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Aspects and prospects of EU multilingualism

Let me first of all thank the organisers for the kind invitation to take part in this interesting conference and share with you the main lines of the European Commission's policy in the field of multilingualism.

The issue concerning which languages should be used inside the European institutions and in communication with the outside world has existed from the very beginning. Indeed, the first European piece of legislation ever approved back in 1958 was the regulation determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community.¹ This regulation was amended following each enlargement to take into account the new official languages, bringing the total number up from the initial four to the present 23.

But of course the language issue is much broader than the question of communication within the European institutions and between these institutions, national authorities, and citizens. The progress of information and communication technologies combined with economic liberalisation, demographic movements and political integration has made the environment in which we all live increasingly multilingual.

Starting in the last decade of the previous century, the European Commission has accordingly developed a growing awareness of the importance of improving the language competences of all citizens to complement the abolition of physical borders achieved by the adoption of the single market. The 1995 White Paper *Teaching and Learning: Towards the learning society*² already mentioned the need to “develop proficiency in three European languages” as one of its main objectives.

The term ‘multilingualism’ itself made its appearance in 2004, when Commissioner Ján Figel’ was given the portfolio of Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism. Three years later, the multilingualism component was re-attributed to the new Romanian Commissioner, Leonard Orban, but the portfolio was once again reunited in 2010 given the strong connection between language teaching and learning and all other aspects of education and training.

There are many good reasons for promoting multilingualism at the European level. A widespread knowledge of different languages is essential to cohesion, social inclusion and intercultural dialogue. European citizenship requires the ability to understand and use several languages; and the same is true for mobility, employability and competitiveness.

The advantages of multilingualism, however, are not necessarily clear to everybody in the European Union and elsewhere. In a recent report written for the European Commission, the Lebanese author Amin Maalouf argued that “every language is the product of a unique historical experience, each is the carrier of a memory, a literary heritage, a spe-

¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31958R0001:EN:HTML>.

² http://ec.europa.eu/languages/documents/doc409_en.pdf.

cific skill, and is the legitimate basis of cultural identity.”³ Language, in his vision, is a central element of one's identity – an identity that can consist of several layers, where the European dimension does not replace, but rather complements one's national, regional or local allegiances.

Such an attitude is very far from the climate that could be found one century ago in the United States of America, when former President Theodore Roosevelt wrote: “we have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intended to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding-house; and we have room for but one soul [sic] loyalty, and that is loyalty to the American people.”⁴

It took almost a century for the United States, or at least its most progressive or pragmatic representatives, to move away from the ‘melting pot’ model and embrace the ‘salad bowl’ metaphor. In 2008, Mayor Bloomberg signed Executive Order 120 requiring the New York Administration to take measures in order to make life easier for the 1.8 million New Yorkers with limited English proficiency by providing translation and interpretation into Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Italian, and French Creole.

Looking back to Europe and other interesting visions of multilingualism Julia Kristeva, a literary critic and philosopher of Bulgarian origin living in France, dreams of Europe “as a federation of respected differences” and points to multilingualism as a laboratory of diversity and the best response to fundamentalist temptations.⁵ Umberto Eco, for his part, writes that “a Europe of polyglots is not a Europe of people who speak many languages fluently, but, in the best case scenario, of people who can communicate, each speaking his own language and understanding that of the other, but who, while not being able to speak it fluently, by understanding it, even with difficulty, would understand the ‘spirit’, the cultural universe that every one expresses when speaking the language of his ancestors and of his own tradition.”⁶

In the last few months, the services of the European Commission have produced a series of documents that provide a good illustration of how we put these principles into practice. They are:

- A Report on the implementation of Council Resolution of 21 November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism,⁷ wherein the Commission gives a synthesis of the actions launched in the priority areas identified by ministers of Member States three years ago;

³ A rewarding challenge: how the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe, Proposals from the Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue set up at the initiative of the European Commission, Brussels, 2008 (http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/maalouf/report_en.pdf).

⁴ From a letter to Mr Richard Melanchton Hurd, 3rd January 1919 (<http://msgboard.snopes.com/politics/graphics/troosevelt.pdf>).

⁵ L'Europe des langues: http://www.kristeva.fr/oslo_europe.html.

