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More efficient and cost-effective interpretation in the European Parliament

Committee on Budgetary Control

PE508.175

European Parliament resolution of 10 September 2013 on ‘Towards more efficient and cost effective interpretation in the European Parliament’ (2011/2287(INI))

*The European Parliament*,

– having regard to Article 286 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,

– having regard to its resolution of 5 September 2006 on the Court of Auditors’ Special Report No 5/2005 on interpretation expenditure incurred by Parliament, the Commission and the Council[[1]](#footnote-1),

– having regard to the European Court of Auditors’ Special Report No 5/2005 entitled ‘Interpretation expenditure incurred by the Parliament, the Commission and the Council’, together with the institutions’ replies[[2]](#footnote-2),

– having regard to the note to the members of the Bureau entitled ‘Resource-efficient full multilingualism in interpretation – implementation of the decision on the European Parliament’s budget 2012’,

– having regard to the report by the Secretary-General of the European Parliament of 9 April 2013 entitled ‘Preparing for Complexity: European Parliament in 2025 – The Answers’,

– having regard to Rule 48 of its Rules of Procedure,

– having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A7-0233/2013),

A. whereas multilingualism is one of the key elements of the European Parliament, and of the Union as a whole, and whereas it ensures respect for cultural and linguistic diversity as well as equal treatment of EU citizens with different origins and backgrounds;

B. whereas the principle of multilingualism in the European Parliament is the foundation of the institution’s political, co-legislative and communication work;

C. whereas the principle of multilingualism in the European Parliament guards against unnecessary obstruction of the right of European citizens to stand for election to the European Parliament;

D. whereas multilingualism guarantees the right of citizens to communicate with Parliament in any of the EU’s official languages, thus enabling them to exercise their right of democratic scrutiny;

E. whereas Parliament’s linguistic services facilitate communication and, in so doing, make sure that Parliament remains open to all of Europe’s citizens, ensuring transparency within the Union’s unique multilingual structure based on 24 official languages;

F. whereas Parliament’s Rules of Procedure stipulate that Members may speak in the official language of their choice and that interpretation into the other official languages will be provided, thus respecting the democratic right to be elected to the European Parliament irrespective of one’s language skills;

G. whereas, as a result of successive enlargements, the challenge of multilingualism has reached a completely new dimension in terms of size, complexity and policy relevance, and whereas extensive multilingualism translates, naturally, into major and increasing costs for Parliament and therefore for the Union’s citizens;

H. whereas, with regard to Parliament’s 2012 budget, considerable savings, including a reduction of EUR 10 million per year in the costs of interpretation services, were necessary in order to limit the budget’s growth to 1.9 % compared with the previous year;

***Interpretation framework in the European Parliament***

1. Acknowledges that the European Union is the only entity in the world running an official policy of multilingualism based on 24 official languages, with a total of 552 language combinations to be covered; welcomes, in this connection, the very high quality of Parliament’s interpretation services, but believes that ways of reducing the burden entailed by the complex structure of multilingualism and its considerable and increasing costs should be sought;

2. Notes that, of all the languages spoken in plenary in Strasbourg and Brussels from September 2009 to February 2013, English was used for 26 979 minutes (29,1 %), German for 12 556 minutes (13,6 %), French for 8 841 minutes (9,5 %), Estonian for 109 minutes (0,1 %) and Maltese for 195 minutes (0,2 %);

3. Stresses that both plenary sittings and committee meetings can be publicly accessed by all through webstreaming or video on demand – new media which are increasing the transparency of European Parliament activities for EU citizens – and that their availability in all official languages highlights the democratic and multicultural nature of Parliament;

4. Notes that some multinational bodies, such as the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, operate only at intergovernmental level with no legislative function; points out in this connection that the UN, with 192 members, has a language regime with six official languages, and that NATO, with 28 members, uses mainly English, despite having two official languages;

5. Stresses, however, that Parliament is a directly elected political body whose Members are elected regardless of their language skills; reaffirms, therefore, the right of every Member to speak in the official language of their choice, as a key principle of Parliament’s operating arrangements;

6. Notes that the practical implications of the use of official languages in the European Parliament are set out in its Code of Conduct on Multilingualism, updated in 2008; notes the fact that the concept of ‘controlled full multilingualism’ laid down in that Code maintains equality among Members and citizens; points out that the implementation of full multilingualism, while based on the principle of ‘interpretation on demand’, will in the long term be contingent upon making users of language services fully aware of the costs of providing those services, and hence of their responsibility to make the best possible use of them;

7. Believes that the principle of sound financial management needs to apply to interpretation as well, and that, with a view to ensuring the best value for money for European taxpayers, critical analysis should continually be undertaken to assess where and how efficiency can be improved, and costs controlled or limited;

