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Aspects of a Multilingual Union

ENLU—European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning Among All Undergraduates

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Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to open this conference today.

Let me first of all thank wholeheartedly the University of Nancy II for organising this exceptional event, and the soul of all this: professor Wolfgang Mackiewicz, our multilingualism man, who needs no presentation.

Multilingualism is central to the European project, and I know that language learning lies at the very heart of the vision of the European Language Council, which has always defended the political and symbolic relevance of languages.

I congratulate you on your participation in this initiative. Languages offer to undergraduates is a goal which receives my full support.

I look forward to seeing the birth of a trans-European network of higher-education institutions gathered around the idea that European graduates—whatever their discipline—should be able to communicate in at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

As you know, a great deal has happened in this policy area since the ENLU project first got off the ground in 2004.

The most important development is that we now have a new strategy for multilingualism which can be defined as a policy in its own right.

The most recent development is our Communication of November last year titled “A new strategy for multilingualism”. This is the first ever Commission document

on the subject, and it is proof of our commitment to languages particularly after the latest enlargement.

Since May 1, 2004, the Union is home to almost 500 million people who speak about 80 aboriginal languages, to which the languages of its many migrant communities should be added.

When I look at this figure, I cannot stop thinking of the enormous linguistic and cultural capital the EU holds within its borders. Why do I call it 'capital'? Because language diversity is a precious asset for Europe. And this diversity must be safeguarded.

Languages define our personal and cultural identities. And this is important in an age threatened by material and symbolic uniformity. Let me explain what I mean by this.

During an internet chat I had with a score of European schools at the beginning of March, a student from Portugal asked me about the advantages of speaking the same language across the EU.

My reply was that it would be easy to talk to each other if we all spoke the same language, but we would have a lot less to say.

In fact, we can have it both ways. We should learn the languages we want to use to communicate with our fellow Europeans AND we should keep our own mother tongues lively and productive in all domains of expression.

I am happy to see that so many are talking about language learning at the highest level these days.

The latest Education Council meeting in February had three language issues on its agenda:

- the Communication on Multilingualism I've just mentioned;
- another Communication on an Indicator of foreign language skills among 15-year olds; and

- our proposed Recommendation on key competencies for lifelong learning, the first two of which are about mother tongue and foreign languages.

Let us take a closer look at the Communication on Multilingualism. The document covers three broad areas: multilingualism in our economy, in the institutions of the Union, and in our society.

The Commission believes that languages and multilingualism are very important for the European **economy**, and we are looking at ways to develop it further.

We all know that if you have good language skills it will be easier for you to move from one part of Europe to another, among other things, to find a good job.

However, let us not forget that the language industry itself generates a great deal of business throughout Europe.

The industry covers a wide range of multilingual services including teaching, tourism, translation, interpreting, localisation and sub-titling.

On the **institutional** front, multilingualism is essential for the Union's democratic legitimacy and the transparency of its decisions.

It is essential to maintain the multilingual nature of the Union and the Communication announces various practical initiatives based among other things on the work of our interpretation and translation services.

Finally, the Communication deals with our multilingual **society**.

I would like to quote a passage from the Communication here: “the ability to communicate in more than one language ... is a desirable life-skill for all European citizens”.

You know what this means in practice: we have the ambitious target that Europeans should be able to speak their mother tongue plus two other languages.

We encourage all citizens to learn and speak more languages in order to improve mutual understanding.

This has crucial implications for the cohesion of our societies and for inter-cultural dialogue.

The more citizens who speak foreign languages, the more languages will be bridges, rather than barriers.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This much for our new multilingualism policy. But where do we stand today?

Last month the Commission published a statistical survey titled “Europeans and their languages”. Let me give you the most interesting results.

56% of European citizens say they can hold a conversation in one language apart from their mother tongue. The figure is encouraging, but there are wide variations from one country to another.

For instance, 97% of the population in my native Slovakia and 95% of Latvians indicate that they know at least one foreign language.

