Leonard Orban

EU commissioner responsible for multilingualism

European multilingualism policy

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

- It gives me great pleasure to be here with you today. First of all I should like to thank Madame Ries, Viscount Eyskens (*Honorary President of EBI*), Baron Jacobs (*President of EBI*) and Mr Stuyven for the invitation to join you as guest speaker on this occasion.

- I am pleased to have been given this opportunity to talk to you about European multilingualism policy. I should first of all like to state that your objectives are very similar to my own.

- I know that the main aim of your association is to promote your city, our city, Brussels, as a European capital, in more ways than one: as the main home of both the Community institutions and of all of the workers (and their families) whose efforts power the Union. Multilingualism, I am pleased to note, is therefore high on your list of priorities.
In fact my goal, as Commissioner responsible for multilingualism, is to implement this European policy and all of the values it encompasses. In order to do this, I will endeavour to reach out to citizens and to the players in this area.

The history of Europe is also that of its languages. In Belgium – and in Brussels in particular – linguistic diversity is a daily reality for the inhabitants and a manifestation of this living heritage. The preservation of this shared heritage has lain at the heart of European construction from the outset.

Today, with 27 Member States and 23 official languages – not to mention more than 60 regional and minority languages – this linguistic diversity is taking on a new dimension. These different languages do not all have the same historical background, or even the same influence. They do not share the same ambitions, but they all have legitimacy and equal dignity.
• The language spoken by a person is an integral part of his or her identity. It is the most direct expression of his or her culture. It is also an essential tool of communication. European citizens must be able to make the fullest possible use of this heritage.

Languages must not be perceived as obstacles, but as bridges between individuals.

• I am convinced that, like me, you share this view, since one of the aims of your association is the promotion and development of the various European cultures in Brussels. In particular, you work to ensure that the public can have access to services in various languages, an exercise that I wholeheartedly support.

• Before I go into more detail on my ongoing activities and the results achieved so far, I should like to draw your attention to the principles that guide my thoughts and actions.
• First of all, the equality of all official languages is and must remain a building block of European integration. The increased demand for translation and publication of legislative and interpretative texts is being closely examined in terms of both the foreseeable consequences and the feasible solutions, with due regard for the limits of the resources available.

• Moreover, whenever it comes to building bridges between peoples, multilingualism is the tool par excellence and the most telling example of “unity in diversity”. Linguistic diversity will, I am convinced, help us to develop a European identity, enriching our other identities, local, regional, and national.

• Finally, Europe is today living in an era of globalisation, increased mobility and migration, one that is also marked by a revitalisation of the regions and a strengthening of the economic and social role played by cross-border regions.
• Multilingualism must therefore offer new answers for citizens and for our society. Language skills must take pride of place in cross-border cooperation.

• There is also a need to respect all languages, including those of national and immigrant minorities. We must ask ourselves: what are we doing to integrate these immigrants, these citizens who speak regional or minority languages? What are we doing to acknowledge the value of these languages and cultures to our communities?

Policy of multilingualism

• At European level, multilingualism policy has progressed apace in the last few years, particularly at the instigation of President Barroso. This progress was boosted even further with the creation in January 2007 of a specific multilingualism portfolio, which I have the great honour to hold.
• Since I became a Commissioner on the first of January, I have endeavoured to define a policy for multilingualism for 2007, 2008 and beyond.

• It is true that we are not starting out from scratch. At the Barcelona European Council in 2002, at the suggestion of the European Commission, the Member States set themselves the objective of European citizens learning at least two foreign languages. Following on from this, in 2003 the Commission launched the 2004-2006 action plan for the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity. The aim of this plan was to promote multilingualism in Europe, in cooperation with the Member States and by means of specific measures in our education and training programmes.

• A report on the implementation of this plan has just been published. The results are quite encouraging. They show that fruitful cooperation between the Commission and the Member
States is possible and positive in the field of teaching and learning languages.

- 2008 will be a pivotal year for multilingualism.

- Thus, on 15 February I will be organising a ministerial conference with the ministers responsible for education and multilingualism. This will be an opportunity to take stock of the progress made and discuss possible ways of cooperation in the future.

- Moreover, a specific communication on multilingualism is being prepared. It should be adopted by the Commission by September 2008. This document will give new drive and direction to our action in support of languages. It will also highlight the cross-cutting nature of multilingualism and its links to other European policies, such as culture, justice and security, employment and social cohesion.
In order to stimulate our discussions, I hope to bring together as many players as possible. My departments at the Commission recently organised an open consultation on the Internet about the future of languages in Europe. This was a great success, with around 2500 replies. In 2008, we will continue to receive contributions from the Member States (consultation of the national governments on 17 January and the ministerial conference, which I have already mentioned, on 15 February). A public hearing is also planned for 15 April.

The Commission ensures that the multilingualism policy is linked with other EU policies such as culture and education. Multilingualism is thus also one of the specific objectives of the Community lifelong learning programme (2007-2013). This involves encouraging the learning of languages from a very early age, throughout school life and also during working life.
• Multilingualism is a cross-cutting policy, with links to many other policies. One very clear link is that to intercultural dialogue. With this in mind, I have set up a **group of intellectuals, chaired by the writer Amin Maalouf**. Its remit is to define multilingualism's contribution to the **European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008** and the years beyond.

• We have also endeavoured to stress the importance of the economic dimension of multilingualism. **European companies have a role to play** in the language field and can contribute to strengthening ties between the business world and the education system.

• This brings me to our economic ambitions. Multilingualism contributes to the implementation of the **Lisbon Strategy**, the objective of which is to make us more competitive and create more jobs. For individuals, a knowledge of languages can offer career opportunities or open up the possibility of working abroad. For companies, a
multilingual workforce can provide access to European and global markets.

- Languages are a way of making European companies more competitive. A recent study conducted for the European Commission confirms that real trade opportunities have remained unexploited because of a lack of language skills in companies.

- The Commission would therefore like to make the business world aware of the impact of language skills on companies' performance and of the potential for growth that a better grasp of foreign languages fosters. To this end, we recently staged in Brussels a conference entitled "Languages mean business" on the subject of languages as a competitive asset for Europe.

- One of the main conclusions of this conference was the following: in the world of international business, having a good grasp of English is
not enough. This idea was repeated many times by the conference participants, the vast majority of whom were representatives of the business world. The link between skills in different languages – especially the consumer's language – and companies' economic performance is becoming very clear.

- A forum of companies on multilingualism has also been set up to look for ways and means of boosting language skills in companies. The idea is to help them to break into new markets.

- Finally, I would draw your attention to the organisation, each year, of the European Day of Languages to celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity.

**Conclusion**

- As you can see, many initiatives are under way and more will follow. I should like to conclude by saying that Brussels is already a potent symbol of our policy of multilingualism and can become
an even more powerful one in future. As a capital of Europe, as a place where most of the European institutions have their headquarters, and particularly as a city where so many different cultures and languages coexist on a daily basis, Brussels is a shining example of a multilingual European city open to dialogue between the different cultures. It is thanks to actions in the field and to initiatives such as yours that multilingualism will become more and more of a reality. Not only here, but for all citizens of the Union. I therefore wish you every success in your work.

- Thank you.