

The EU's approach to multilingualism in its own communication policy



See the full study

The European Union (EU) is committed to linguistic diversity and promoting multilingualism. Multilingualism brings the EU closer to citizens by facilitating understanding of the EU, respecting cultural diversity and contributing to transparency and accountability. There is scope to improve the EU's approach to multilingualism in its communication policy taking account of feasibility constraints.

Main observations

The study

assesses the EU's approach to multilingualism in its communication policy.

EU institutions, bodies and agencies comply formally with EU multilingualism obligations. This is facilitated by flexibility in the regulatory obligations and the absence of a comprehensive framework that ensures common standards fit for the digital era, especially in terms of EU websites.

The language regimes of EU institutions, bodies and agencies are not sufficiently transparent and formalised. Nor are they systematically monitored and reviewed by the EU, hampering transparency and accountability.

This study proposes a multilingual needs typology to clarify the types of website content that should be prioritised for translation. **Core documents** are legally obliged to be available or submitted in all EU languages. **Primary documents** should be available in all EU official languages due to their substantive content and potential impact on the rights and obligations of citizens, businesses and public authorities. Taken together these two types constitute a category of documents that ought to be available in all official languages. Lastly, **secondary documents** are a lower order priority for multilingual needs and accessibility, where machine translation could be used if resources are unavailable for human translation. The study reveals variations in the provision of multilingual content on EU institutions' websites that ought to be available in all official languages.

The variability in the provision of multilingual content across the websites of EU institutions, bodies and agencies implies that this communication channel does not always suit the needs of all EU residents. The analysis of the 13 EU websites with the most multilingual content showed that some performed very well while others performed more poorly in terms of the grouped multilingual index developed in the study to measure the proportion of web pages available in all official languages. The grouped index (right panel in Figure) takes account of the different content sections of a website (e.g. general information, tenders, publications, news, events etc.).



An alternative (ungrouped) index of multilingualism that only looks at the total volume of webpages, without taking account of differences across the content categories, increases the performance of two of the websites marginally (the European Parliament and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) but reduces the performance of the majority of websites (Figure, left panel).

Analysis of Eurostat's Adult Education Survey (2016) shows that **there is no common language in the EU spoken at a very good level by residents.** Around one-third of EU residents aged 25-64 speak only their native tongue(s). About 20% of EU residents are able to communicate at a very good level in German, followed



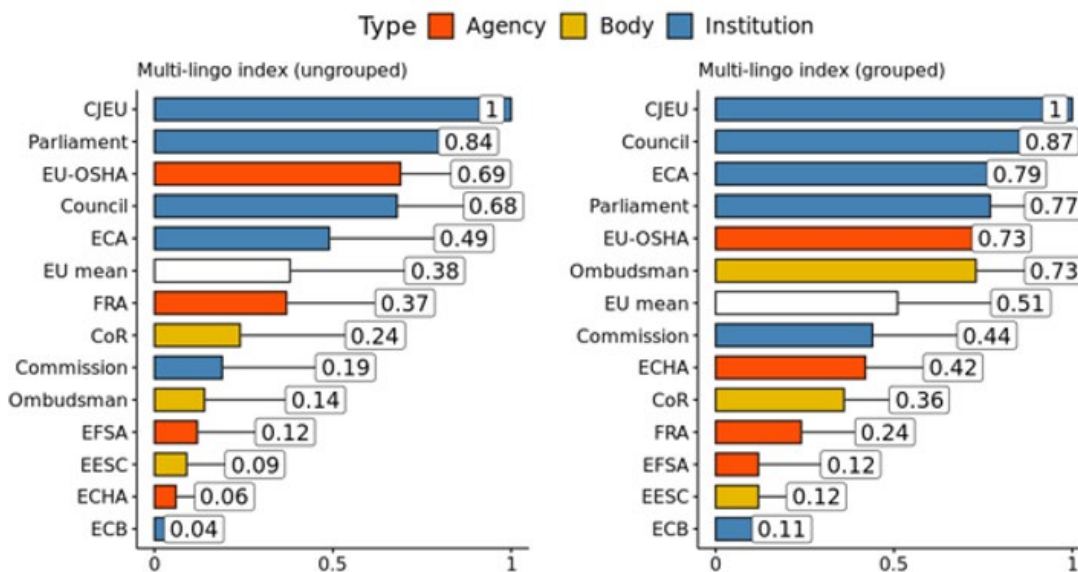
by French (about 16%), Italian (14%), and English (13%).
A multilingual communication regime is the most effective and accessible communication policy.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Develop a common and transparent framework and standards for multilingual communication including in the digital sphere and prioritise documents to be translated.**
- **Institutionalise monitoring of compliance, transparency and use of resources to ensure multilingual communication through a Periodic Report.**
- **Establish an Officer of Multilingualism to review practices, language regimes and website language policies.**
- **Enlarge the number of official languages used in digital communication in order to improve accessibility and closeness to citizens.**
- **Increase the EU budget allocations for multilingualism.**

Comparison of EU entity's average scores using the study's indices of multilingualism (ungrouped and grouped)



Abbreviations/Short name: Parliament (European Parliament), Council (Council of the European Union / European Council shared site); CJEU (Court of Justice of the European Union); ECB (European Central Bank); ECA (European Court of Auditors); EESC (European Economic and Social Committee); CoR (European Committee of the Regions); Ombudsman (European Ombudsman); EU-OSHA (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work); ECHA (European Chemicals Agency); EFSA (European Food Safety Authority); FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights).

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