

Mr Leonard Orban
Commissioner designate for multilingualism

Introductory statement

European Parliament Hearing

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Titles in italics are meant to support the reading, not to be read

Mr President,

Honourable Members,

May I say, first of all, that I am deeply honoured to be here today.

I am extremely happy to see so many of you, whom I have already had the privilege to meet in the course of the last weeks.

On 1 January next, when Bulgaria and Romania become full members of what I consider the world's most farsighted political undertaking, we shall have taken another historic step towards the realisation of the European project of Unity in Diversity.

I cannot tell you how much it means to me, both as a citizen of Romania and as one of its former chief negotiators, to see my country join the European family you represent on the peaceful path that the Union is treading towards the goals of prosperity, solidarity and security. I am deeply committed to European integration, and I would like to assure you that, if confirmed, as a Commissioner I will do my best to make a substantial contribution to move this fascinating European project forward.

I am truly honoured by the confidence President Barroso has placed in me as Commissioner designate for Multilingualism, a portfolio that touches the very substance of European identity, since the values and challenges lying in integration, competitiveness, inclusiveness, cohesion, mobility, transparency and democracy are vital to the future of the European project and intimately linked to multilingualism. Indeed, the importance of multilingualism to the European project was recalled at the

recent Soul for Europe conference (17-19 November) in Berlin, which a number of you attended.

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As announced by President Barroso, and provided I am confirmed following this hearing, I will be responsible for multilingualism. I will spearhead the Commission's work on a portfolio which has become more important with every enlargement. Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity is a source of richness which also needs to be nurtured and promoted. My portfolio will involve important political and managerial tasks:

- Politically, I will steer the Commission's work on bringing an active multilingualism policy into a variety of policies which are key to the functioning of the Union and the single market: culture, education and competitiveness.
- Managerially, I will take charge of several services of central importance to the good working of the EU. The Directorates General for Translation and for Interpretation permit the EU institutions to work properly in the Union's 23 official languages, but their work has much wider repercussions for accountability and public participation across the EU. I will also be responsible for the Office for Official Publications of the European Union, the EU's inter-institutional publishing house, as well as for the multilingualism unit in the Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

If I am confirmed, and in line with the statement of President Barroso before the plenary on November 14, I will take special responsibility, alongside the President and Commissioner Figel', to work on inter-cultural dialogue, including the dialogue being organised by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers and the 2008 European Year of Inter-cultural dialogue.

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We live in a continent where dozens of languages are spoken. After centuries of strife, and after decades of division between Eastern and Western Europe, internal frontiers have been abolished and our ability to speak and understand each other's languages is the passport to real freedom of movement.

I want to use the opportunity of being here today to set out my views on the importance of multilingualism, how it contributes to our economic competitiveness, how it feeds into the social dimension and inter-cultural dialogue, and ultimately how it is a prerequisite for nurturing a space for European political dialogue – a huge, but tremendously motivating task for the EU and all its institutions and Member States.

I am deeply convinced that this must be a joint venture. I am therefore glad that:

- The European Parliament has always paid the greatest attention to language issues when discussing Commission documents and putting forward initiative reports, such as those prepared by Mr Ebner, Mr Portas, Mr Mavrommatis, and most recently Mr Joan i Mari.

- The Commission has also played a significant role in promoting language learning and linguistic diversity, in cooperation with the other institutions of the EU and with the Council of Europe, and launched the first Lingua programme in 1987.

Now I trust we can continue on that road and I would like to share with you my thoughts on the objectives towards which we should be working and how we could write the next chapter of multilingualism together. One of my fundamental beliefs is that the multilingual dimension of the EU must be mainstreamed in all relevant EU policies and programmes and not be seen as a separate, isolated policy.

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As you know, in 2005, the Lisbon Strategy was refocused to create higher levels of sustainable growth and jobs to deal successfully with the challenges of globalisation and an ageing population. Multilingualism is good for business and competitiveness; it therefore has an important contribution to make to the Lisbon agenda.

