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**"Multilingualism – and intercultural  
dialogue"**

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

**Forum on Multilingualism in the EU - Bratislava, 23 October 2008**

## Ladies and Gentlemen

- I am grateful to the organisers for inviting me to take part in this forum. Today we are talking about multilingualism and intercultural dialogue. These are two themes very close to my heart. And it is particularly fitting to be discussing these topics here in Bratislava.
- Yours is the only capital city in the world to be found on a border—with not just one country, but two. And it also straddles the Danube, giving your citizens access to 10 more countries. **Bratislava** is a true crossroads: a meeting point at the heart of central Europe.
- But this is not just a curious fact. It is also a point for reflection – on what borders mean in today’s Europe.

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- Borders are first and foremost places of **diplomatic, cultural and commercial exchange**. They are opportunities for openness and enrichment. Your own unique brand of culture is a testament to this –

Slovakia has been a point of convergence for German, Austrian, Hungarian and Slavic cultures for centuries.

- Of course, borders can also be points of fracture and separation. For centuries, Europe was criss-crossed with lines of conflict. But five decades ago, old enemies came together to build a Union in the ashes of these conflicts. And with our steadfast commitment to dialogue, we have managed to defuse these tensions.
- Borders are no longer confines or constraints. They have become frontiers for us to cross. Like languages, they are gateways to opportunity.

## **Mobility and Migration**

- Europe is an open continent. We can all appreciate the value of **openness**, and **interaction** with other peoples. You yourselves have several minority communities. **Multiculturalism** is tightly woven into the fabric of your society.
- I know that many places across Europe are experiencing this for the first time. It is not only

Europeans who are on the move; but **migrants** from outside Europe, come here to search for a better life. So we find ourselves living amongst overlapping communities of difference. Our classrooms are filled with children of **different origins, traditions and faiths**. Our streets are alive with the chatter of **different languages**.

- Even the **remotest regions** of our continent are becoming **crossroads between cultures**. It is as though we are all living in border regions now.

## **Intercultural Dialogue**

- How can we make sure that this proximity to **difference** remains a **source of enrichment** - as it has done for Bratislava? How can we prevent the emergence of invisible borders within our societies? How can we stop fault lines of conflict from breaking open within and between our communities?
- Again, the answer is **dialogue**. But of a different nature. We need **concrete exchanges** and **mutual**

**understanding**, not just between community representatives, but also between those they represent: ordinary **individuals**. And more cohesive, more sustainable societies will be the reward. Dialogue is the key ingredient. It is the yeast that allows our societies to mature— from multiculturalism to **inter-culturalism**.

- This is precisely why we made 2008 the **European Year of Intercultural Dialogue**. To raise awareness of this. And also to help equip our citizens with the skills and knowledge needed to engage in dialogue.

### **Languages for Social Cohesion**

- Naturally, languages are among the most practical tools we can offer for the purpose. This is one of the key thrusts in our new **strategy on Multilingualism**, which was just recently adopted by the **Commission**. A whole chapter outlines the role of languages in building sustainable societies.

- It stresses the need to provide **Migrants** with the chance to master the **language of the host country**. This is indispensable for their ability to participate in community life, or simply to get a job. But it is equally important that Europeans learn languages as well. Even if their language of choice is not one used by a migrant community, it is still a step towards a more cohesive society. This is because languages are more than tools of communication and comprehension. Learning a language makes us more **tolerant**, more **understanding**, and more **appreciative of difference**.

## **European Identity**

- This is significant. Because this is the very ethos of our European project: **Unity in Diversity**. The idea that what makes us different need not divide us – it can act to bind us together. The idea that affirming difference – rather than ignoring it - is the best vaccine against intolerance and fanaticism. In fact this last idea was suggested to me by a group of intellectuals I

commissioned to investigate Multilingualism, headed by the writer **Amin Maalouf**.

- We have succeeded in opening up the continent to its citizens. Now the challenge is to open up our citizens to their continent. We must forge a **true sense of belonging** to a common space among the peoples of Europe - a **European citizenship**. Languages offer us the means to achieve this.
- By learning another language we not only awaken to a wider community of difference. We can also go and explore it. We can travel and work in other countries with greater ease. Our surveys show that a **lack of language skills** is still seen as the main obstacle to moving abroad.
- And 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.

## **The Other Rewards of Multilingualism**

- These are only a few of the many rewards of multilingualism. In our new strategy we underline the numerous ways languages can benefit Europe. Languages **strengthen the life-chances** of our citizens. They provide citizens with greater **choice on the job market**; and more **equal access to services and rights**. They can be pivotal in our **external relations**. And they can help European **enterprise** prosper in a new geopolitical climate.

## **Situation in Slovakia**

- I believe these last two points are particularly relevant for Slovakia. A recent **Eurobarometer survey** on languages acknowledged your high levels of language skills. I notice that **Slovaks** are particularly **proficient in Russian**. Slovakia would do well to build on this precious asset. For its own future. And for that of Europe as a whole.

- It is important that we all learn the languages of our trading partners. And is vital that we **strengthen our bridges with the rest of the world**. Our current focus is on **intercultural dialogue** between individuals living in Europe. But we must not lose sight of the importance of broader exchanges as well.

## **Conclusion**

- It is my firm belief that **languages are bridges** in every sense – across both visible and invisible borders. And as some of the most multilingual people in our Union, you can demonstrate this to the rest of Europe: that multilingualism is within our reach.
- I can only encourage you to build on your successes: enhancing language teaching, expanding the range of languages taught in your schools, and building an intercultural society on these strong foundations.
- I have every confidence you will achieve this.

Thank you for your attention.