By comparison, in six countries the majority of citizens speak only one language. These include Ireland (66%), the United Kingdom (62%), and Italy (59%).

As to our ‘mother tongue plus two’ target, the road is going to be much longer. A bit less than one respondent in three states that he or she speaks two foreign languages well enough to have a conversation.

On the top of this list we can find Luxembourg (92%), the Netherlands (75%) and Slovenia (71%).

Not only are language skills distributed unevenly in geographical terms, there are marked socio-demographic differences as well.

The typical “multilingual” European is likely to be young, well-educated or still studying, born in a country other than the country of residence, who uses foreign languages for professional reasons and is motivated to learn.

All this suggests that a large proportion of European society is still not enjoying the advantages of multilingualism.

The study shows that the main reasons for this are lack of time, or motivation, or money.

And when people do decide to learn a language, they do so for the expected practical benefits. 35% learn a language to use on holiday abroad, 32% because they need the language for work.

In spite of these perceived obstacles on the way to learning languages, it seems clear that many fellow Europeans regard multilingualism as a good thing.

83% agree that speaking several languages is an advantage.

Also, more than two thirds even believe that language teaching should be a political priority in education. This probably reflects the fact that Europeans learn languages mostly at school, particularly secondary school.

Finally, three quarters of us are convinced that young people really do need to learn foreign languages, and that they should start as early as possible.

Things become a bit more contentious when people are asked which languages they speak and which they would like to learn. Inevitably, English gets the lion's share.

English is the most widely used language in the EU. 51% speak English either as their mother tongue or as a foreign language.

From this point of view, our policy to promote mother tongue plus **two** languages has its reasons.

Many people believe that foreign language learning is the same as learning English. Of course there is nothing wrong with learning English, but English is simply not enough.

If you decide to leave home and settle in another part of Europe, English may help in the transition provided you share it more or less as a lingua franca.

However, if you want to have long-term, significant contacts with the people around you, there is no option but learning their native language as well.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are convinced that higher-education institutions must be encouraged to play a much more active role in promoting multilingualism.

Universities across Europe are beginning to work towards the goals of international competitiveness, mobility of students and staff, and employability.

Increasing integration, as well as globalisation, presents major linguistic challenges for universities. In particular, there is a growing trend in some non-English speaking countries to offer courses through the medium of English rather than in the local languages.

This is a clever decision if you want to attract students from abroad, however it may also have an impact on the vitality of those languages.

These developments and the associated risks should not be taken lightly.

Another idea we have in the pipeline is a network of chairs in studies related to multilingualism and inter-culturalism, somewhat like the current Jean Monnet chairs on European studies.

I hope that the budget available for our education and training programme over the next 7 years will be enough for us to take this idea forward.

One final note. You may be familiar with the fact that EU research programmes also address multilingualism, to the tune of some €20 million per year.

These funds go to the field of technological research—particularly translation technology—and in the social sciences.

The latter support research into language issues in relation with, for example, social exclusion, identity, and cross-cultural understanding.

Let me repeat that these domains are crucial for the social and political development of the Union and of its relations with the outside world.

I can only encourage universities to come forward with interesting projects for the 7th Framework research programme as we are very keen to develop this work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe that all this is proof of the Commission's commitment to supporting multilingualism and—as the first Commissioner to be entrusted with this portfolio—I intend to establish this policy area on solid foundations.

One of the main challenges for a European co-operation network such as ENLU is how to bridge the gap between policy development at European level and at institutional level.

How can proposals and recommendations developed at European level best make their way into the individual institutions in the Member States? And here I mean not only in the ENLU partner institutions, but also in universities outside the project partnership.

On a positive note, present conditions are right for multilingualism to take root in our academic institutions:

- the advent of the knowledge society is giving universities new educational priorities and
- a wind of reforms is blowing across Europe's higher education.

In this favourable climate, I would like to encourage you to persevere and ensure the sustainability of these important endeavours.

I hope that you will have a very successful conference.

Thank you.