

United in Diversity: Political and Social Development Aspects of EU Languages and Cultures

Vilnius (Lithuania) – 27 September 2013

Speech

Ministers,
Honourable members,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to be back in the Seimas today for the second high level event on languages hosted by the **Lithuanian Parliament**. Let me thank you for the invitation and, once again, for the warm welcome you ensured to the conference the Commission co-organised earlier this week with our Lithuanian partners on the occasion of the European Day of Languages.

This week Vilnius is indeed the **capital of multilingualism** and I am persuaded that the echoes from the events taking place around the city will further inspire the discussions on languages and culture at all levels, from academics to people in the street.

Opening up Education

Let me first update you on an initiative that is very much in tune with the activities of the two parliamentary committees united

here today. Two days ago the European Commission adopted the Communication "**Opening up Education**". At the conference yesterday we gave a quick preview of the strategy behind it. It is all about using **new technology and open educational resources to improve skills** development.

Our starting point was the general realisation that while information and communication technologies have become an integral part of our daily lives, they are still under-used in schools and universities.

If Europe fully exploits the new technology and the new opportunities offered by free online courses and other Open Educational Resources, it can make its education and training systems more effective, flexible and accessible. ICT skills and digital literacy enhance young people's employability and encourage active citizenship.

This is why within the Commission the Directorate General for Education and Culture and **DG CONNECT** have worked together to devise a strategy to speed up the change in schools and other education institutions to better integrate the possibilities opened by new technologies.

The link to languages is obvious. You will hear more about **language technology** from an expert in the field, Mr Rossi from DG Connect this afternoon. Let me just signal that one of the recurring themes in the new initiative "Opening up Education" is that the lack of multilingual digital content in Europe is hampering the use of Open Educational Resources for educational purposes. Therefore, the European Commission welcomes all initiatives such as META-NET, promoting linguistic diversity in the World Wide Web.

To be more specific, the European Commission is about to launch a new web site called **Open Education Europa**, with links to high quality open educational resources in their original languages. But this is really only the beginning of a process that will revolutionise the way we learn, collaborate and work together. Many new actions have been announced in the new Communication. Some of them aim to promote **organisational change** in schools, universities and training institutions to support integration of new technologies. Others are intended to stimulate the **publishing sector** and new content providers to exploit new market opportunities. The implementation of most measures will begin in the coming few years. The measures will be funded under the new Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes. I shall come back to Erasmus+ in just a few

moments. First, let me bring you up to speed with the discussions at yesterday's conference.

The essence of the conference

The conference was the result of a successful collaboration between the linguistic services of the European Commission and three Lithuanian partners: the Institute of the Lithuanian Language, **the State Commission for the Lithuanian Language and the Department of Translation and Interpretation Studies of the Vilnius University.**

The title of the conference, "Languages for mobility, jobs and active citizenship", referred to some crucial as well as topical issues: the **circulation of people** within the EU borders and beyond, **employment** and the **skills** necessary to find a job, and the **rights of citizens** allowing them to participate in democratic life at all levels of society. All these topics came under the umbrella of the EU motto "**Unity in diversity**" to signify the central role languages play in enabling communication, learning and exchanges among Europeans.

It is of course not possible to summarise all the discussions in just a few minutes, so I will limit myself to mentioning a few highlights.

Rethinking education - benchmark

In the session devoted to **language learning for mobility and work in Europe** participants discussed the challenges of language teaching and learning, in particular how to make learning more attractive.

The importance of **languages for jobs** was a central topic. Languages are definitely among the skills people need to improve their job prospects. This is borne out by surveys and studies which clearly underline the competitive advantage of individuals who can master foreign languages and of companies who employ them.

The Commission's own document on languages for employability, mobility and growth presents clear **evidence** on language learning based on recent surveys and proposes for the first time an **EU benchmark** on language learning for both the first and the second foreign language. That is why language learning is an integral part of the Commission's strategy on "**Rethinking education**" which aims at increasing the efficiency of education and training systems all over Europe.

Citizenship, democracy and institutional multilingualism

I would also like to elaborate on the session entitled "**Translating and interpreting for active citizenship**". Translation and interpretation are crucial for democracy and for

giving to all citizens, regardless of their origin and language skills, the opportunity to exercise their rights and to take an active part in society. Let me say that this is at the heart of the **multilingualism policy of the EU institutions**. Interpreters ensure communication in all EU meetings. Behind the scenes, translators work so that citizens can have access to legislation that matters to them in their own language and to other information in as many languages as possible. Indeed, EU citizens can take part in EU democratic life even if they do not master a foreign language: this is made possible by the institutions' commitment to multilingualism and the high professional qualities of the linguists working for the EU.

Enlargement – new official languages

Finally, one workshop examined the influence of the latest EU enlargements on languages. This workshop gave the opportunity to discuss how languages – including Lithuanian – have been **influenced by Europe-wide exposure** and if and how closer contact with other official languages has prompted linguistic or conceptual developments. It was an interesting and challenging debate, with many examples of how languages cope with new developments. On this point I would like to quote Commissioner Vassiliou's words, when she said that the day Europe ceases to speak its many languages is the day that Europe – as an idea, as a project – ceases to exist.

Before the 2004 enlargement, many had predicted that the European institutions would not cope with the overnight doubling of its official languages, and that multilingualism was too costly and doomed to fail. They were wrong. The situation was examined, and a strategy was laid out and **successfully implemented**. It would not have been possible without language technology, which gave translators and interpreters new tools to help them cope with the ever-increasing volume of languages to process.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, brings me back to the issue of **language-enhancing technology** and the main theme of our gathering here today. It was a recurring theme in most sessions at the conference. Through the European Commission's funding programmes, we have supported many innovative projects in the fields of language technology and ICT for language learning. It has been a priority under the Lifelong Learning Programme, managed by the Directorate-General for education and Culture between 2007 and 2013. I have already told you about our fruitful collaboration with the Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, DG Connect. Support has also come from Directorate-General for Research through projects financed by

the Framework Programme for Research. In future this will continue under the new programme Horizon 2020.

Erasmus+

Next year a new programme for education, training, youth and sport – Erasmus+ - will see the light. Language learning and linguistic diversity are among the specific objectives of the programme. Erasmus+ will provide support to projects on innovative teaching methods, for example, through "**strategic partnerships**" which aim at developing projects with high EU added-value and impact. Moreover, for the next seven years, people going on mobility for periods longer than a month within Erasmus+ projects, will systematically have the opportunity to receive learning support and follow language courses in the language they will be using in their work or for their studies. Technologies will play a crucial role in this initiative as they will allow more flexibility for learners to study wherever they are and whenever they want.

A large proportion of Erasmus+ budget will go to mobility for learning and training purposes and it goes without saying that we need to equip our young people with the language skills they need to make the most of these opportunities!

Before leaving the floor to my colleague from the Commission's

Directorate General for translation, let me congratulate the organisers again for their **commitment to multilingualism and linguistic diversity**. I can assure you that your commitment is shared. I wish you all a fruitful and successful continuation of the debate.

Thank you for your attention.