures to fulfil this principle at the European level.

7. Information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals

Employees have the right to be informed in writing at the beginning of their employment about the rights and obligations arising from the employment relationship, including the probationary period.

Prior to the dismissal, workers have the right to be informed of the reasons and must be given a reasonable period of notice. They shall have the right of access to an effective and impartial settlement of disputes and, in the event of unjustified dismissal, the right to redress, including adequate compensation.

Directive 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the EU was adopted on 20 June 2019 and has now entered a transposition period of three years. The issues of individual dismissal, reasonable notice periods, protection in the event of unjustified dismissal and the settlement of labour disputes have not yet been amended in EU law.

8. Social dialogue and involvement of workers

The social partners must be consulted in the formulation and implementation of economic, employment and social policies in accordance with a national practice. They must be encouraged to negotiate and conclude collective agreements in matters which concern them while recognizing their autonomy and the right to take collective action. Where appropriate, contracts concluded between the social partners must be implemented at the level of the Union and its Member States.

⁴ The text presented here in the Contribution of the Czech Republic does not anticipate the detailed position of the Czech Republic on the draft directive, as it will be formulated in the prepared government position.

Workers or their representatives shall have the right to be informed and consulted in good time on matters which concern them, in particular in the event of transfers, restructuring and mergers and collective redundancies.

Increasing the capacity of the social partners to strengthen social dialogue must be encouraged.

In recent years, the Czech Republic has **strengthened the intensity of consultations with social partners** and supports their dialogue at the regional, national and European levels. The Czech Republic supports the involvement and consultation of social partners at the European level, including their involvement in the activities of the Social Protection Committee, the Employment Committee or conferences (e.g. the Social Summit) to present their views and reflect them in the conclusions and possible EC initiatives.

Regarding the **right to inform workers** in the event of transfer, restructuring and merger and collective redundancies, the Czech Republic has so far preferred to maintain the current legal status of the relevant directives (considered sufficient). It does not support the recodification of EU legislation.

The Czech Republic will also support the strengthening of social dialogue and the capacity of social partners from EU level to conduct effective and constructive collective bargaining to ensure the widest possible personal scope of negotiated collective agreements - including platform workers and other workers in non-standard labour relations not yet covered by collective agreements.

The Czech Republic also supports the continued fulfilment of this EPSR principle within the European Semester, in which the EC proposes recommendations to the Member States aimed at promoting and strengthening social dialogue at the national level.

In the Czech Republic, consultations with the social partners on fundamental issues of economic and social development at the level of national and regional tripartism take place regularly. This activity needs to be constantly strengthened by including a more comprehensive range of topics of common interest pertaining to all social partners and by deepening the discussion at working and formal level. Greater emphasis will also be placed on the tripartite social dialogue at the regional level as a means of seeking new topics for social dialogue with an interregional or national overlap.

The Czech Republic supports increasing the capacity of social partners through a regular annual contribution to the development of social dialogue and the support of mutual negotiations at the national and regional levels. The key role of the social partners in preventing the risks of damage to the health of employees as a result of an accident at work or an occupational disease will be strengthened by introducing a separate contribution to the prevention and adoption of innovative measures in this area.

9. Work-life balance

Parents and carers have the right to adequate leave, flexible working conditions and access to care services. Women and men must have equal access to special leave to fulfil their caring responsibilities and must be motivated to make balanced use of this type of leave.

Creating the **conditions for reconciling work and private life** is one of the key tools for promoting equality between women and men. The Czech Republic has supported the adoption of **Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on the work-life balance of parents and carers** and is currently preparing its transposition. As part of the implementation of this principle, the Czech Republic considers the support of informal carers to be desirable.

The Czech Republic emphasizes the conditions for reconciling work and private life in its current *Government Strategy for Equality between Women and Men in the Czech Republic for 2014-2020* and in the framework of the new strategy being prepared. Although both parents can draw parental allowance (and can take turns drawing), the percentage of men receiving this allowance in the Czech Republic has

been continuously very low (less than 2%). Approximately 40% of potential recipients receive a new sum of paternity postpartum care (support for seven calendar days). At the national and European level, the Czech Republic considers it important to support active fatherhood and equal sharing of care between women and men.

