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European Commissioner for Multilingualism

Multilingualism – What does it mean in today’s European Union?

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

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Title: Multilingualism – What does it mean in today's European Union?

Dear Dr. Weilemann, Excellencies, Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

Multilingualism does not function, the costs are far too high and anyhow we do not need it since there is English as lingua franca.

These are, ladies and gentlemen, the well-known negative perceptions about multilingualism. I have experienced similar reactions when President Barroso presented this portfolio. But I can easily prove that these arguments are wrong and I can assure you all, that nobody nowadays has any doubt about the political dimension of this policy, especially in Germany.

Let me start with the easiest argument that the costs are too high. Obviously, 1% of the annual EU budget for securing that all legislative texts or documents for citizens are available in 23 languages seems to be a lot of money. But as usual, breaking down huge figures helps to put them into context. The mentioned costs do not represent more than 2€50 per citizen each year for a democratic right to understand and to be understood in the mother tongue.

Secondly, despite the fact that since 2004 we have doubled the number of official languages and since the creation of the Union in 1958 we have six times more official languages, the system still functions. I am well aware that some question this and claim that we have to review the situation. I am already doing so but there is no quick fix, ladies and gentlemen.

Finally, there is English as lingua franca; again, easy to counter argue. Not only because without doubt France and Germany but also Spain and Italy, just to name the most important countries, would strongly disagree. But is English really a lingua franca? Isn't it more a communication tool for certain communities, such as this special Brussels environment or some financial or scientific circles? And isn't it true that we often say in English what we can say and not necessarily want to say? Are we not regularly speaking Globish, this reduced set for communication and not English?

Ladies and gentlemen, we all know multilingualism came about at the moment of birth of the institutions with regulation 1/1958. That does not say more but also not less than that all official languages are equal. There is no reference language. That is true until today and I am convinced that we should not touch this principle.

It constitutes a democratic right for all citizens, has a strong link with the equality of treatment for all Member States independent of their size, economic power or their importance and is the expression of the Union's motto: unity in diversity.

Moreover, it represents the relationship between language, cultural heritage and identity, which in my view is part of the answer to the question what a European identity constitutes. It is this double approach of keeping the national background in culture, language and identity while promoting and living the diversity of an ever more linked-up and exchanging Europe.

I should like to devote a few moments to the challenges that this policy is facing. Starting with education, I can confirm that we have a positive trend in taking up language learning by youngsters and that all Member States actively support the Barcelona decision, mother tongue plus two. But we have a serious motivation problem and there is a need to help more efficiently those who are teaching foreign languages. In addition we have to discuss what Barcelona means in terms of language proficiency if we want that this becomes reality for all citizens and not just for the elite. The recent and first ever ministerial conference in February this year confirmed the commitment of Member States and Parliament to work on those issues. I am looking forward to the first ideas that the May Education Council will eventually produce.

Business has confirmed the study which we presented at the beginning of 2007, that there is a need for more language knowledge and that beyond English, which counters the lingua franca issue mentioned earlier. Globalisation is not the only reason.

Markets are in the end relations with consumers and that still requires very often the language one masters best. As business, especially SMEs, needs more guidance I have invited a group of experts under the Chairmanship of Vicomte Davignon to analyse the potential. Results and recommendations are expected soon.

Intercultural dialogue is a necessity since the club of Rome warned decades ago of the eventual clash of civilisation. Migration and globalisation have added a more direct dimension. Language plays an important role as all Member States recognise. All models, be it the UK, France, the Netherlands or Germany, have shown their limits. Yet, there is convergence in saying that learning the language of the host country is a prerequisite for effective social integration. Still, I think there is also potential for open societies to profit from the language knowledge of those coming from another cultural and linguistic background. I am conscious that there is a fine line which needs to be drawn. The current year of intercultural dialogue offers many opportunities for promoting exchange and best practices.

My contribution to this was the creation of a group of intellectuals, chaired by the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. I recommend the reading of their interesting, although by some called "challenging" proposals.

Since globalisation was mentioned we cannot close these reflections without touching upon the external dimension of multilingualism. On the one hand we are exporting our system to others.

Just to name one example, we have been contacted by the South-African authorities, who are interested in profiting from our experiences in setting up a similar system for their 11 different languages. From contacts with the Indian and Chinese authorities we know that both countries are engaging in training their people in the European languages. I personally think that Europe should also increase the possibilities to take up the languages of these growing economic powers.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the main goal of my mandate I announced a new strategy for multilingualism to be presented in autumn this year. The aim is to present an approach that should secure a long-term sustainable system. Such a way forward will cover to extend, and also in a form still to be decided, the institutional issues. But these are too different issues in nature that we will keep them apart.

In preparation of the many aspects of multilingualism I have called for as much external advice as possible. The High Level Group of Multilingualism, under Berlin Professor Mackiewicz, has also provided its valuable input for the educational part. The business forum, which I mentioned earlier is working and will meet later this month in order to advance towards its recommendations, which I am certain will help us a lot. Amin Maalouf's group has also prepared its report that looks at ways forward in better integration.

But there are so many more stakeholders, interest groups and even very engaged individuals that we have gone for a public consultation. Much to our surprise this has created an unexpected high return rate of replies. More than 2500 organisations and individuals made useful observations with rather converging views about the key principles of multilingualism.

We are examining this rich input and aiming to take up the essential ideas in cooperation with Member States and Parliament. Under the French Presidency we hope to have an engaging and fruitful debate that should ideally lead to meaningful conclusions.

Meine sehr geehrten Damen und Herren, ich kann meinen Vortrag vermutlich nicht beenden, ohne einige wenige Worte über die deutsche Sprache zu sagen.

Let's be conscious that the German language is privileged at the EU Institutions. Even though we adhere to the initially mentioned principle of the equality of the official languages in accordance with regulation 1/1958, the Commission has the internal system of three working languages, English and French and German. Almost no decision is taken in the college without having the texts available in these three languages.

I am well aware of concerns in Germany about the status of the language in the institutions. But, ladies and gentlemen, it cannot be the responsibility of the Commission to revert to the situation that nowadays the vast majority of officials draft in English. That nags equally France and Germany but I repeat this is homework. I sympathise with and encourage the efforts by both countries to promote their languages in the institutions.

Let me conclude by underlining that the Lisbon Treaty will add new challenges inter alia with the increased rights of national Parliaments. We are already analysing the possible impact. This will create an extra burden who's sharing needs to be discussed. As I said I would call for caution to attack the basic principles of regulation 1/1958. I do not expect that we can reduce the number of official languages. On the contrary, the number is likely to increase and this is not only for reasons of enlargement.

All these are good reasons for a very careful analysis which takes time. As we all know, it is easy to open the box of Pandora but as you say in German: die Geister, die ich rief, werd ich nun nicht mehr los.

Thank you for your attention.