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**"Towards a comprehensive strategy
for multilingualism"**

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Honorable Members,

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to be here at the Greek Parliament and to have the opportunity to inform you of the latest developments of my policy to promote multilingualism in the European Union.

To begin from first principles, in the best tradition of Greek rhetoric, let me underline that the European Union is built on respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. The very first regulation adopted by the European Economic Community placed the official languages of the six founding members on an equal footing. We have maintained this principle with each enlargement, and currently all 23 languages are used.

These principles are also enshrined in Article 22 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. This declares that "The Union respects cultural, religious and linguistic diversity."

Languages and Europe together

My second principle is that languages and Europe are two sides of the same coin. Our linguistic diversity is a fact of life in Europe; it joins us in a common history and culture. To appreciate our linguistic diversity is to build bridges between people rather than sowing division. And, I am convinced, it will help us develop a European identity, enriching our other identities, local, regional, and national.

I want to stress that Europe's diversity of languages - 23 official languages, around 60 regional and minority languages - is not an obstacle, either internally, or externally in our dealings with the rest of the world. Our diversity is an opportunity, but as with all opportunities, we must go out and seize it.

This is why I am committed to promoting multilingualism as a key feature of the European project. I intend to help to nurture language skills in Europe, not only in education but in other domains with natural links to languages - economic growth and jobs, justice and security, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

Languages are a shared responsibility. We all play our part – European policymakers; Member States; education systems; business; and individual citizens. In September, having consulted stakeholders across the board, I will be setting out a new strategy for languages. It will reflect the full breadth of our multilingualism policy as outlined to you today.

What are the advantages of multilingualism?

What are the advantages of multilingualism? Let me highlight three in particular: for building inclusive societies; for better skills and employability; and for a more competitive Europe.

First of all, our modern information society is built around communication. In Europe's culturally and linguistically diverse landscape, languages are bridges that give our citizens the means to communicate, to understand our own and each others' cultures, to discover and build on our shared values. Knowledge of languages is the key to building an inclusive Europe, where European citizens feel they belong to a wider community.

Secondly, across the Union, we are undertaking widespread reforms to create a Europe of growth and jobs. Language skills open up better job opportunities for European citizens, both at home and as a means to accessing jobs across the Union. And a Europe where more of each others' languages are spoken is a more welcoming society for those on the move.

Thirdly, languages make a real contribution to Europe's competitiveness. Businesses that can call on language skills are better equipped to reap the benefits of the European market – which is the largest in the world. Equally, language skills sharpen our businesses' competitive edge around the globe.

I want to look at these language benefits in more detail.

Languages for skills

Let me begin with skills. Language skills are on the list of eight key competences that Member States have agreed everyone should master, in order to thrive in today's knowledge era.

Language learning is obviously a key advantage on the labour market. Both for the growing number of jobs on the home market that call for language skills (thanks to globalisation of trade and new European markets); and as a factor in moving abroad to take up job opportunities in another country.

Yet somewhat surprisingly, despite the success of the single market in other areas, only 2% of Europeans live and work outside their country of origin. In fact, our surveys show that workers, and their families, consider the main obstacle to moving abroad in search of new opportunities is their lack of language skills. This is one good reason why we must take a lifelong learning approach to languages, to offer people the chance to develop language skills at any stage of their life.

Languages and intercultural dialogue

But languages are more than just a means of communication. By learning languages, and gaining an insight into the point of view of others, we become more tolerant, more ready to compromise, more conscious of the complexity of our society. We learn to see our many mother tongues as a source of wealth and a pathway to greater solidarity and mutual understanding.

As you know, this is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The aim of the year is to help European citizens and everyone living in the Union to deal with a more open and diverse environment by promoting mutual respect, and ensuring everyone has the opportunities to play a full part in society. Its motto, 'together in diversity' sums it up well.

As a contribution to the European Year, I asked a group of intellectuals, chaired by the French–Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, to consider what role multilingualism could play in European integration and the dialogue between different cultures.

The group's report ("*The rewarding challenge: How the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe*") is full of exciting, challenging ideas.

To give you their two main suggestions:

- The goal of a "personal adoptive language": every citizen should be able to acquire a deep understanding of another language and culture. The adoptive language would be a personal choice, to reflect individual interests, while also deepening a shared sense of European kinship.
- Languages as a tool for inclusive societies: the integration of migrants should be two-way. Migrants should be able to maintain their heritage languages while being fluent in the language of the host country.

The choice of "adoptive language" would be virtually unlimited. It could certainly help ensure that no language is condemned to disappear. I believe that this report has the potential to give new impetus to learning lesser-used and migrant languages, side by side with the bigger, world languages.

