

Dear Commissioner Orban

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear colleagues,

I am honoured and very pleased to be able to welcome you to Lessius University College and to this EULITA conference on ‘Aspects of Legal Interpreting and Translation’.

This year, and indeed this very month, we celebrate two landmark anniversaries that have a bearing on this conference.

Twenty years ago, in November 1989, the Berlin wall came down. That we can welcome here today colleagues from every former Central and Eastern European country testifies even on this small scale of our conference, to the importance of this momentous historic event.

And ten years ago, in October 1999, the European Council adopted in Tampere, Finland, its first work programme on freedom, security and justice.

Through the course of a number of previous Grotius and AGIS projects and a first attempt at a Framework Decision on procedural safeguards in criminal proceedings, we have now arrived today at a new and agreed upon EU Council proposal for a Framework Decision, or most likely a future Directive, on interpretation and translation in criminal

proceedings and the establishment of EULITA, the European association of legal interpreters and translators.

As a result of enlargement and globalisation, all Member States of the European Union face an ever-growing movement of citizens. They may be on holiday in a foreign country, studying or on a temporary job assignment, and occasionally they may find themselves faced with legal problems in that country. They will then want to rely on a competent legal interpreter or translator to assist them in the proceedings. Similarly, immigration from outside the EU poses, and will continue to pose even more complex language challenges.

The European Union has also come to realise the increased need for judicial cooperation and mutual recognition between Member States in order to guarantee security and justice in the EU. However, such cooperation can only be effective if there is mutual confidence between the authorities of the Member States, and this ultimately rests on reliable communication channels and hence on reliable quality legal interpreting and translation.

However, inadequate legal interpreting or translation may put justice in jeopardy during police investigations or trial and post-trial proceedings. It may cost the system dearly in terms of money, time and quality of justice, whereas conversely the use of qualified legal interpreters or translators will increase the efficiency of case

progression, reduce ineffective trial hearings, avoid miscarriages of justice, and improve communication in out-of-court settings such as lawyer-client meetings or probation sessions, thus resulting in an overall more effective judicial process.

The conclusions from a recent AGIS project coordinated by Lessius University College on the provision of legal interpreting and translation in the EU indicate that “sufficient legal interpreting or translation skills and structures are not yet in place in most Member States, though a process of development to do so is in progress across the EU, albeit still variable in coherence, quality and quantity”.

Therefore the need to provide all citizens, newcomers and immigrants in the EU who have to access justice across languages with professional legal interpreting and translation is both a major ambition and challenge for the EU.

We are grateful that both Vice-President of the EU Commission and Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security, Monsieur Barrot, as well as Mr Leonard Orban, European Commissioner for Multilingualism, have recognized this challenge and have taken various initiatives to improve the quality of interpreting and translation in the legal services.

As Mr Orban formulated it at the 11th SCIC Universities conference on interpretation:

“In fact, in the Community institutions we are very privileged to be able to benefit from the excellent interpreting provided by our own specialised services that set the standard world-wide. However, we should not forget that others, who are less privileged in a number of respects, are entitled to the same quality in interpreting. I am thinking here of people, whether they are European citizens or not, who need to defend their rights in court.”

I think these words clearly set out the ambition and the challenges that should inspire this conference.

I wish you a pleasant stay here in Antwerp and in Lessius, but above all a most interesting and fruitful conference.