It is also necessary to support **the expansion and availability of childcare services** (mostly children under three years of age), social services and long-term care services, as well as support for flexible forms of work. With the use of relevant EU funds, the Czech Republic fulfils the country-specific recommendation which the country received in this respect as part of the European Semester process. By the EU Council in the framework of the European Semester. Specifically, the Czech Republic uses ESI funds to support reconciliation of work and private life initiatives - for example, to finance children's groups (crèches), to motivate employers to offer flexible working hours or to carry out gender audits.

10. Healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection

Workers have the right to a high level of safety and health at work.

Workers have the right to a work environment that is adapted to their professional needs, and that allows them to extend their active participation in the labour market.

Workers have the right to protection of personal data in the context of employment.

The Czech Republic supports (within the mandate of the current EC) **a comprehensive review of European health and safety policy** (see the EC Communication Safer and Healthier Work for All - Modernization of EU Legislation and Policy in the Field of Health and Safety at Work, January 2017).

Within the implementation of this principle, it is possible to emphasize the following priorities:

- Support for digitization and use of modern communication technologies in the field of occupational safety and health;
- Greater support for the involvement of ergonomics to increase the quality of working life and health of employees;
- Psychosocial risks and their emphasis on risk management;
- Prevention of musculoskeletal disorders due to heavy physical work;
- Risks in the workplace in the context of anti-epidemiological measures.

The Czech Republic believes that the right of workers to the protection of personal data is adequately ensured by the General Regulation on Personal Data Protection, which replaced the Personal Data Protection Directive with effect from May 2018. Judging by the accompanying document, the EC has no ambition to strengthen the status quo further.

In recent years, several packages have been approved to revise the Directive of the European Parliament and the Council amending Directive 2004/37 / EC on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to carcinogens or mutagens at work.

Legal regulations ensuring the protection of the health of Czech employees are designed so that protection is available to every employee as much as possible. The Czech Republic already supports the adaptation of the working environment to support a sustainable and prospect of a long career in accordance with EU law. At the national level, therefore, the Czech Republic considers the principle to be fulfilled.

Chapter III: Social protection and inclusion

11. Childcare and support to children

Children have the right to affordable and quality education and care at an early age.

Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to special measures to increase equal opportunities.

The Czech Republic understands the varying conditions and needs of individual states in the field of education. The Government is thus of the opinion that the main method for implementing the principles of the pillar in the field of **childcare and child support** should be policy coordination within the European Semester process. The Czech Republic believes that to fulfil this principle, the maintenance of the status quo is essential (or possibly by strengthening financial support through EU funds).

In May 2019, a Council Recommendation on high-quality pre-school education and care systems was adopted. This year, work began on drafting a Council Recommendation for a Child Guarantee, which should be submitted in 2021. The Czech Republic is actively involved in the preparation of this initiative and which the Czech Republic supports.

Special attention is paid to the support of childcare services within the European Semester and specific recommendations of the EU Council, when the Czech Republic is called upon by the EU Council to **increase support and increase the number of childcare services**, especially for children under three years of age. The European Semester, the open method of coordination and the financial instruments under EU cohesion policy are appropriate tools for implementing this principle.

Support for affordable and quality education at an early age is a priority for the Czech Republic, which the Government perceives as a tool for reducing educational inequalities and improving the quality of educational outcomes at a later age. Pupils who have previously participated in pre-school education achieve better results in international and national surveys. The Czech Republic, therefore, wants to increase participation in pre-school education for children aged 3 to 4. Kindergarten education is an independent education accompanying a child in his or her developmental stage. It is appropriate to start early, to focus on the development of competencies important for success in further education and on the development of children's social skills.

The Czech Republic believes that more attention should be paid to measures aimed at strengthening the pre-school preparation of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It is essential for the successful completion of further education, as well as to support these pupils throughout primary and secondary school attendance.