***Efficient use of interpretation resources***

8. Notes the decision on ‘Resource-efficient full multilingualism in interpretation’ taken by Parliament’s Bureau in 2011, which increases the efficiency of interpretation services and reduces their structural costs in the following ways:

(i) matching the needs arising from travel by Parliament delegations with the financial and human resources available,

(ii) giving priority to interpretation for trilogues during committee weeks,

(iii) spreading committee meetings more evenly over the week,

(iv) applying the rules on the duration of evening meetings more stringently;

9. Welcomes the fact that, as a result, the budgetary resources devoted to interpretation services in Parliament have started to decrease; points out that in 2010 the budget outturn figure was EUR 54 990 000, that in 2011 it was EUR 56 964 283 and that it currently stands at EUR 47 000 000 for 2012, although the final outturn for 2012 will not be known until 31 December 2013 and may be higher;

10. Notes that the estimated 2013 budget figure for the interpretation DG is EUR 58 000 000, of which EUR 53 000 000 is directly linked to interpretation services; asks to be informed in detail and on a regular basis about the concrete results of the ‘Resource-efficient full multilingualism’ initiative as regards the 2013 budget, in particular in terms of expected cost reductions or increases;

11. Notes, furthermore, that while Parliament’s interpretation services cost EUR 157 954 283 in the three year-period leading up to the end of 2012, a reduction of 17 % was achieved when comparing the budgetary outturn figures for 2010 and 2012; notes that the smart savings achieved in interpretation services did not jeopardise the principle of multilingualism and insists that equal access to language services needs to be ensured for Members and that proper working conditions need to be upheld for the services concerned;

12. Welcomes the fact that Parliament’s estimates of revenue and expenditure for the financial year 2014 propose reducing interpretation costs by 23 % during an election year, compared with the 2013 budget figure of EUR 58 000 000; asks for detailed information proving that the proposed cuts are feasible and that the excellent quality of interpretation can be maintained;

13. Emphasises that the implementation of ‘resource-efficient full multilingualism’ has led to considerable gains being made through a more even spread of committee meetings during the week, without any reduction in the overall number of committee meetings; notes that, as a result, the total number of interpreter days decreased from 105 258 (EUR 107 047 386) in 2011 to 97 793 (EUR 100 237 825) in 2012, leading to savings of EUR 6 809 561;

14. Notes with concern that, according to the reports on the Code of Conduct on Multilingualism, requests for interpretation services originating from committees, delegations and political groups were still affected by a high and growing level of late cancellations, as illustrated by the following figures:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Committees** | **2009** | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** |
| Requests | 984 | 1712 | 2213 | 2448 |
| Latecancellations | 76 | 172 | 238 | 359 |
| % | 7,72 % | 10,05 % | 10,80 % | 14,70 % |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Delegations** | **2009** | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** |
| Requests | 624 | 813 | 836 | 832 |
| Late cancellations | 116 | 93 | 102 | 171 |
| % | 18,59 % | 11,44 % | 12,20 % | 20,60 % |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Political groups** | **2009** | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** |
| Requests | 1922 | 2310 | 2297 | 2146 |
| Latecancellations | 285 | 378 | 266 | 292 |
| % | 14,83 % | 16,36 % | 11,60 % | 13,60 % |

15. Notes with concern that the potential costs incurred as a result of these late cancellations would represent, without last-minute redeployment of some interpreters, a substantial proportion of the overall interpretation budget; notes in this connection that in 2011 EUR 4 350 000 (7,6 % of the interpretation budget) and in 2012 EUR 5 480 000 (11,9 % of the interpretation budget) would have been spent on interpretation services made available and then cancelled outside the deadlines foreseen in the Code of Conduct on Multilingualism; calls on the Bureau to provide the Committee on Budgetary Control with a detailed analysis of the growing trend in late cancellations and to introduce a mechanism to increase awareness of the lost resources due to late cancellations and to significantly reduce the number and percentage of such cancellations;

16. Reiterates that, while maintaining a high standard of work, it is also necessary to make more efficient use of language resources and to control their costs by looking at the overall workload for each language section and ensuring that the costs generated by the late cancellation of meeting requests and delegation visits with interpretation, in contravention of the deadlines laid down in the Code of Conduct, are reduced; insists that committees, delegations and political groups should be made aware of the rules laid down in the Code of Conduct;

17. Calls on the Bureau to develop a system with further measures to combat late cancellations of interpreter bookings;

18. Calls on the administration to make full and efficient use of Members’ updated language profiles when making language arrangements for committees, delegations and political groups both in and outside the places of work; insists that all Members’ language profiles should be updated every year; points out, in addition, that a copy of the updated profiles should be forwarded to the secretariats of the committees, delegations, political groups and working groups;

