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European Commissioner for Multilingualism

"Multilingualism in the EU: promoting intercultural dialogue, linguistic diversity and language"

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It is a real pleasure for me to be here today. I would particularly like to thank the organizers of this conference for giving my an opportunity to talk to you about multilingualism policy.

As the title of my new strategy for languages in Europe makes clear – 'multilingualism, an asset for Europe and a shared commitment' – it is by working together that we will bring about the reality of a truly multilingual Europe. ALTE is a vital partner in this task.

Let me share with you briefly my vision of how languages are a strength for Europe. And then I will say a few words on the European survey on language competences, where ALTE has a key role.

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Europe – unity in diversity, through languages

Europe is an open, dynamic alliance. In 2007, we marked the 50th anniversary of the European Union and its sixth enlargement, bringing the total number of Member States to 27, each contributing its own culture and identity.
Languages have been a significant part of European policy right from the start: the very first regulation of the then European Economic Community concerned languages: it placed all the official languages on an equal footing.

This set the trend for multilingualism; today’s Europe of 27 is a multicultural, diverse enterprise with 23 official languages that characterise this diversity.

In a changing Europe, daily life has become more international and multilingual. Languages are becoming essential for everyone.

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The new strategy on multilingualism

This is the context in which the Commission's multilingualism policy has expanded, culminating last year in my new strategy.

Valuing diversity is at its heart. My objective is to promote all language skills - official European Union languages, and European regional or minority languages. I would also like to develop our relationship with major partners such as India and China in the field of languages. We need to promote European languages in these two vast countries, but also
encourage our own citizens to learn Hindi and Mandarin. The same applies to other world languages such as Russian and Arabic.

Our new strategy takes multilingualism beyond the field of education and training, placing it in the wider context of building a Europe of solidarity and prosperity.

Languages for solidarity

Languages can create a Europe of solidarity, because by better understanding and valuing each others' languages, we can build stronger bridges of understanding between the different peoples of Europe, and improve our awareness of being part of a wider culture: one that speaks different languages but has a common background in diversity.

Our strategy emphasises that languages are a tool for social cohesion and for dialogue between different cultures. That multilingualism is also a way to integrate migrants, allowing them to keep a link with  their culture and language while making sure that they are fully able to use the language of their host country and thus fully integrate into it.
Here I would like to recommend to you a remarkable report entitled 'a Rewarding Challenge' written by a group of intellectuals chaired by French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. I feel that this report, published in January 2008, offers a genuinely visionary approach to multilingualism.

Languages for prosperity

Languages can create a Europe of prosperity, because language skills can help open doors to better jobs, economic growth and better access to international markets.

With expanding global trade and international relations between Europe and the rest of the world, European companies require a wide range of language skills and intercultural competences among their workforces.

As the knowledge society develops, the nature of work changes. We are moving from a 'job-for-life' perspective to one where people will change job several times. We have to prepare people for jobs that themselves are changing. People don't just need technical skills – increasingly, employers are looking for a range of cross-cutting skills that focus especially on communication and languages.
Therefore, we encourage companies to improve their linguistic skills in order to be competitive on a global scale, and encourage people to develop language skills for better job opportunities. In this we draw on a report drawn up by the Davignon group on the importance of languages in business. This report, published in July 2008, provided inspiration for the Commission communication on multilingualism.

Languages for everyone

We emphasise that language learning is a lifelong activity. Hence, the emphasis on offering more language learning in vocational training and adult education, where provision has hitherto been scant.

Our policy underlines the importance of languages for mobility of students as well as teachers and workers. For many students, their Erasmus scholarship opens the door to the practical use of a new language, which will be valuable for their future careers. We are also extending Erasmus-type mobility to vocational training. Erasmus Mundus links Europe with the world, developing student exchange links with important new world partners such as India and China. In fact, with these two countries in particular I can inform you that we
have recently signed agreements on multilingualism co-operation.

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**European Indicator on Language Competences**

Assessment and certification - your core work - are integral to language learning. We also see them as important in bringing us closer to our goal of a multilingual Europe. This is why, when the Member States committed themselves in 2002 to the target of teaching 'mother tongue plus 2' from a very early age, they also agreed to develop a linguistic indicator, to measure the general level of foreign language knowledge of pupils in the Member States.

I am very pleased that we are making progress towards setting up a European Language Indicator that will tell us how close we are to achieving our objective of making Europe’s citizens truly multilingual. And I am delighted that ALTE, with your experience and expertise, is part of the survey consortium.

As you know, we will test knowledge of English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. These are the languages most often taught as first or second foreign languages in the EU.
But the framework for testing will also be available for all countries that wish to carry out tests in other languages as well. The Commission will ensure that the 2\textsuperscript{nd} round of the survey covers all the official European languages taught in the European Union.

The survey will test pupils in the final year of lower secondary education or the second year of upper secondary education. Initially, we will test reading comprehension, listening comprehension and writing; speaking will be covered in subsequent surveys.

**Implementation and timing of the survey**

Development of the survey is well underway. The first round of testing will take place in 2011, and the data and final report will be available in February 2012.

I am confident that with the help of your consortium, we will succeed in developing a top class tool for measuring the language competence of young Europeans.
Multilingualism – a shared endeavour: the role of networks and platforms

Language networks and consortia, such as SurveyLang, carry out invaluable work promoting language skills across Europe. Northern Spain is particularly rich in cultural and linguistic diversity, and I am very pleased that these regions are represented in 6 of the language networks and projects we are supporting under the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme.

These projects are fertile sources of new ideas about teaching and learning languages. But the vital feedback they give us, about how multilingualism is actually applied on the ground, helps us to refine and improve our approaches.

As I said earlier, multilingualism is a shared endeavour. This is why these projects and networks are so important. It is also why I intend to create two new platforms later this year for a permanent dialogue, one with civil society; the other with businesses and their organisations, to help us develop our policy on languages and with the work we do with Member States in education and in culture.

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Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

2009 is the European Year for Creativity and Innovation. I am sure you will agree with me that knowledge of languages not only opens doors to new opportunities. It also opens the way to new and creative thinking – since multilingual people are aware that problems are perceived and tackled in different ways depending on language and cultural backgrounds, and can harness this ability to find new solutions.

With a network of institutions spanning 26 languages, ALTE is a powerful agent for change, and therefore I invite you to share our common vision of the potential of languages with your partners.

The multilingual Europe we all desire will require hard work and real investment. It will be a shared commitment. Member States, the media, enterprise, and civil society must all work with us, to preserve our linguistic heritage and allow it to flourish.

Grazas!