

**INTERVIEW COMMISSIONER ANDROULLA VASSILIOU
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MEDIA CONTACT: MARIA KOUTI

Question 1 - Bologna Declaration is a primary objective of the EU on education. However, several member states, such as Greece or Spain, have not yet taken the necessary steps to create the Single European Higher Education Area. How do you ultimately see this goal put into practice?

The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental initiative of 47 countries, not an EU initiative. However, the Commission fully supports its main objective of creating a European Higher Education Area by making higher education more compatible, comparable, competitive and attractive for students in Europe. We think that Bologna complements the Commission's own priorities in the modernisation of higher education and relates closely to the new Europe 2020 strategy.

At their latest meeting in Budapest and Vienna in March the Higher Education Ministers from the Bologna countries acknowledged a number of shortcomings in the implementation of the reforms so far. The plans for degree and curriculum reform, quality assurance, recognition, mobility and the social dimension have been implemented to varying degrees in the different countries. But Ministers explicitly said that they want to listen to the critical voices raised among staff and students, and I am convinced that we will succeed in tackling the remaining problems in the years to come.

Question 2 - By reading the list of your priorities as a Commissioner, one can see that language teaching (official and/or minority languages) is your personal favourite. You believe that every European citizen should speak at least 2 foreign languages, plus his/her mother tongue (2+1). Since the dominance of the English language is given, do you think that the goal set for 2+1 is still feasible?

Yes, I do. It is true that English tends to be the language of communication in Europe and we need a *lingua franca* to understand each other. However, we must not forget that linguistic diversity is the distinctive feature of the EU. There are 23 official languages of the EU and over 60 autochthonous regional or minority languages. This represents an incredible richness that we need to cherish. Moreover, if you apply for a job other languages than English will make all the difference in your CV.

Question 3 - Unfortunately, serious problems have been reported in achieving the principle of multilingualism in the Greek educational system. This legislative framework in Greek educational system supports the teaching of traditional "prominent" languages (English, French or German) while, on the other hand, weakens the teaching of other recently introduced languages such as Italian or Spanish (Italian language has been introduced in higher education in the academic year 2008-2009 while Spanish in academic year 2009-2010), and it is characterized by the unequal treatment of these four European languages. Indeed, it is an oxymoron to give the student the right to choose the second foreign language of choice (French, German, Italian, Spanish) and, on the

other hand, to require a minimum number of students for class formation which eventually cancels the formation of new classes for the recently introduced or less popular or less traditional foreign languages of choice.

On the basis of many queries submitted by almost all parties in the Greek Parliament for the introduction of Italian or Spanish as second foreign languages in primary education, would you, as Commissioner, encourage the Greek government and the Greek Minister of Education to exploit EU funds and conduct a three-year pilot program for the Italian and Spanish languages in primary education and in addition to introduce Spanish language in the Greek Technical Vocational Education (so far not possible)?

Note: Ministerial Circular defines that in order to form a class for the teaching of a new foreign language (Italian, Spanish), the requirements are at least 12 students in urban areas and at least 8 students in rural areas. However, since Italian and Spanish are only recently introduced, they do not have similar popularity compared to French and German. Moreover, the aforementioned difficulties that have been identified and recorded in the design and implementation of multilingualism, they are hampered even more by the fact that while teaching of French and German begins from the elementary school, teaching of Italian and Spanish begins from secondary education.

First of all I have to remind that in the field of education Member States are fully responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems. It is not the remit of the European Commission to steer the Greek government concerning possible changes in its educational system. However, I have to underline that promoting language learning (and not just the “prominent” languages) is crucial for the achievement of the European project and I strongly encourage Member States to create all the necessary conditions to fulfill this objective. I also wish to stress that the 2008 Commission Communication "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment"¹ acknowledges that very limited language provision, if any, is offered in vocational education and this should be changed. Important EU funds are available to promote language projects and other activities in this field notably through the Lifelong Learning programme².

Question 4 - Now, let us move to Spain, a country with a clear linguistic diversity. Bearing in mind your intention to protect the less spoken languages and considering the fact that free movement of persons is a cornerstone of the European Union, what is your opinion about the unusual "exclusion" that European citizens face when they apply for public sector positions in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, in case they do not speak Catalan?

National and local authorities in the Member States are the only responsible for their language policy and language regime in public administration. Of course you are right when you say that free movement of persons is a cornerstone of the European Union. Member States should take all the adequate measures to comply with this objective.

Question 5 - Finally, considering the aforementioned, multilingualism is not promoted as a key strategy in some educational systems. On the contrary, it ends up being an abstract concept. Should we not only encourage the promotion of multilingualism in the member states, but should we also adopt precise rules which will account for even the

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/com/2008_0566_en.pdf

² http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78_en.htm

smallest details regarding the implementation framework, in order to safeguard the concept of multilingualism?

According to the Treaty the role of the European Union in the field of education and training is to support and supplement Member States' actions. The Commission works with the representatives of the Member States to encourage the promotion of multilingualism and safeguard linguistic diversity in the European Union. I believe that Commission's action and recommendations will continue to make their way.