19. Insists that, with due regard for the decision of Parliament’s Bureau of December 2011 on ‘Resource‑efficient full multilingualism’, interpretation into an official language during a delegation visit should be provided only on the explicit written request of a participating Member of the European Parliament; stresses that during a delegation visit the number of interpreters should be kept to the absolute minimum in compliance with the applicable rules;

20. Recalls the proposal by the Secretary-General to introduce measures to raise awareness among users of interpretation services, including committees, delegations and political groups, and awaits further detailed proposals to improve awareness of the cost of late cancellations;

21. Calls on the administration to continue having the head of the team of interpreters draw up a list of interpretation facilities requested but not used at the end of each meeting and in agreement with the secretariat of that meeting; notes that a copy of that list should be forwarded to the secretariat of the meeting concerned; considers that the list should also take account of those using webstreaming or video on demand;

22. Takes note of the new Interpretation ad personam (IAP) service offered to Members and established following the pilot project which started in 2010; notes that this new service entailed costs of EUR 157 000 in 2011 and EUR 115 000 in 2012; believes that the service should be reviewed in order to look for ways to improve it;

***Interpretation in the European Parliament: the way forward***

23.Welcomes the fact that the interpretation services have achieved efficiency gains and cost reductions in recent years while maintaining an excellent quality of work; emphasises that interpretation and translation expenditure continues to take up a significant proportion of Parliament’s budget and therefore believes that the challenge of multilingualism at reasonable costs requires Parliament’s continual attention;

24. Believes that the Committee on Budgetary Control should be informed regularly about changes in the cost of interpretation; calls for the annual Code of Conduct report prepared by the interpretation services and sent to the Secretary-General to be made public to members of the committee;

25. Takes the view that situations in which interpretation into certain languages is offered without being used should be avoided as far as possible; stresses the need for measures to reduce the costs of unneeded interpretation at meetings, and calls, therefore, for the development and urgent implementation of a system that prevents situations in which interpretation is made available into languages that are not actually spoken at a given meeting or requested by webstream users;

26. Expects the Secretary-General to present, by the end of the year, a detailed analysis of the interpretation languages provided for all (working) group, committee and delegation meetings and of the languages actually spoken at these meetings, as well as an overview of the derogations from the general interpretation rules adopted by the Bureau on 12 March 2012[[3]](#footnote-3) which are requested by and granted to delegation visits;

27. Calls on the Bureau to adopt a further decision on multilingualism by the end of the year, dealing specifically with possible scenarios for ‘interpretation on demand’ and the efficiency gains expected to be achieved as a result;

28. Asks the Court of Auditors, therefore, to provide Parliament, within a reasonable time frame and at the latest by March 2014, with a special report on the interpretation and translation expenditure incurred by Parliament, the Commission and the Council, assessing the soundness of the financial management involved and updating the findings made in its Special Report No 5/2005; notes, furthermore, that this report could be produced periodically and used for the discharge procedure; reiterates that the report should provide information on whether the institutions involved have adequate tools and procedures to ensure that:

– the services provided do not exceed the real needs,

– all the services needed can be provided,

– the services are provided at the lowest possible cost,

– the services provided are of high quality;

29. Notes also that this follow-up report should carefully compare the cost-effectiveness of Parliament’s interpretation services with that of the interpretation services provided by the Council and the Commission, and compare the actual costs of the three institutions’ interpretation services with those recorded in the audit reference period;

30. Insists, furthermore, that Parliament address, as a matter of priority, the considerable number of late cancellations and invites the Bureau to present a detailed action plan for reducing it;

31. Reiterates that interinstitutional cooperation is essential in order to exchange best practices that promote effectiveness and allow savings to be made; considers that interinstitutional cooperation should be improved as regards interpretation; calls for a thorough review to be carried out, with priority being given to more effective sharing of available resources among all the institutions and concrete measures in the area of freelance interpretation;

32. Stresses the importance of software applications as management instruments and insists that more funding be allocated for this purpose in next year’s budget; notes that a higher level of efficiency can be obtained if Parliament’s administrative services are provided with appropriate management information; considers it regrettable that certain DGs are still lagging behind in terms of the software applications available, despite improvements in the IT sector since 2010;

33. Calls on its relevant services to assess whether the considerable efficiency gains made in the area of interpretation can serve as an example for improvement within other DGs;

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34. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.

1. OJ C 305 E, 14.12.2006, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. OJ C 291, 23.11.2005, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It was decided specifically that, while delegations would continue to benefit from the full interpretation entitlement of up to five languages – as laid down in the Code of Conduct on Multilingualism – during weeks set aside for external parliamentary activities (green weeks), delegations requiring derogations for travel during committee weeks would only be provided with a limited language regime not exceeding interpretation into one language. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)