Languages and business

Of course, Europeans will continue to learn a language of international communication – which is nearly always English. On the other hand, as more and more people learn English, just knowing English isn't enough anymore. People's other, more distinctive language gains value, even on the employment market.

As a study we issued last year shows, businesses with language skills are better able to seize opportunities on the European market and around the globe. But many businesses - 11% of the survey – felt they had lost contracts for lack of language skills. And many businesses have not considered how to improve their language capacity, to respond to the new opportunities in the enlarged Europe and in global trade.

Business has got to reflect on its strategic needs: what can it do to meet the lifelong learning needs of the workforce, including language-learning? This is why I have set up a Business Forum, to discuss how businesses, individuals and education systems could both invest in and benefit from languages in Europe.

The Forum will recommend language strategies for improving the competitiveness of companies and the employability and mobility of workers.

At this stage, let me just say that the forum is well aware that 'English is not enough' to do business in a globalised world. And it is conscious of the good business arguments for working harder to integrate migrants in the workforce.

Greece and the implementation of the Action Plan

I'd now like to turn to Greece itself, and say a few words about Greece's contribution to the Commission's 'Action Plan on promoting language learning and linguistic diversity'.

When the Action Plan was adopted in 2003, the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs was in its first phase, with an increasing emphasis on the way in which education and training could help deliver the Lisbon goals of growth and jobs.

Improving foreign language learning was a specific objective of the EU and of Member States. All European countries had set themselves the target that everyone should learn two foreign languages, starting from an early age.

I am pleased to know that Greece has made good progress since 2005 towards this objective.

Although English is still the dominant foreign language in schools, the introduction of a second foreign language in primary school, and the teaching of Italian and Spanish in secondary education, are measures that could change this trend.

It is also good to know that foreign language teaching has been introduced in most university courses.

I want to acknowledge here that Greeks are more open than most Europeans to learning languages. According to a Eurobarometer survey, 74 % of Greeks – the second highest number in the EU – believed in the value of learning two foreign languages. This compares well to an EU average of 50%.

And you back theory with practice. Many Greek citizens speak more than one language, but they usually choose from among the 'big' ones.

I would like to plead here for maintaining a wide range of languages in our schools and universities in Europe. A greater spread of language choice is desirable, and by this I mean a choice that includes both European and world languages. The benefits – for competitiveness, for skills, for more inclusive societies – are within our grasp, if we make the right choices.

The results of the Ministerial Conference

Before finishing, I want to turn to the other initiatives I am pursuing to build a broad coalition in favour of a multilingual Europe.

Last February, Ministers of Education met for the first time on an agenda devoted to multilingualism. Ministers were clearly willing to do more to promote languages. They endorsed our aims of broadening multilingualism policy to better link languages to the economy and to culture and intercultural dialogue.

They supported different options for improving language learning:

- reaching their agreed target of teaching two foreign languages to all students in initial education, and strengthening teacher training to make this happen;
- widening the range of languages offered, so citizens can tailor their own learning paths;
- maximising the use of European programmes;
- integrating migrants and minority communities into our education systems and our societies, and valuing their heritage languages;
- strengthening language learning in vocational and adult education to increase mobility and improve language skills in business.

The future Communication

To conclude, let me say the feedback from citizens, stakeholders and Member States convinces me that our preparations for the Communication on the future strategy are taking the right shape. The Communication will be adopted in September and will be

structured around the two principal themes I have identified: the contribution of multilingualism to prosperity and to citizenship.

We already have the framework – language-learning is a key objective within the 'Education and training 2010 work programme', the work programme that we share with the Member States. We must build on the progress made so far, to sustain our efforts in initial education and in language teacher training. We must look to lifelong language learning, providing for adults, for migrants, and to meet workplace needs. We will draw in informal learning, cultural activities, mobility and the media.

The time is right for a fully-rounded strategy in Europe, to reflect all the dimensions of multilingualism. The overall goal is still to promote linguistic diversity as the clearest expression of the Union's motto 'unity in diversity'.

Our ambitions with this Communication will be threefold:

- first, to position multilingualism as a policy in its own right, by underlining its contribution to prosperity and citizenship;
- second, to promote multilingualism in European programmes and initiatives, and to invite Member States to do the same nationally;
- third, to establish a permanent dialogue with Member States, with the other EU institutions and with stakeholders, to regularly review and promote multilingualism policy.

However, the Commission alone cannot create a multilingual Europe. Multilingualism is a cross-cutting policy, involving people at every level of society. I will be honoured to act as the catalyst of this policy. the genuine Real European added-value is when we can shape a framework that all stakeholders can endorse and develop.

I am eager now to listen to your comments. Thank you.