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CITIZEN'S SUMMARY

Subject: Commission Communication 'Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment'

1. WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

There are many languages in Europe: some are official national languages, others are spoken in particular regions or by minorities. They all belong to our common cultural heritage and they make us who we are. The languages and cultures brought by immigrants enhance this rich palette.

People speaking different languages now have many more opportunities to come into contact with each other. There are a number of reasons for this:

- (1) We can move freely within Europe. Going on holiday, studying or working in another European country where another language is spoken is now a common experience.
- (2) Nowadays many of our towns present a mosaic of languages and cultures, thanks to daily contacts with people from widely differing backgrounds who have chosen to settle in Europe.
- (3) As a result of globalisation, we do business with customers and suppliers in other countries and continents.

Language is the key to communication. It is also the key to other cultures. Without mutual understanding through language learning, contacts between people of different mother tongues all too often lead to misunderstanding and segregation, and thereby missed opportunities.

2. WHY LANGUAGES MATTER

Languages matter for citizens in their everyday life. You are travelling abroad and need to find someone who speaks your language in a hospital or in a police station. Your African neighbours would like to take part in the activities of the local community, but do not know how to start learning your language. You find information on the Internet, but it is in a language you do not understand. You are a plumber, a nurse, a doctor, who would like to work in another country but neither you nor your family speaks the language. You hope to sign an important contract in China and a Chinese speaker on your staff would give you the edge over your competitors.

3. WHY AT EU LEVEL?

To improve the situation, the European Commission has proposed to join forces with Member State governments, the European Parliament, regions and social partners in order to:

- Make people aware of the advantages of speaking different languages both for business and for dialogue with other cultures.
- Give all citizens the chance of learning two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

These objectives are the backbone of what is called 'multilingualism policy'. They are set out in a Commission Communication. This is not a piece of legislation, but rather a policy-setting document. The Commission has no say in the running of schools. That is left entirely to the Member States. Nor does the Commission adopt laws to promote languages. Its role is to give political direction, to help Member States solve the common problems faced by their citizens.

To achieve its medium to long-term objectives the Commission promotes multilingualism throughout the whole range of its policies and programmes, providing an impulse for Member States, local authorities and social partners to take action at their level. In 2012 the Commission will review the progress that has been made.

Clearly, languages are important, but which languages should people learn? The Commission suggests that, beside mother tongue, citizens can choose a language of communication and a "personal adoptive language" depending on their needs, interests and family background.

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