⁶ Eco, Umberto (1995): *In search of the perfect language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

⁷ SEC (2011) 927 final (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/pdf/sec927_en.pdf).

- An update of the 2008 Inventory of Community actions in the field of multilingualism.⁸ This is a much more detailed record of all the Commission initiatives that have an impact on multilingualism including: research on machine translation; a directive on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings;⁹ research; and actions financed through the European Social Fund in order to promote employment through better language learning;
- A policy handbook entitled *Language learning at pre-primary school level: making it efficient and sustainable*.¹⁰ This guide, the fruit of cooperation in a group of national experts, provides recommendations on how to ensure the success of early exposure to language learning and linguistic diversity. The publication focuses on the direct and indirect benefits of this approach, from openness to other languages and cultures to problem-solving skills; potential pitfalls are equally addressed;
- The Report of the Civil society platform for multilingualism,¹¹ including input from representatives of European organisations federating cultural institutes, translators, terminologists, publishers, theatres, and other groups. Recommendations cover many aspects, from intercultural competences to social inclusion and language policy and planning;
- The report of the ‘Languages for Jobs’ group of experts¹² that recommends European mobility for all learners and stresses the status of English as a ‘basic skill’ to emphasize the need to diversify language learning. It also suggests strengthening content and language integrated learning, in particular reference to vocational education and training; and
- The Report of the Business Platform for multilingualism.¹³ Not only pupils and their parents, but also employers should develop a better awareness of the many benefits of multilingualism. The report suggests mapping the best practices in this field and paves the way towards the establishment of the CELAN network,¹⁴ a web platform to help companies to manage their linguistic needs – and assets.

As you see, this is quite an impressive range of documents! In September, the European Commission and the Council of Europe also signed a joint declaration to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the European Day of Languages,¹⁵ reaffirming their commitment to the promotion of multilingualism and their determination to look for further synergies.

In the next few months, other important texts will follow. The Commission is supporting the efforts of the Polish Presidency to reach an agreement between Member States on what initiatives should be taken to improve mobility inside the EU through better lan-

⁸ SEC (2011) 926 final (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/pdf/inventory_en.pdf).

⁹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:280:0001:0007:en:PDF>.

¹⁰ SEC (2011) 928 final (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/pdf/ellpwp_en.pdf).

¹¹ Policy Recommendations for the Promotion of Multilingualism in the European Union. The full report can be downloaded here: http://ec.europa.eu/languages/pdf/doc5088_en.pdf.

¹² Providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market: <http://ec.europa.eu/languages/pdf/report.pdf>.

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/languages/pdf/business_en.pdf.

¹⁴ <http://www.celan-platform.eu/#>.

¹⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/languages/news/pdf/joint_declaration_european_day_of_languages_en.pdf.

guage competences.¹⁶ At the European level, the main tool for promoting language learning is the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) through its various components for school, higher education, vocational education and training.

At the end of 2013, the Lifelong Learning Programme will be replaced by a new programme, covering the period 2014-2020. This new programme, that should take the name of *Erasmus for All*,¹⁷ will capitalize on the strengths of the current LLP, harnessing all the resources available to help young people find a job and exploit the opportunities opened by the Single Market. Languages will of course play a central role in every aspect of the programme.

Cooperation with international partners, such as India and China, will also continue, in particular within the framework of the high level people to people dialogue announced a few days ago by Commissioner Vassiliou.¹⁸ The interest for Chinese language learning is rapidly growing in the EU, and there is a similar interest in China to teach not only the biggest European languages, but also the smaller ones.

Next year the European Commission will also publish the results of the first-ever European Survey on Language Competences¹⁹ that was carried out in 14 countries earlier this year. This will pave the way for the establishment of a European Indicator of Language Competences, allowing us to measure progress towards our objective of having all EU citizens learn at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue from a very early age.

We look forward to a rewarding period in the field of European multilingualism. The support of the National Institutions for Languages and of the European Federation will certainly be extremely precious for us.

¹⁶ The Council conclusions on language competences to enhance mobility, adopted on 28 November 2011, can be consulted here: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126373.pdf.

¹⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-for-all/>.

¹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news3105_en.htm.

¹⁹ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11105_en.htm.