The key implementation tool for pre-school education for the Czech Republic will be the list of measures of the prepared *Strategy of the Czech Republic's educational policy until 2030+*. It aims to increase the quality of pre-school education and participation in it by changing the content of education with an emphasis on key competencies. support for teachers and individualized work with children.

12. Social protection

Irrespective of the type and duration of the employment relationship, employees and, under comparable conditions, self-employed persons have the right to adequate social protection.

The content of the principle was reflected in the ***Council Recommendation on access to social protection for all workers and self-employed persons (adopted in November 2019)***. In 2021, the Member States are to prepare and submit to the EC national Action Plans with measures to implement this recommendation. In 2022 the EC will issue a Report on the implementation of the recommendation.

A monitoring framework for the implementation of social protection recommendations is being developed and is likely to be approved this year within the Social Protection Committee. Potential further activities should be taken at European level only after the evaluation of the implementation of the recommendations at the end of 2022. Following the adopted Council recommendation, the European Semester appears to be a suitable tool for implementing this principle of the EPSR.

13. Unemployment benefits

Unemployed people are entitled to adequate activation support from public employment services to (re) integrate into the labour market, and to adequate unemployment benefits for a reasonable period of time in accordance with their contributions and national eligibility rules. This support must not be demotivating for a quick return to work.

In order to fulfil the goal of this principle, in the opinion of the Czech Republic, a coordination method using reference indicators could be used at EU level as a legislative initiative is not the preferred tool for this principle. To date, the Council Recommendation of 1992 on common criteria for sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems and the EC Recommendation of 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market serve to fulfil the content of this principle. The German Presidency is now deliberating in the Council on draft conclusions calling on the EC to revise and update these recommendations. The principles of active inclusion from the EPSR are also reflected in the proposal for the Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States for 2020 (submitted by the EC in February 2020, approval is expected in October 2020).

The Council Recommendation adopted in November 2019 on access to social protection for all workers and self-employed persons also applies to coverage by unemployment benefits, or unemployment insurance respectively.

The European Semester (thematic reviews and specific Council recommendations) regularly evaluates the level of Member States' active inclusion policies, including the (sufficiently activation) level of unemployment benefits.

The EC planned to issue a proposal for a regulation at the end of 2020 to create a European unemployment insurance system.⁵ The Czech Republic has been rather sceptical of the creation of this fiscal stabilization instrument for unemployment insurance out of fear that it may reduce pressure to implement the necessary structural reforms in the Member States.

14. Minimum income

Everyone who does not have sufficient resources is entitled to adequate benefits guaranteeing a minimum income that will enable them to live in dignity at all stages of life and to have effective access to ancillary goods and services. For those who can work, minimum income benefits should be combined with incentives to (re) integrate into the labour market.

According to the Czech Republic, the most effective tools for **ensuring and monitoring an adequate level of minimum income** to prevent poverty and social exclusion in the Member States are the European Semester of economic policy coordination, the open method of coordination in social protection policies and the European minimum income network (including voluntary use of reference budget methodology). These should encourage the Member States to introduce adequate, accessible and sustainable minimum income systems. The Czech Republic prefers and supports such cooperation

⁵ However, the issue was postponed following the adoption of a temporary instrument in the form of Council Regulation (EU) 2020/672 of 19 May 2020 establishing a European instrument for temporary support to mitigate the risks of emergency unemployment (SURE) due to the spread of COVID-19.

within the EU in the long run with regard to the diversity and complexity of national systems of social protection and social assistance.

The guidelines for ensuring a minimum income are reflected in the proposal for a **Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States for 2020** (submitted by the EC in February 2020, approval expected in October 2020), one of the main instruments for EU coordination of national policies.

At the European level, there is also an expert working group on minimum income (MINET), where examples of good practice are exchanged. The Czech Republic has representatives, who actively participate in the group. The Working Party on Indicators within the Social Protection Committee has set up a benchmarking framework for a minimum income for the forthcoming monitoring and evaluation of developments in the EU under the European Semester.

