

**Speech by Commissioner Leonard Orban at the EULITA  
Conference on  
"Aspects of Legal Interpreting and Translation"  
Antwerp, 27 November 2009**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to open this conference and I would like to thank the organisers for giving me this opportunity.

Today I am going to talk about some of the activities taken forward by the European Commission in the field of multilingualism concerning legal interpreting and translation. I would like first of all to take you back to May 2007, when I addressed the SCIC-Universities Conference for the first time. If you are not familiar with that event, the annual SCIC-Universities Conference brings together DG Interpretation and dozens of European Universities that teach interpretation.

In my speech I said that one of the objectives of the new Multilingualism portfolio was to create a multilingual space for European political dialogue through multilingual communication with the citizen. More specifically, I was thinking of people who are not fully in a position to communicate directly in a given language and who therefore need the assistance of interpretation and translation to make sure that their voices are heard and their words are read.

In fact, the message I wanted to convey was that while in the European Institutions we are very privileged to be able to benefit from the excellent interpretation services that we have and that set the standard worldwide, we should not forget that others, who are less privileged, should be entitled to the same quality interpretation.

I was thinking of people, European citizens or not, who need to defend their rights in court. And I was also thinking of those who are in need of assistance from public bodies and must be able to state their case unequivocally in their own language.

Therefore, at the SCIC-Universities 2007 conference I called upon the national authorities and universities to play an active role in ensuring high quality training in the area of court and community interpreting, also underlining that, where possible, I would have liked the Institutions from their side to provide assistance to initiatives taken in this field.

The following year, when I had again the chance to address the SCIC-Universities Conference, I mentioned that I was particularly interested in one of the proposals coming from the report of the High Level Group on Multilingualism, which I had previously presented to the press.

It was the High Level Group's proposal to *improve the quality of legal interpreting*. One of the conclusions of the group was that it would help in preparing future policy if we took a closer look at new requirements in the field of legal and community interpreting and translation.

As you know, this was not uncharted territory: in the European Commission, the Directorate General for Justice, Freedom and Security had already dealt with this issue. In order to be sure to follow the right path, I asked DG Interpretation to examine how far multilingualism could contribute to this work, and to what extent its expertise in the field of conference interpreting could be used to improve legal interpreter training across the European Union.

Since then, with the substantial contribution of national authorities, individual universities and members of the European Masters in Conference Interpreting Consortium, an inventory of training currently existing in the Member States was drawn up, and several fact-finding missions were made to universities in order to identify best practices. This work was done during the first half of 2008, and I would like to thank DG Interpretation's services for their cooperation.

What came out of that informal survey was that the situation varies considerably from one Member State to the other. I will not go into the details of the conclusions, which I already had a chance to explain briefly at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Forum on Interpreting and Translating at Court and for Public Authorities, which took place in Tampere in May 2008.

The next step was setting up **a forum of external experts**, with the remit to draft recommendations in the field of training of legal interpreters. This group of experts was set up in the summer of 2008, and was called "Reflection Forum on Multilingualism and Interpreter Training".

The group was composed of experts in the field of interpreter training, practicing legal and court interpreters, and members from the legal professions, as well as representatives of relevant Commission DGs. During their meetings, the experts took account of previous work that had been done under the Grotius and AGIS programmes.

They decided that the best way to improve the quality of legal interpreting in Europe was to start by elaborating recommendations on a standard curriculum for legal interpreter training, on levels for training, as well as on certification and accreditation.

I would like to thank once again the members of the Reflection Forum, some of whom are here today, for accepting to take part, for their commitment and for the excellent job they accomplished.

Our hope was that the recommendations of the Reflection Forum would be seen as a blueprint or a model of best practice to be implemented by those who want to set up a system which ensures quality of interpretation throughout legal proceedings.

Personally, I was convinced from the very start of my mandate that the Multilingualism policy could make a useful contribution here, as this is an area of increasing relevance today. The European Union itself has expanded rapidly. Globalisation is obliging us to look beyond purely national concerns. And large scale immigration brings us face to face with people from a variety of countries of origin. Just walk around a dynamic city like Antwerp any day of the week and you will understand that these are not just empty words but really reflect reality.

As I said, from the very beginning we knew that the situation of legal interpreting and translation in Member States differs greatly, and this was confirmed by the comprehensive and very useful study that was the result of the *Status Quaestionis* project, funded by DG Justice, Freedom and Security. The publication that came out of the project, *Questionnaire on the provision of legal interpreting and translation in the EU*, has also been very useful in this field.

If you allow me, I will take the liberty of quoting one paragraph from the Executive Summary of that publication, which also reflects my way of thinking. I quote: "The need to provide all citizens of the EU with the right to a fair trial, including the provision of quality legal interpreting or translation, is both a major ambition and challenge for the EU, given the disparity and the patchy and uneven provision of legal interpreting and translation throughout the EU." Unquote.

Concerning **EULITA**, the European Commission can only congratulate the people that carried out the project and are happy to see the creation of the *European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association*. We agree with the objectives of promoting the quality of justice, ensuring access to justice across languages and cultures, and guaranteeing the fundamental principles of human rights.

I also welcome the aims of promoting the establishment of national associations of legal interpreters and translators in Member States in which they do not exist, to promote cooperation with academic institutions in the field of training and research, and to encourage the establishment of national and EU-wide registers of qualified legal interpreters and translators.

I consider that the establishment of EULITA is a very positive development, and I do hope that it will soon fulfil its mission, thus achieving its expected results, in order to help to improve the situation of legal interpreting and translation in the Member States.

As you know, in July 2009 the Commission adopted a proposal for a *Council Framework Decision on the right to interpretation and to translation in criminal proceedings*, which is partly inspired by the recommendations of the Reflection Forum. And you also know that the Framework Decision was adopted by the Council last October.

Now we know that the road to improving the current situation as far as legal interpreting and translation are concerned is not always that easy. Some Member States will face difficulties in introducing new rules that will probably entail a certain amount of extra expenditure for their budget.

However, as the proverb says, "Rome was not built in a day"; this means that little by little, all positive developments like the recommendations of the Reflection Forum and now the setting up of EULITA will give positive contributions to the improvement of access to justice across languages and cultures.

Personally, I am very confident that now that the course of action has been set, and EULITA will become operational, it will only be a matter of time before we can see real improvements taking place in the field of legal interpreting and translation.

Before I end, I would like to thank Professor Erik Hertog of Lessius University College for his unflagging commitment over the years in the field of legal interpreting and translation. And my thanks also go to all the other people who have been active in this field, in different parts of Europe and in various roles.

Thank you very much for your attention.