At first sight, one single language might appear easier to manage for business. However, not only is the "language industry" among the fastest growing industries in the world, multilingualism can also give businesses a competitive advantage by helping them to tap local markets and create new products which also cater for multilingualism, for example in communication technologies.

Companies, organisations and individuals, which have the capacity of mastering several languages are more creative and tend to break cultural stereotypes, think "outside the box" and develop innovative

products and services – all qualities and activities that have real economic value. We need open minds if we are to turn Europe into a modern, innovation-friendly society.

Mastering several languages also helps European firms, especially SMEs, to gain market share in other parts of the world if they are able to communicate in their clients' mother tongue. Better language skills therefore help our companies to take full advantage of the European internal market and be successful in the global economy.

Not only is multilingualism good for the economy, it is also essential to Europe's social dimension. Knowledge of other languages contributes to economic and social integration in the labour market and social cohesion. It also helps to make workers more mobile between countries, thereby enhancing their employment prospects.

It is through language that citizens' adhere to society and it is language which fosters social cohesion.

Respect for diversity, including linguistic diversity, and the fight against all forms of discrimination are essential cornerstones of our efforts to build a Social Europe.

With each enlargement the European Union has become more diverse, while at the same time sharing important common values ("unity in diversity"). Within each Member State also, our societies resemble an increasingly rich mosaic of cultures.

It is therefore particularly timely that 2008 will be the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, as proposed by the Commission under Mr Figel's responsibility.

Multilingualism has a major contribution to make to the process of intercultural dialogue. After all, language is an integral part of our identity. It is the structuring element of any culture and its most direct expression. It is through language that we socialise, that we organise our thoughts, that we transmit our cultural heritage.

Promoting multilingualism is therefore an excellent way to bring European citizens closer to each other, to make them feel that they belong to a wider community, so diverse and multifaceted that the identity of everyone is taken into account. On the other hand, multilingualism can also be an important tool with a view to achieving a better integration of immigrants in Europe.

Should my nomination be confirmed, I intend therefore to make a significant contribution to this European Year. I intend - already in 2007 - to hold a high-level seminar of intellectuals and practitioners of multilingualism which could make proposals and recommendations concerning the concrete contribution of multilingualism to the 2008 Year.

Multilingualism is also important with regard to our relations with third countries and ensuring balanced external relations. Indeed, our efforts to support multilingualism are not limited to EU languages; we are also

encouraging training in other languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Turkish and Russian.

The results of the French and Dutch referenda in 2005 demonstrated that European citizens in many Member States are wary of a rapidly growing Union which might weaken their national and regional identities. They want to be reassured that integration will not mean the loss of their traditions, cultures and languages.

When European policies touch upon subjects such as immigration, security, health and consumer protection, people want to participate in decision-making, to be involved and to have a say in shaping the future of this continent. And they cannot do so unless the European institutions ensure maximum transparency, opening up the decision-making process, and publishing relevant documents in all languages.

The European Institutions are forever striving to enable citizens and businesses to enjoy their rights and meet their obligations as well as give them access to information in their own language. This is where our translators and interpreters show their worth. The Barroso Commission was first in appointing not only a Commissioner with responsibility for multilingualism, but also a Vice-President with responsibility for communication.

We need to deliver results for citizens, and we need to communicate with them in a language they can understand. The Commission this month decided on its communication priorities for 2007 and it has fully embraced the need to adapt to the national and regional situation (**going**

local) if it is to succeed. Going local is first and foremost a question of understanding, with language being an essential medium whereby.

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I am impressed by the work undertaken so far by Ján Figel' to promote multilingualism in Europe with the support of the European Parliament. I intend to build on what he has begun.

For instance, and if confirmed, I would carefully analyse the results from the Action Plan for the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity, the recommendations from the High Level Group on Multilingualism and the activities of the Commission internal network for multilingualism. Before the end of 2007, I would organise a Ministerial conference to discuss the way forward. I would then propose a new Action Plan in 2008 to continue work in this area.

The promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity is a general objective of the new programme for lifelong learning to be launched next year. For the first time, it will be open to all languages spoken in the European Union as well as to the languages of the EU's main trading partners.

Work is also under way to develop an indicator of foreign language competences in Europe, which was recently endorsed by EU education ministers. I look forward to the development of this indicator, which will provide vital information for policymakers, identifying the most efficient systems and facilitating the exchange of good practices in language learning.

Cooperation with my future fellow Commissioners would be an important feature of my work in order to promote multilingualism within other relevant policies, programmes and measures – including the Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, the European Social Fund, education, and immigration issues.

Cooperation with other institutions would also be essential to my work. Within the Lisbon strategy, one of the priorities for education is to improve language skills. “Mother tongue plus two” is the ambitious objective which should guide our action for the years ahead. I am glad to see that the Council and Parliament recently endorsed the Commission’s recommendation on eight key competences, which include communication in foreign languages.

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At the same time, there are some other topics that I would like to tackle, should my nomination be confirmed.

Motivation lies at the heart of successful language learning. Careful analysis and imaginative solutions are required to motivate people and to overcome the barriers to learning. I want to pass on the message that languages are for everyone and shall work to make available and disseminate language methods fitting the needs of adults, especially the less educated, those at a disadvantage, including migrants.

The quality of language teaching should be improved. Initial and in-service training of language teachers and those who teach a different subject through a foreign language must be a priority for the coming years. I want to lead a reflection on common actions to be taken across Europe on this issue. Greater mobility of language teachers and prospective teachers could clearly help in this connection.

I believe that proper consultation with stakeholders is essential: not only to ensure that our policies are sound and based on good evidence, but also to help create momentum so that they achieve real results.

I intend therefore to create a Business Forum on Multilingualism to engage in a structured dialogue and partnership, with a view to identifying the concrete contribution that multilingualism can make to the Lisbon strategy, building on good practice and successful business approaches.

I see positive returns if we can better exploit the media potential to promote languages, supporting, for example, film sub-titling, publicity campaigns and programmes raising the language awareness of the general public.

Among other initiatives designed to raise visibility of the crucial role of languages in European integration, I will launch a translation contest

between schools from all over Europe, in the framework of the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

I spoke earlier about the need to have a genuine space for European political dialogue with citizens. I will make sure I contribute fully to this through my portfolio.

A key part of my job will be to make sure that the multilingualism of our institutions continues to be ensured. Citizens of all the Member States must be able to read and understand the laws that apply to them; democratically elected representatives must also be able to defend their interests and ideas without being hampered by language.

Consequently, if I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will pay strong attention to the translation and conference interpreting services of the Commission. In particular, I would work for the consolidation of the languages of the 2004 enlargement, for the smooth integration of Bulgarian and Romanian next year.

The European Commission is at the forefront of setting standards for translation and interpretation around the world. I intend to make sure this position of excellence is maintained and that standards are set for new translation and communication tools. The challenge here is to ensure that multilingualism is synonymous with language quality and vitality.

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Mr President,

Honourable Members,

The European institutions have proven their ability to take up the challenge of multilingualism; with adequate resources, they — and the Commission in particular — will continue to do so in the future, based on the same cost-efficiency parameters that were praised by the European Court of Auditors.

Much remains to be done to raise the language awareness and linguistic skills of citizens, enterprises and administrations. The Commission, with the help of the European Parliament, can do a great deal to increase both the demand for and the supply of language learning opportunities and to promote linguistic diversity.

I know that the Parliament is very active on multilingualism, and I would therefore welcome close cooperation with this House, and in particular with the Committees on Education and Culture and on Constitutional Affairs, on all aspects of this highly rewarding, deeply European and citizen-oriented portfolio. Should you wish to organise a hearing on the topic in the near future, it would give me great pleasure to participate.

Thank you.