The Czech Republic perceives this issue as an area which, from the point of view of the principle of subsidiarity, falls primarily within the competence of the Member States. However, as part of the expected update of existing EU standards (see above to Principle No. 13 - Council Recommendations and EC Recommendations of 1992 and 2008), the Czech Republic is ready to discuss the creation of an updated, respectively a new EU framework for the development of national guaranteed minimum income schemes and the principles of active inclusion. Such an EU framework could, for example, ensure that the system is adequate, accessible (including services) and transparent, it could address the use of national reference budgets, etc. The setting of a specific guaranteed minimum income and other details of the system should be left to the Member States.

15. Old age income and pensions

Retired workers and self-employed workers are entitled to a pension that corresponds to their contributions and provides an adequate income. Women and men must have equal opportunities to acquire pension rights.

In old age, everyone is entitled to the means to ensure a dignified life.

The Czech Republic **could support measures dealing with the main causes in pension divergences between women and men**, especially persistent gender inequalities in the labour market (lower employment rates for women, differences in average wages between women and men or low levels of men's involvement in childcare).

In November 2019, a **Council Recommendation on the access of all workers and self-employed persons to social protection** was adopted, which applies to all pension benefits and social, or pension insurance respectively. The Member States are to submit national plans for the implementation of the recommendations in 2021.

Next year, the EC is going to publish a **Green Paper on ageing**, which will focus on the situation of older people, probably also on their security.

The Social Protection Committee is going to issue another regular **Report on the Adequacy of Pensions** in 2021. The Working Group on Indicators under the Social Protection Committee has set up a **benchmarking framework for pension adequacy**.

Regulation (EU) 2019/1238 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on the **pan-European personal pension product (PEPP)** was adopted, introducing a voluntary personal pension scheme in addition to existing public, occupational or private pension schemes.

The implementation of this principle is regularly monitored and evaluated **within the European Semester**. At the moment, the Czech Republic considered the above-mentioned activities to be sufficient to fulfil principle No. 15 of the EPSR.

However, in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be necessary to respond to the current uncertainty of economic and social development and to evaluate the short-term and long-term effects on the stability of pension systems. After a comprehensive evaluation, Member States should determine a possible strategy that responds flexibly to the new situation and should proceed with the modernization of their pension systems to meet changing needs and conditions. At the same time, this process should lead to the strengthening of the health system, because senior citizens are the most vulnerable group. The aim must also be to ensure that benefits are adequate so that older people are not at risk of poverty and can maintain an adequate standard of living after retirement. The primary means at EU level should be the sharing of good practice under the open method of coordination.

16. Health care

Everyone has the right to timely access to affordable and quality preventive and curative health care.

The organization and financing of health care fall primarily within the competence of the Member States, as stated in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (Article 168). Maintaining national competencies in the organization of health care must be kept in mind when creating an Action Plan.

The Czech Republic is fully committed to the principles of universal health coverage. This means a **low participation rate for the Czech Republic**, especially for economically disadvantaged people (example: limits on co-payments for medicines for pensioners) and ensuring local and time availability of health services, which the Czech Republic supports with several subsidies and bonuses for regional health service providers. In the future, the Czech Republic is committed to better monitoring of waiting times, travel distances and other indicators of the performance and availability of health services in the Czech Republic, within the Health System Performance Assessment (HSPA) project, ideally in cooperation with the EU.

17. Inclusion of people with disabilities

People with disabilities have the right to income support that guarantees them a dignified life, to services that enable them to participate in the labour market and society, and to a working environment adapted to their needs.

Given the limited legislative power of the EC in this area, **a coordinating role at EU level is particularly welcome** with regard to the sharing of good practice and financial intervention through EU funds.

EP / Council Directive (EU) 2019/882 on accessibility requirements for products and services was adopted in April 2019, and a general transposition deadline till June 2022 is now running. A forthcoming **European Disability Strategy beyond 2020** is being prepared and should be issued in 2021. The publication of an **Action Plan for Social Entrepreneurship** is planned for next year, which may affect the integration of disabled people into the labour market. The issuance of a **European Card for People with Disabilities** is also being discussed and is underway in a pilot project. The European Semester and the open method of coordination are also used to implement this principle to exchange good practice. The Czech Republic is ready to discuss activities that may result from the above-mentioned planned strategies and action plans.

