



EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTRE

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Mr Vladimir Špidla,
Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200,
1040 Brussels, Belgium

Honourable Commissioner Špidla,

We, the undersigned organisations, write to you to express our deep concern about the latest adverse remarks made by the Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek on equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups including women, the elderly and ethnic minorities. We believe that Prime Minister Topolanek, in the very least, misrepresented this very important concept by stating, *inter alia*, that, “equality is at its lowest where the state commits itself the most in the name of the so-called protection of disadvantaged groups”. Furthermore, his approach, which favours assimilation to multiculturalism, is also worrisome. We regret the fact that Prime Minister Topolanek, as a representative of a European Union country, presented publicly such a mendacious representation of one the pillars of the European integration process.

We deem it very ironic that his adverse statements on equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups including women, the elderly and ethnic minorities were made at the launch of the *European Year of Equal Opportunities for All*. Whilst establishing a just, fair and democratic society that respects all its citizens, the role of equal opportunity mechanisms and practices is fundamental. However, his statement that “*No well meant effort to make equal that cannot be equal, no positive discrimination will guarantee the equality of opportunities. Positive discrimination sounds about the same as a pleasant beating,*”¹ does not reflect the core elements that this concept suggests. Moreover, the central idea behind the EU’s integration programming, as you would agree, is to generate a multicultural European society. In the face of this core European value, Prime Minister Topolanek mentioned in his speech that the money the state spends in multiculturalism, “must go to the assimilation of individuals, not in support of the chimera of multiculturalism.” Consequently, we believe his comments on equal rights and multiculturalism are not only at odds with internationally recognised human rights standards and norms, but also in direct opposition of the European principles laid out in the *acquis*.

International law and the European *acquis* firmly establish the equality of all persons regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status. Equal rights, equal opportunity and equality practices do not give “privileges” to disadvantaged groups, such as Roma, but attempt to balance historical inequalities. Thus, equal opportunity practices aspire to create a climate wherein all members of society can participate in social and economic life on an equal basis with no hindrance.

Providing equal rights to all citizens is the foundation of the European integration process with which all Member States should comply. As the leader of a European Union country, Prime Minister Topolanek should be held accountable for misrepresenting such a crucial concept. In this respect, we consider that it is the task of the European Union, the foremost political and social structure in Europe, to define and enforce the implementation of these practices, as well as to guarantee the compliance of all parties with this process.

¹ Quoted by the Prague Daily Monitor’s bulletin published on 2 April 2007

We welcome your prompt response to the statements by Prime Minister Topolánek at the above mentioned meeting and recall your salute to the powers of the EU to combat discrimination as “one of the most impressive steps” and mentioned legal tools to eliminate discrimination during an interview published in the journal *Equal Voices* in 2006.² You further stated that, “[...] legislation itself cannot bring all the required changes. People have to change their mindset.”³ You were indeed correct in underlining the need for the “mindset change” and we disappointingly note that Prime Minister Topolánek’s remarks reveal the urgency to address this need.

Commissioner Špidla,

Mr Topolánek’s mendacious statement demonstrates the need for the EU to improve the channels for communicating the fundamental concepts and practices of human rights, and reminding him of his obligations under the various EU-driven legislative programmes aimed at introducing, maintaining, and ensuring the twin principles of equality and non-discrimination in the EU member states.

We kindly request to be informed of any actions your office may take in this regard.

Respectfully,

European Network Against Racism
European Roma Rights Centre
Romodrom



European Network Against Racism
Réseau européen contre le racisme
Europäisches Netz gegen Rassismus



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² Equal Voices, Issue 20, December 2006

<http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/spidla/articles/2006/int_061201_en.pdf>

³ *Ibid*