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Multilingualism and its challenges

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Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Milí hostia,
Vážené dámy a páni,

I am very pleased to be able to address you here today, on the occasion of the thirty-third Assembly of AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters.

May I begin by extending to you all and to all those who are dear to you my very best wishes for the coming year. I also wish AIIC a very successful conference.

I have been asked by the organisers to deliver my speech in my mother tongue – Slovak. I will gladly do so. I am confident that the interpretation at this forum will be truly first class!

I would like to review in the next few minutes some of last year's developments and to look ahead at what 2006 has in store for us.

Last year was a year when we made considerable progress and change in the area of multilingualism. Multilingualism has been part of the Union's life since the beginning. The principle has always been adhered to and has always been applied in practice. I need not remind you that the very first Regulation the Council of the then European Economic Community adopted, the famous n° 1/58, established the list of official and working languages of the Institutions. That list was updated at every enlargement, as a result of which we now have the 20 official and working languages of the Union.

Having said that, it was only under the present European Commission – the Barroso Commission – that multilingualism was for the first time in history defined as a stand-alone policy of the European Commission. This manifests the weight attributed to the multilingualism policy by the European institutions, not least after the enlargement of the Union.

At the same time, it is the recognition of the fact that multilingualism is at the heart of European values, because language identifies every one of us individually and, at the same time, connects us with our own culture.

The European Union is currently home to almost half a billion of people, who speak 80 original European languages, but also many other languages originating from outside of the borders of our continent. Every one of them is unique and valuable.

Hence, Europe harbours a tremendous potential. In its language policy, the European Commission says clearly: it is necessary to preserve this rich linguistic and cultural diversity.

In the European multilingual society, every citizen should have the language skills needed to make full use of opportunities offered by the Union: inter alia the freedom to choose one's place of study or work.

Multilingualism, however, is important not only from the economic or social point of view. It is also of fundamental importance in terms of the European Union's democratic legitimacy and transparency of its decisions. No citizen should be excluded from the democratic process in the Union just because of the language he or she speaks.

What has the European Commission decided to do in the area of multilingualism?

It has undertaken the following three objectives:

- to strongly encourage all citizens to learn and speak several languages, and this way to facilitate better mutual understanding and communication,
- to emphasise the roles of language and multilingualism in the European economic area, and to look for ways of developing them even further,
- to preserve and protect multilingualism in the institutions of the European Union. Our professional linguists in translation and interpretation services will continue to endeavour to ensure effective communication between the Union and its citizens.

Last year on 22nd November, the Commission took a new and important step towards promoting multilingualism when it adopted its

Communication on the subject. This Communication sets out a new framework strategy for multilingualism which addresses the whole spectrum of language use in the EU from languages in society, to the multilingual economy, to the EU's own efforts to interact with citizens in their language.

The first strand of the Communication is on the multilingual society. It considers the language skills of the individual citizens and urges Member States to put more resources and commitment into language teaching and to encourage language learning more.

As you know, the long term aim is that EU citizens should acquire practical skills in "mother tongue plus two", an objective that was set in 2002 in Barcelona. A recent Eurobarometer survey showed that half of the EU's citizens say they can hold a conversation in a second language. We think that language knowledge is a desirable life-skill for all EU citizens of today and of tomorrow.

We would like to see more early language learning, further improvements in language teaching and also the teaching of subjects through foreign languages. Did you know that the Commission invests 30 million € every year in actions such as training, mobility of students and teachers and in funding class exchanges? This happens through the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes.

In the second chapter of the Communication, which deals with the multilingual economy, we highlight the importance of language knowledge for increasing the competitiveness of the European economy, as well as the mobility of workers in our Single Market. Next year the

Commission will publish a study on the impact that shortages of language skills are having on the European economy.

The Communication also looks into the role of the language-related professions, including interpreting, and stresses the growing place of languages and language services in the information society, and on the web in particular.

The Commission is of the view that more needs to be done to strengthen the language industries, an activity that is continuing to grow in the EU. You may be interested to learn that the Commission is inviting Member States to review training programmes at universities to ensure that students in the language professions can acquire the right skills for rapidly changing working conditions.

Last but not least, there is a chapter on multilingualism in the Commission's relations with citizens. The European Union, unlike other multinational communities, passes laws that are directly binding on citizens.

