



College of Europe
Collège d'Europe



Natolin

NATOLIN – 'MULTILINGUALISM – ESSENTIAL FOR THE UNITY IN DIVERSITY OF THE EU

Ladies and gentlemen, dear students

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address you in the College of Europe today. You are the experts on Europe, after all, so the Commission is always keen to pay you a visit to pick up some tips on how we ought to be running the Union!

Your college provides a very appropriate setting for today's discussion. Not just for its beauty and history; but the very fact that the College of Europe is today shared between Poland and Belgium. This tells us, in a nutshell, almost everything we need to know about the recent history of the European Union. What would have been just a distant dream 20 years ago is a living reality, turning out highly qualified graduates who, in turn, will be shaping our future tomorrow.

Today I would like to talk to you about multilingualism in this new Europe of ours. As Commissioner with responsibility for this portfolio, I won't surprise you when I insist that this is an essential feature we must hold on to at all costs.

Some people may contend that multilingualism has outlived its usefulness, and is unworkable when it comes to running a Europe of 27 Member States. They might think that as citizens of a globalised world, we need only English to get by. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Europe expands, multilingualism is ever more necessary.

As a result of 50 years of growth, of enlargement, Europe is more diverse than ever before. This is of course a challenge, and living with diversity takes effort and investment. But I am sure that this investment is worthwhile.

Perhaps the best known element of the Commission's languages strategy is the debate about our official languages – Why 23? Why not just 3? Why not just 1?

We may sometimes have the impression that one common language would help us understand each other better. But the very notion of a common language is contradicted by our history. Europe has always been multilingual. Think of Latin. Once it was the common language imposed by an empire, but it had to adapt to the complexity of the peoples of Europe. Out of one single tongue grew many of the different languages that give us our cultural richness today.

The founders of the EU understood well that this diversity was a source of richness. The very first regulation adopted by the European Economic Community gave parity to the official languages of the six founding members. And we have maintained that principle and the practice ever since.

It is not just parity for parity's sake. For the first Community to work, uniting old enemies, each partner had to be treated with equality. Parity of treatment was an absolute, then.

50 years on, can we still apply lessons from history to our modern globalised world? I am convinced that we not only can – we must! For the Union to continue to work smoothly, each of our 27 countries requires – and deserves – the level playing-field that a multilingual regime provides.

So multilingualism has got to be embedded in the daily life and management of the European institutions. Speaking of Brussels, people often make the remark that too much time and money is spent translating and interpreting into all the official languages of the Union. I must disagree - multilingualism strengthens the democracy, transparency and legitimacy of the EU institutions.

It is not only a matter of ensuring everybody's right to read and understand EU legislation in their own language. If we want to create a European area for political debate and democratic participation, citizens must be able to have a say on the policies of Europe while they are in the making.

And we must provide a level playing field for decision makers to discuss policies that they agree at European

level, allowing everyone to speak, get advice and make judgment calls in their own languages.

Multilingualism is what keeps the door open between the EU institutions and citizens. We want to keep it this way, to ensure that the achievements of the EU are not abstractions, but a reality, for the citizens of the Union.

Once Poland unleashed the momentum that overwhelmed the old Soviet bloc, it was only right and fitting that Europe should reconstitute itself, drawing west and east back together again, and creating a single space in which Europeans from all corners could mingle freely, and move for work or study, not to mention leisure.

But in practice, despite the success of the single market, only 2% of the European working population actually live and work outside their country of origin. Our surveys show that workers – and their families – see the main obstacle to moving abroad in search of new opportunities in their lack of language skills.

In fact, according to our latest survey, only 28 % of Europeans – though I don't think it applies to today's gathering! – believe they can carry out a reasonable

conversation in two languages in addition to their own; 44 % declare themselves to be monolingual. The most widely spoken second language is, not surprisingly, English. Only 14 % of Europeans have learned French or German. The situation is slightly better among younger people, but far from satisfactory when it comes to wanting to learn other languages apart from English. And even the level of English is very mixed.

So why do we and the Member States persist in trying to reach our target of two foreign languages learned, on top of one's mother-tongue? I can sum it up for you in two words, two words which also pretty much sum up the aims of the Union.

Solidarity. And Competitiveness.

To take solidarity first of all

You can all probably quote Robert Schuman on this. But his words are still worth repeating. The foundations of the Community were about much more than creating a market place or a trading bloc. Europe's founders wanted to create solidarity, for 'a coming together of the nations of Europe'.

Building a sense of solidarity, of European kinship, is still a guiding principle for Europe. It is as true today as ever, especially in our new world of globalisation, increased mobility and migration.

For Europe's need to attract people from other continents is undeniable. Our population is decreasing, while it continues to explode elsewhere in the world. By 2050 Europe will account for only 7% of the world's population. 50 years ago, it stood at almost 22%.

Our societies are becoming more and more diverse, culturally and linguistically. How do we react? Sometimes diversity is seen as a threat, and communities live in isolation, which can create xenophobia. What our societies need to do is to become intercultural, - in other words, places where citizens of different backgrounds can share a dialogue.

In order to develop a feeling of solidarity, people need to know each other's cultures, ideas and ways of living –and this involves language, too. When we learn a new language, we are not just accessing a communication tool, we are accepting that we can be influenced and changed by a different conception of life. We are drawing nourishment from a variety of cultures. In Europe we can learn to see our many mother tongues as a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding.

I asked a group of experts under Amin Maalouf, the French-Lebanese writer, to reflect on how we can use languages as a force in intercultural dialogue, to mark the European Year that has just begun.

The group suggests that an in-depth knowledge of another language - what they call an 'adoptive' language - would be a capital way of strengthening links between Europeans, of bringing us closer to our neighbours. Many here will have had personal experience of this. The College of Europe gathers people from all over Europe and from third countries. Two languages are used for teaching, but many others in everyday life of the campus. This is a vivid proof of how multilingualism can build bridges between people from different countries and different cultures.

The report Maalouf also says that migrants could choose their heritage language as their adoptive language, and migrant languages should be included in the palette of languages that Europeans could choose from.

Clearly, the best way for migrants to integrate is by learning the language of the host country. At the same time I agree that we should value the new languages they bring to our communities. Migrants who can preserve their roots and be proud of their culture of origin are more ready to play an active role in our societies.

This brings me to my second point – languages and competitiveness – where I'll be brief, as I think you will be able to see where this is leading.

Better language skills not only translate into better opportunities to move around Europe (or further afield) for work. They also translate into better business opportunities too, as recent research of ours shows.

Of 2000 exporting businesses that we surveyed, 1 in 10 felt they had lost contracts for lack of language skills. More than half knew they needed to improve their language capacity; in European languages – at least partly to take advantage of the new markets created by enlargement; and world languages, to handle the consumer explosions in the developing economies.

Of course English has a place as the lingua franca of international communication. But on its own it cannot provide the competitive edge that Europe needs.

One telling illustration: UK companies export as much to Denmark, with a population of only 5 million, as they do to the whole of Central and South America, with a population of 390 million... And I don't think it's because English firms have all learnt Danish...

And in this scenario where European trade is going global, I'd like to point out that many businesses could make much better use of the (often unacknowledged) language skills of the migrants they employ.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear students,

In September the Commission will be issuing a new strategy for languages. It will encompass all the issues I have raised today, and set out proposals on how we can meet Europe's language challenges.

This is what the Commission is planning to do, but, in conclusion, do let me stress that this isn't an issue which 'Europe' thinks it can, or should, solve on its own. Multilingualism needs all of us to play our part, if we are to create a truly language-friendly, inclusive, and prosperous Europe for all our citizens.

Thank you.