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Multilingualism – fundamental value of the EU

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to be with you in Bucharest today. I am here to speak to you about multilingualism as a fundamental value, a fundamental element of the European Union.

As European Commissioner for multilingualism, I am sure you can understand that this is a subject very close to my heart – but also, I believe, very close to the heart of Europe itself.

I like to think that the accession of Romania has been instrumental in making the connection between languages and Europe even stronger. Since on 1 January 2007, with the accession of our country to the European Union, President Barroso created multilingualism as a European portfolio in its own right, and gave me the honour of steering it.

This higher profile for multilingualism is a direct recognition that languages are good for Europe. Multilingualism can boost our competitiveness and employment. It is a key channel for social cohesion and inter-cultural dialogue and for nurturing a space for European political dialogue.

Let me assure you, I am committed to preserving and promoting this key feature of the European project.

Languages - fundamental to Europe

In Europe, our linguistic diversity is a fact of life – 27 Member States, 23 official languages; a great variety of regional and minority languages, and the languages spoken by our migrant communities. But more than that, our living heritage of languages is a richness, a resource, to be treasured.

Our diversity of languages is part of the European landscape, as much part of Europe as our mountains, our rivers. Languages could be seen as obstacles, but they are in fact the paths, the bridges, that we use to reach each other.

I might not go as far as Goethe, who said, 'A man who does not know foreign languages is ignorant of his own'. But if I can put it more positively, I am convinced that knowing other languages adds a rich dimension to our lives.

Language is for each of us the most direct expression of our own culture. And by learning other languages, we discover other cultures, other values, beliefs and behaviours. We can discover, in Europe, the values that we share. This openness to dialogue is an essential part of our European citizenship, and a reason why languages are such a crucial element of it.

Languages are also crucial for our competitiveness in Europe. The ability to communicate in several languages is a powerful asset for individuals, organisations and companies alike. I will come back to this shortly. It is vital that we create a lifelong learning environment where everyone of us can continue to develop these skills.

EU actions - competitiveness, intercultural dialogue and language-learning, and developing a space for European political dialogue

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now set out some of the concrete actions I am planning, in the three principal areas I have identified where languages can make a real difference to Europe.

First, they can contribute to economic competitiveness, growth and better jobs.

We published a study in February that makes clear that lack of language skills costs companies lost business. Across the sample of nearly 2000 exporting businesses, 11% said they had lost a contract because of a lack of language skills. The average loss per business over a three-year period was €325.000.

All in all, Europe's 23 million SMEs provide two-thirds of private employment – about 75 million jobs. In 2004, SMEs share of total turnover of companies in the EU-25 was almost 58%. Clearly, even a marginal improvement in their export performance would have a huge impact on growth and jobs.

In this study, a quarter of the Romanian companies surveyed estimated they lost business because of a lack of language skills. Ladies and gentlemen, as Romania develops economically, it will not want to come up against doors that are closed because of gaps in her citizens' language skills.

This of course holds true for all EU countries. This is why I am setting up a Business Forum on Multilingualism, to identify ways for companies to improve their language skills to become more competitive and enter new markets.

Multilingualism constitutes an industry in itself and creates a large number of jobs. We need to explore further all the possibilities given by new technologies to attract and train language learners. I will launch a study that will look at new technologies and linguistic diversity later this year. And I intend to encourage the use of artificial intelligence as a tool for translation and interpretation.

Second, languages can foster lifelong learning and intercultural dialogue.

2008 will be the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue – a welcome opportunity for putting languages in the spotlight. As I said, our community of 27 States is a rich mosaic of cultures and languages. Europe is not trying to harmonise, to make everyone and everything the same. Europe is our common home, but one where diversity is celebrated.

Promoting languages is an excellent way to help us all feel we belong to a wider European community.

I have set up a high-level group of intellectuals to bring us their ideas and inspiration for how languages can help build intercultural dialogue. I'm very much looking forward to this forum, and to our first meeting which takes place next week.

Language learning is a key weapon for developing a Europe of knowledge for the 21st century.

Where the individual citizen is concerned, the evidence is quite clear: language skills are an advantage in the job-market. And an advantage for moving around Europe, whether to work or study.

Language skills, according to the Member States, are one of the eight key competences that every young person should have leaving compulsory education. They are personally and culturally enriching. They are popular with employers. They give our citizens the confidence to take on bigger challenges – as we hear over and over again from young people who have felt their self-belief grow from taking part in the EU's Erasmus mobility programme.

This is why many Community programmes make a substantial commitment to language-learning. So that citizens can benefit, from the earliest age, and the education systems are encouraged to improve their language teaching methods by mutual learning.

The new EU Lifelong Learning programme makes language-learning a priority, for school and adult education, and for university students through Erasmus, and for students in vocational training, in the Leonardo da Vinci mobility programme. For the first time, there's an additional cross-cutting theme dedicating about 17 million € each year to language-learning. All languages, including regional and minority languages - in fact, potentially any language in the world – are eligible for funding.

Third, through multilingual communication with the citizens we can develop the European political dialogue.

The European institutions need to be accessible to citizens and business, for our credibility. The third pillar of my strategy will use multilingual communication with citizens to create a space for European political dialogue. We have already doubled language coverage over the past three years from 11 to the present 23. The Commission will continue to support post-graduate programmes for the training of interpreters and translators in Member States. I will focus as well on ensuring we use the best, cutting-edge technology for improving multilingual online access to EU information.

Working with the Member States towards a new strategy

As you know, Member States take their own decisions on language-learning. But exchanging good practice and good ideas in Europe helps shape good decisions. It is my intention to gather ideas and suggestions from Member States and stakeholders in order to build new policies reflecting their needs.

I want to keep up the momentum behind languages in Europe, and see where we can improve our strategy. I am planning a ministerial conference on multilingualism in early 2008, to get the input from ministers and other stakeholders for a Communication outlining a new strategy on multilingualism that I will present in the second half of 2008.

In the meantime, we will have several reports this year to take stock of how language-learning is progressing in the Member States. And in September, the multilingualism High-level group set up by my predecessor Jan Figel' will present its proposals for reinforcing multilingualism in Europe. These will also give us valuable input for the new strategy.

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In Romania, in years to come, we will look back on 2007 as the dawn of a new epoch. We have work to do in many areas as we modernise our country, but we are making an excellent start. We have strong economic growth, decreasing inflation, and growing employment. I would encourage you, as Romanian citizens, to grasp today's opportunities, in multilingualism and in all policy areas. The changing face of Romania is in your hands. In partnership with Europe, you can shape it for the better.

Thank you.