

## **The FUEN Congress**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Federal Union of European Nationalities on behalf of Commissioner Leonard Orban, who unfortunately had to decline due to other engagements.

I congratulate FUEN for the valuable work it has been doing for more than half a century. FUEN is part of the broad partnership that has ensured the peaceful coexistence of majorities and minorities in this continent where diversity is a unique, distinctive and defining, feature.

### **Diversity - the identity of Europe**

In fact what marks Europe out is this very diversity: the great variety of languages and cultures within its boundaries. Every national, regional, minority and migrant language spoken in Europe adds a facet to our common cultural background. Each language reflects a particular way of thinking, carries a memory, a literary heritage, and is the legitimate basis of cultural identity.

Respect for our linguistic diversity is the very basis of the European ideal as it was conceived by the founders of the European Community in the aftermath of the conflicts that scarred the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A common sense of belonging based on linguistic and cultural diversity is a powerful antidote to intolerance and conflicts. The many languages spoken in Europe can serve as a bridge to other people and open access to other countries and cultures, promoting mutual understanding. This is why the European Union is founded on, and thrives on, "unity in diversity": diversity of cultures, customs, beliefs – and languages.

Linguistic diversity is a source of benefit and richness. The European Union has 23 official languages and some 60 regional or minority languages. Each of these languages, even the smallest minority language, is part of our heritage, and has a place of its own in Europe. To neglect a language can only be harmful to Europe as a whole: to run the risk that we could lose part of our heritage, and to run the risk that its speakers become disenchanted with the European project.

At the initiative of Commissioner Orban, and in this spirit, one year ago the European Commission adopted a new strategy for languages in Europe: "***Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment***". We focussed on the harmonious co-existence of many languages in Europe. We reaffirmed the European Community's commitment to regional and minority languages.

### **Member State support for multilingualism**

We all know that Member States are the key decision-makers on language policy. We act within these limits. However, we were pleased that when the Council adopted for the first time a resolution on multilingualism in November last year.

They recognised the need to widen the range of languages offered in the education system, so that citizens can tailor their own learning paths.

And they reaffirmed the goal they had set six years earlier, in Barcelona, to teach people two foreign languages as well as mother tongue, and to start from an earlier age.

They recognised that these goals called for more cooperation between the EU and its members.

This consensus on the need for more language skills in Europe was the context for our **new strategy on multilingualism. Our strategy does not exclude any language. Our native regional or minority languages are particularly strong symbols of the diversity on which the European Union is built.**

**In fact, people who speak a regional or minority language are often closer to meeting the Barcelona objective than many other Europeans. They successfully combine speaking a regional or minority language with the national language and score well in foreign languages too. They are multilingual citizens; and this precious asset allows them to act as bridges between different cultures.**

In the last two years Commissioner Orban has been able to visit almost all the Member States; and have had the opportunity to talk quite openly with minority language communities and with central and local authorities. We also confirmed our view that regional and local bodies have a crucial role in promoting language learning.

Border regions and authorities have a very active role in promoting the neighbour's language and in strengthening bilingualism. We have several good examples in the European Union: the German-Danish border, where FUEN is very active, for example; but also the Italian-German, The Belgian-German and the Swedish-Finnish border or the Portuguese-Spanish border. The bilateral contacts and initiatives that span these borders are a crucial support for our linguistic diversity. They also very much contribute to the achievement of the Barcelona objective: imagine if every European took this approach, and mastered the language of his/her neighbouring country!

### **Working with stakeholders**

*With the Member States*

Of course, a multilingualism policy, to succeed, must bring all the stakeholders on board. We are engaging with a wide range of interests.

We are pursuing cooperation with the Member States to identify ways of promoting multilingualism together, to use our linguistic diversity as a tool to achieve intercultural understanding, and to value it as a defining element in our rich cultural heritage. We will work with member States to help them provide opportunities for everyone to master the national language and two other languages, and at the same time to broaden the range of languages available to learners, to allow individual choice.

*With language experts through the Lifelong Learning Programme*

Our Lifelong Learning Programme also offers a great deal of opportunities, whether to the Member States or other language interests, for teaching and learning languages. Any language is eligible for support. From 2008 to 2010, we have given special priority to projects and networks that are open to regional and minority languages. FUEN has presented a very successful project within this programme receiving Community funding.

*With the business world, in the business platform for multilingualism*

A week ago, we launched the business platform for multilingualism, a forum for companies to exchange best practices and to devise ways of making language-learning more accessible for business.

During the economic and financial crisis, we must use all the tools available to help make Europe's business stronger. Languages are one of these tools.

Not long ago we commissioned a study on the impact of languages skills on small businesses in Europe. We learnt that as many as one in ten small enterprises in Europe are losing out on business because of a lack of language

skills. Clearly, we must invest in languages in order to prosper. The report also made it very clear that English is not enough. English is still the "lingua franca" for international business. But demand for other languages is growing.

Thus, our strategy identifies multilingualism as a springboard for competitive business and employability. We encourage European companies and workers to improve their language skills: so that companies can be competitive on a global scale, and so that workers can enhance their employability and future job opportunities.

*With civil society, in the civil society platform*

We are also involving civil society at large, to promote multilingualism for intercultural dialogue and social cohesion.

Next week we will launch a second platform, where people from the world of culture, the media, and the non-formal learning sector will discuss linguistic diversity and language learning.

Multilingualism can play a key role in creating more cohesive and more sustainable societies. Languages can be the power that turns the wheel of understanding between people.

Both platforms will work completely independently, making their own proposals for multilingualism policy. The Commission will act as facilitator and will feed these proposals into the policy process.

## **Conclusion**

**We are convinced that knowledge of languages benefits Europeans. A successful multilingualism policy can strengthen citizens' life chances: it can boost job prospects. It can open up access to rights and services. It can bring about a Europe of solidarity, because it creates paths to dialogue**

**between people and cultures, laying the basis for strong and unified local communities.**

In conclusion, the new strategy for multilingualism steps up a gear. It emphasises the many ways that multilingualism will benefit Europe.

Languages will always be the first expression of our identity. We will continue to preserve and nurture our roots and traditions. But with our new strategy we want to show that languages not only reflect Europe's past but also can help create Europe's future.

By engaging with others we not only heighten our sense of European identity. We also heighten our awareness of ourselves, enriching our other, local, regional, and national identities.

Thank you.