The Government Resolution No. 761 of 20 July 2020 approved the *National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities for the period 2021–2025*. The National Plan is a

basic strategic document covering the area of **equalization of opportunities for people with disabilities**, determining the state policy in this area. It aims to continue to promote and support the integration of persons with disabilities and to fulfil the individual articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities through concrete measures. In the system of providing health services, patients in the Czech Republic are not differentiated based on their health status, religion, gender, nationality, etc. Persons with disabilities have their rights defined by Act No. 372/2011 Coll., On health services and the conditions of their provision, as well. as other citizens of the Czech Republic. In this respect, the issue of inclusion of people with disabilities at the national level is sufficiently taken into account in the Czech Republic.

An important element of inclusion is to support the **participation of people with disabilities** in policy-making that affects them (at all levels) and to support the activities of civil society organizations that help people with disabilities to overcome obstacles using self-determination and mutual assistance.

18. Long-term care

Everyone has the right to affordable and quality long-term care services, especially home and community care services.

The implementation of Principle 18 in the form of the **open method of coordination**, mutual learning and the European Semester, with sufficient support in particular for the financial instruments of cohesion policy, seems to be the most appropriate method. The Czech Republic does not believe that it would be appropriate for the EC to create legislation on the abovementioned topic.

The Social Protection Committee is preparing a **Report on Long-Term Care**, which will be issued in 2021. The Working Group for Indicators within the Social Protection Committee is preparing long-term care indicators for its monitoring. The European Semester and the open method of coordination are used to implement this principle in order to exchange good practice.

Already in 2010, the **Voluntary European Framework for the Quality of Social Services**⁶ was developed in the Social Protection Committee. From 2007 to 2013, the EC issued biennial **Reports on social services of general interest**.⁷ In 2011, the EC issued a Quality Framework for services of general interest and in 2013 Guidelines for the application of EU rules on public aid, public procurement and the internal market to services of general economic interest, especially with regard to social services of general interest.

In June 2019, **Directive No. 2019/1158 of 20 June 2019 on the work-life balance of parents and carers** was adopted, which introduces the right to take a care leave in the case of caring for a close person.

The Czech Republic can support the publication of a **Green Paper or a general strategy for long-term care within the EU**, based, among other things, on the expected Report on Long-Term Care.

Even in this case, the national competences of Member States in the way of providing long-term care must be respected. Due to the different models of providing long-term care and the possibilities of payments from the population's own resources, it will probably be difficult to set any common standards or criteria for this area.

As part of setting up the **system of social - health borders**, the Czech Republic strives to set up a comprehensive system of assistance that will improve the availability of services for people who need a combination of health and social services (a comprehensive system of permeable / integrated / social

⁶ (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1169&langId=en>).

⁷ (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=794&langId=en>).

health care). This integrated care will have clearly set standards for its provision, network and availability of services.

In accordance with **Act No. 372/2011 Coll., On health services**, all citizens are provided with quality and accessible care. Within long-term care services, it is necessary to link the health and social area at the national level due to the very close interconnection. Specific measures at the national level must aim to (1) create an interconnected system of institutional, outpatient and outreach services that respond flexibly and effectively to the changing needs of people with long-term health problems, (2) analyses the current situation forming the basis for planning specific sub-measures. leading to the restructuring of the existing system, to the coordination and implementation of long-term care into institutional, outpatient and outreach services, to ensure its quality and availability, and (3) support for formal and informal carers.

19. Housing and assistance to the homeless

People in need must be given access to social housing or good quality housing assistance.

Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced evictions.

Homeless people must be provided with adequate shelter and services to promote their social inclusion.

The fulfilment of this EPSR principle should be left to each Member State, not addressed by binding legislation at EU level. The EU can provide support through the open method of coordination, with the European Semester successfully being used to implement this principle. Support for the fulfilment of this principle from EU funds is currently crucial for the Czech Republic - the ERDF is already the largest source of investment in social housing in this programming period, and systemic and partial projects in this area are being implemented from the ESF.

