

Leonard Orban

European Commissioner responsible for Multilingualism

Cyrillic, the third official alphabet of the EU, was created by a truly multilingual European

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

Day of Cyrillic alphabet

Sofia, May 24 2007

Ladies and gentlemen,

When Bulgaria joined the European Union at the beginning of this year, the Union received not just a new member, but also a new alphabet. Being responsible for Multilingualism, I am delighted and honoured to be here today to join in the celebrations of the Bulgarian language and the Cyrillic alphabet.

Throughout the ages, Bulgaria has borne aloft the Cyrillic alphabet and culture in the Slavic world. The Old Bulgarian language gave birth to a universal literary Slavonic language. Today Bulgaria is taking another historic step: bringing Cyrillic into the EU family.

We have many causes for celebration this year. We have just commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. This was also a celebration of multilingualism, which has been one of the core principles of the Union since its very foundation.

The principle of “unity in diversity” is a cornerstone of the European Union – diversity of languages, cultures, traditions, and, one might add, alphabets. Our diversity of languages is a shared wealth that the European Commission is keen to support. By preserving and cherishing our different national languages, we strengthen a multilingual Europe. The Cyrillic alphabet and the Bulgarian language will add to this cultural diversity that makes the European Union unique.

Knowing several languages is important for the European Union as a whole, for every country and for every individual. Multilingualism creates economic opportunities, opens doors to a richer cultural life and helps us find a job or develop a career. Knowing other languages also makes it easier to make new friends and to broaden our minds through understanding other cultures.

Learning foreign languages is much more than just knowing English – it is important to learn any language, regional, minority or world language. And there are many ways to learn: through study, of course, but also by travelling, watching foreign films or even surfing on the Internet.

Even more important than which languages to learn is the ability to take on new ones when needed: learning to learn languages. We do not know where our children will have to move to pursue their studies and their careers. But when people are enthusiastic about languages, they are not daunted by the prospect of learning a new language to follow the opportunities of the market and their own changing interests.

2008 will be the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue – a welcome opportunity for putting languages into the spotlight. If we, all together, can promote the healthy development of European languages by cultivating our multilingualism, we will have made a capital contribution to the success of our European project.

As we gather here in front of the monument to St Cyril and St Methodius, we commemorate their great accomplishments and their gift of the Cyrillic alphabet, your national alphabet. Cyril, who studied theology and philosophy, astronomy, geometry, rhetoric and music, was also a true multilingual, knowing Greek, his native language, Latin, Arabic, Hebrew and the Slavonic language. Let us hold him up as an example as we strive for plurality and multilingualism.

I am certain that if Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius could see us today, they would share your pride that the Cyrillic alphabet has been adopted as the third official script of the new united Europe. Happy celebrations to all of you, on this festive occasion! Chestit prastnik! (happy celebration)