Legislation must therefore be published in all official languages of the Union – doing otherwise would mean compromising an essential right of citizens, as well as the legitimacy of the European Union as such.

I am sure you have come across the view that the multilingual system is an enormous financial burden that should be reduced.

But in reality, in 2004, the translation and interpreting services of all institutions represented 1.05% of the EU budget, which means about 2.58 euro per citizen per year.

I do believe that this is an acceptable price for universal access to the EU's legislation. The right of all citizens to be able to access the Union's legal texts in their mother tongue is one of the fundamental rights on which the Union has been built. The possibility for citizens, as well as for experts in meetings, to express in their mother tongue their views on proposed legislation or other initiatives, is part and parcel of democratic decision-making.

I would like to mention some of the commitments the Commission adopted under the chapter on relations with citizens.

There is the launching, which actually also took place on 22nd November, of the thematic portal about "Languages and Europe" on the Europa server.

High level seminars on multilingualism will be organised in the Member States, targeted at journalists and other opinion multipliers. What we need to develop is a pro-active multilingual communication policy that will complement the Commission's wider initiative to improve communication with European citizens.

And you will be happy to learn that the Directorate General for Interpretation will continue to offer universities grants and help with the teaching of conference interpreting. I myself am impressed with what has been achieved in this area and I am sure the interpreting profession

appreciates the fact that, like AIIIC, we relentlessly emphasise the need for quality in interpreting and in interpreter training.

Finally, let me mention that the Commission envisages the creation of a High Level group of independent experts who will analyse the progress made by Member States and will provide support and advice in new initiatives. In 2007, we plan to organize a ministerial conference on multilingualism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me say a few words about the main challenges for the interpretation service of the European Commission in 2006. 2004 saw the arrival of nine new working languages, for which we had prepared very fully and carefully in the field of conference interpreting. I can conclude that the process of adapting to the new situation has been proceeding rather successfully and that the European institutions continue to increase their capacity of interpretation in the new languages as well as its quality.

But this is not the end of the road of course. On 1st January 2007, Irish will be added, the scope of its use having been determined by the Irish authorities. Romanian and Bulgarian will join the EU language family on the date of accession of the two countries concerned.

Furthermore, we now have the so-called co-official languages from Spain, which are Catalan, Galician and Basque. They will not be used as extensively as the official languages. However, I am able to announce that all three were used recently, at the December plenary of the

Committee of the Regions, and that this service was provided by the Commission's DG Interpretation or SCIC.

If I were to ask its Director General what had marked him most in 2005, I'm sure his reply would be, without hesitation "Hampton Court". That is shorthand for an event involving the Commission's interpreting service: the London European Council in October of last year had a 20-20 team plus the candidate countries' languages and was interpreted entirely in remote or tele-interpreting.

From the interpreting point of view things went very smoothly, thanks to excellent preparation and close co-operation with the UK presidency, and above all the professionalism of the interpreters. But the event caused quite a stir among many staff and freelance interpreters. This was understandable because, although I hear that remote interpreting is not infrequent on the private market, it had never been done on such a scale within the Institutions.

It is unlikely that remote interpreting will ever make up a sizeable part of the interpreting work within our Institutions, but we have to move with the times and so occasional reoccurrences cannot be ruled out and we need to be prepared for them.

I and DG SCIC have now undertaken not to accept any more remote interpreting assignments until working conditions for such events have been agreed with interpreters. We are ready to start discussing this important matter as early as possible in the New Year.

We must move with the times I said. I will merely mention the very far-reaching changes that have happened on the travel market over the last few years, something the Court of Auditors put a certain emphasis on in its report on the Institutions' language services last year. This is why we want to take a fresh look, together with AIIIC, at some parts of the Agreement of 1999. We see this as an important item on our agenda for 2006.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is also with the help of the multilingualism policy that the European Union is becoming what it seeks to be: a society of peacefully co-habiting people from many different cultural and language communities. Multilingualism, therefore, is part and parcel of our joint process of integration.

The role of the European Commission is to fully respect and support the multilingual nature of Europe, and in this way to bring the European Union closer to citizens, and to make it more transparent, legitimate and effective.

The coming year promises to be a busy and an important one for the European Commission, DG SCIC, for the AIIIC and for the profession. I am confident that we will achieve good and positive results.

Let me reiterate my best wishes to you all and to your Association.

Ďakujem vám za pozornosť.