



Assessment of personal protective equipment in the Czech Republic

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The Czech Republic joined those countries of the European Union which had been approaching the issues of personal protective equipment in a unified way. The countries made contribution to safety of workers exposed to occupational risks, as well risks while practising sport and other recreational activities. Here, I should like to expand upon our experience from the initial years of international cooperation in more details.

Technical standards are said to be one of the bases for unification of views on product safety. The standardisation process in the Czech Republic has got its long-standing tradition dating back to the first standardisation organisations which were founded about ninety years ago. The national standards served solid base of industrial development of Czechoslovakia which belonged to the most advanced European countries.

More than a half a century later, in 1987, the Czech Republic was the first country from Central and Eastern Europe to join the European Committee for Standardisation (Comité Européen de Normalisation). This resulted in rapid implementation of a series of European standards into the Czech national system and, accordingly, the adjustment of the Czech national standards to European ones so that any collision could be avoided. This process was not just that easy because of a long tradition of the Czech national documentation, its mutual interconnection and the way the professional community was accustomed to use it for its work. Also, newly implemented interconnection of a series of standards has brought about some problems as liberation was perceived as degradation of all existing regulations.

The basic requirements for occupational health and safety are anchored in the legal regulations implement particular EEC guidelines; for personal protective equipment (PPEs) this is 89/686/EEC which was adopted as binding in the Czech legislative.

Thus, it is necessary to have a sufficient base for legislation and standards for a reliable enforcement of the New Approach. The guideline No. 89/686/EEC stipulated the basic requirements applied in the European Union for a number of years. In the Czech Republic, the requirements for personal protective equipment have been enforced since 1997 with no crucial difficulty.

In the nineties significant development in European standards for personal protective equipment occurred. The standards were originated in technical commissions of CEN/TC (Technical Commission). Participation in these commissions also offers various opportunities for the Czech experts.

Still, we do have a big backlog in our active participation which is mostly due to time and financial requirements. Hopefully, media for electronic communication are being developed which makes it possible to exchange the documents and revise them.

Ever before, the Czech Republic has already been accustomed to working with European standards; therefore the transition itself was not that demanding.

The Czech Standards Institute is an institution whose activities entail standardisation in the Czech Republic. Implementation of European standards to the Czech technical standards is conducted in conjunction with the National Technical Commissions. A good illustration of this is the Technical Standardisation Commission No. 3 acting by the Occupational Safety Research Institute in Prague. The Commission deals with personal protective equipment. As a consequence, the whole system should be flexible enough to hold implementation of a particular European standard to a Czech one within six months. The system also stands efficient to rectify possible contradictions with other national standards as well. We are happy to say that we have been successful to manage these tasks in the recent years.

The basic European guideline No. 89/686/EEC, which contains basic technical requirements for personal protective equipment, was implemented in the Czech Republic in 1997. This was executed by the Law No. 22/1997 Coll.(lection) and Government Decree No. 172/1997 Coll.(lection). The implementation of those documents was catered for by the Czech Office for Standards, Metrology and Testing.

The standards consistent with the requirements of the European Union were first enforced on a national scale. This stood an opportunity for functional verification of the whole system.

New demands of the guidelines were reflected in the area of drafting product documentation while being launched on the market and while enforcing new principles for conformity assessment.

There were some seminars run within the PHARE programme whose aim was to transfer the European modes of conformity assessment. At the seminars, European experts informed the Czech professional community, mainly the employees of the future notified bodies, on theoretical and practical actions required for personal protective equipment assessment. There have also been some internship programmes organised within European notified bodies. This intermediation of foreign experience has been of an inestimable value for us.

In the years 1997 to 2001 the new approaches were used on a national scale only. In practice, they did not mean a great relief for an importer of personal protective equipment to the Czech Republic. Although the equipment had been assessed in Europe, it did have the EC declaration of conformity and the CE denomination; it did have to be assessed in the Czech Republic as well in line with identical routine. Unnecessary time and financial burden are visible at first sight.

Therefore, it has been a great contribution to enforce the Protocol to the European Agreement on Conformity Assessment and acceptance of industrial commodities, designated as PECA (in short). On the basis thereof it was made possible to recognise mutually the results of conformity assessment prior to the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union. The PECA Protocol inured on 1 July 2001. It was valid restrictively for the producers from the EU and the Czech Republic, on no account for the third countries, up to 2004.

The enlargement of the validity of the PECA Protocol for the third countries at the beginning of 2004 meant full compatibility to the procedure enforced in the European Union countries. Therefore, accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in May 2004 did not stand the reason to a change in the area of conformity assessment of personal protective equipment.

Testing of personal protective equipment in the Czech Republic has already got its standing tradition. For instance, the assessment has been conducted since the sixties of the last century at the Occupational Safety Research Institute in Prague. The approaches used derived from national standards, the criteria were sometimes stipulated by the testing laboratories because a general rule did not exist. The biggest shortcoming for this period was insufficient scope of the documentation required for an assessment. The aim of assessment, which is a safe product for its user and the environment, has been consistent then and now.

The System of the New Approach provides for documents and approaches which mean an appreciable simplification for a producer and traders on pan-European level. The Czech Republic fully endorses this system.

In the Czech Republic there are seven institutions assessing conformity of personal protective equipment. Most of them assess not only personal protective equipment but other products as well.

Accreditation is an indispensable basis for this activity. It is granted by the Czech Accreditation Institute, which is member of the European Accreditation. Meeting the European standards for testing laboratories EN ISO/IEC 17025 and for certification bodies for assessment of products EN 45011 is an imperative condition of authorisation for conformity assessment.

The authorisation procedure is conducted by the Czech Office for Standards, Metrology and Testing in Prague. As there is no legal title for accreditation, the office also considers a real need for other authorisation bodies while making the decision. In other words, strict control takes place prior to authorisation process. The control result, along with meeting the requirements, means that the Czech authorised bodies are prepared for notification in the European Union.

The Czech bodies authorised for conformity assessment were notified under the PECA Protocol in 2001.

The coordination process among separate notified bodies is of crucial importance on national and international levels. On the levels of the Standing Commission, the Horizontal Committee and vertical commissions there is an efficient system of cooperation for particular kinds of personal protective equipment. Any information attained at these levels is important, particularly getting informed about practical activities of another notified body.

Also, the electronic system called CIRCA has got good prospects. Still, it has got a number of enlargement opportunities and improvements, particularly in the area of information on activities of vertical groups. The system serves nowadays for a basic information source among notified bodies.

Every notified body has to provide services on unified professional level. This aim is also facilitated by interlaboratory testing, whose results provide an actual overview of capacities offered. Therefore, vertical groups prove a good platform for testing arrangement. Needless to say, there are some competitive relations between individual notified bodies, yet it is necessary not to lower the demands for basic requirements fulfilment. The cooperation of the notified bodies in the Czech Republic for personal protective equipment is safeguarded by regular meetings several times in a year.

On the basis of the facts mentioned above we would be pleased to present ourselves as a national system, which fully integrated to European system of conformity assessment of personal protective equipment. Therefore we would like to extend our thanks to our European whose helpful attitude has made the integration happen.