Thematic reviews - exchanges of good practice - are organized at the level of the Social Protection Committee on the issue of social housing and homelessness. In 2020, the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs is organizing an expert seminar (*peer review*) on the topic of the role of legislation in cases of housing exclusion (*Housing exclusion: the role of legislation*). Sharing good practices between the Member States is key to finding effective housing solutions and assist the homeless.

Due to the specific development of social structures in each Member State, long-term trends and different traditions of providing housing for disadvantaged groups, Member States face different challenges in housing and helping homeless people (from the need to ensure the functioning of social and affordable housing providers or the necessary revitalization of large social housing complexes up to the extent where the social housing segment is essentially non-existent or insufficient for the needs of the homeless). Uncertainty also linked to ongoing EC disputes with some Member States is one of the obstacles to setting up long-term support and legislative frameworks for social housing. The EC should **interpret or initiate a change in public support rules so that social and affordable housing can be promoted for all households** in need of such assistance in the contexts of their countries and regions.

Ensuring social and affordable housing of good quality is closely linked to the issue of energy poverty, equitable energy transformation and the necessary adaptation of the existing housing stock to climate change. These challenges affect everyone, regardless of their relationship to housing (tenure) - owners, cooperatives or tenants. The EC came up with a number of necessary initiatives and measures, including financial ones, that respond to individual problems. Ultimately, however, the effective response to these challenges depends on the involvement of homeowners and managers (municipalities, non-profit and for-profit companies, individuals), for whom the multitude of objectives, programs and subsidies may be difficult to understand.

Given the central position of housing for the fulfilment of the EPSR (housing as a basic condition for social inclusion and subsequent participation in work, education and exercise of other civil and social rights), its economic importance (housing and related services are an important part of the consumer basket of all households) and role in order to achieve climate goals (housing as a sector with a high carbon footprint and a high potential for reducing it), a **housing-centered approach strategy** should be developed at European level to develop innovative tools / models / practices for integrated social solutions and removing bureaucratic barriers to existing solutions, etc. (eg operating a solar power plant on the roof of a multi-owner residential building and using this energy directly in the house while complying with all rules in the energy market) now requires the creation of additional legal entities and complex legal relations between co-owners / owners and others.

20. Access to essential services

Everyone has the right to access quality basic services, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Help must be available to people in need to access these services.

The Czech Republic **welcomes the initiatives approved** so far at EU level: the Act on Accessibility to Services and Goods (see above for principle 17); WiFi initiative for the EU (promoting the use of digital transformation opportunities); revision of the EP and Council Directive on the quality of water intended for human consumption, which introduces access to drinking water for vulnerable groups.

According to the Czech Republic, in fulfilling the principle No. 20 of the EPSF, it is necessary to consistently take into account the needs of people with limited mobility and to take into account the **standards of availability of public services**. It is also necessary to focus on the position of the municipality / city in the given settlement system (or the degree of central character of individual municipalities) and also on their position on the core-periphery axis. Therefore, the Czech Republic expects, for example, the submission of a long-term vision for rural areas, which the EC should present in the spring of 2021. The Czech Republic has a vision for the development of rural areas and defined individual development goals in the Rural Development Concept.

The Czech Republic analyses the current **standard of availability of individual services**⁸ on its territory. The ongoing outputs of the research project show that the spatial availability of services in the Czech Republic is above standard in an international perspective.

The availability of public services in the Czech Republic is systematically addressed, among others, by the **Working Group for the Availability of Public Services**⁹, the aim of which is to create a document that defines public services and sets out managers and co-managers for their preservation and development.

⁸ Through the research project TB050MMR001 "Changes in the equipment of rural communities with basic services and impacts on their inhabitants", the researcher is the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

⁹ Established by Instruction No. 2/2017 of the Deputy Minister of the Interior for the management of the section of legislation, law, archiving and administrative agendas authorized to manage the section of public administration on 31 July 2017.