



Research for CULT Committee – The European Union’s approach to multilingualism in its own communication policy

This study assesses the EU’s approach to multilingualism in its communications policy. A mixed methods approach is employed, including literature review, legal and policy analysis, quantitative analysis of EU websites, interviews with EU experts and survey data analysis.

Key findings



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.

Regulation No 1 is the legal cornerstone of EU multilingualism obligations. It sets out the rules determining the languages to be used by EU institutions, bodies and agencies and provides

flexibility for EU entities to decide which languages are to be used in specific cases e.g. in working documents or internal meetings with experts. Multilingual digital communication is not addressed in Regulation No 1 or Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) case law to date. Consequently, much content published online is not translated because it is viewed as a by-product of internal communication. This means that published documents that can affect citizens, businesses and Member States may not always be available in their language.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on “The European Union’s approach to multilingualism in its own communication policy”. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3TpgJ8e>

Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies
Directorate-General for Internal Policies

Authors: Project leader: Dr. Carlos MENDEZ (European Policies Research Centre (EPRC Delft and Glasgow, University of Strathclyde)

Project team: Dr. Michele GAZZOLA, Prof. Laure CLEMENT-WILZ, Dr. Vasiliki TRIGA, Dr. Fernando MENDEZ, Dr. Costas DJOUVAS, Antonis CHARAMBOULOS, Prof. John BACHTLER
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This study argues, based on legal reasoning, that **multilingualism obligations should apply to specific types of website content**. To this end, a multilingual needs typology is proposed to clarify the types of content that should be prioritised for translation. This is based on a ranking classification of: (a) *core documents* that are legally obliged to be available or submitted in all EU languages; (b) *primary documents* that 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, e.g. State aid guidance, EU funding programmes or calls for tender; and (c) secondary documents that are a lower order priority for multilingual needs and accessibility, and where machine translation could be used if resources are unavailable for human translation.

The study reveals significant variations in the availability of multilingual content that ought to be available in all official languages. This is the result of an assessment of multilingual scores based on the application of the multilingual needs typology to the websites of EU institutions. The European Commission and the European Central Bank websites do not perform well in the publication of sections with “mostly core” and “mostly primary” content that should be available in all EU languages. By contrast, the performance of the websites of the European Council/Council of the European Union, the CJEU and the European Court of Auditors is very good. The European Parliament also has a relatively high score.

Another important conclusion is **that the language regimes of EU institutions, bodies and agencies are not sufficiently transparent and formalised**. The regimes are sometimes not specified or are often unclear. Similarly, most EU institutions and bodies have published a website language policy, but most agencies have not done so. This is inconsistent with European Ombudsman recommendations calling for the policy on the use of official EU languages to be clearly defined and published.

The wide range of language regimes, practices and website language policies are not systematically monitored and reviewed by the EU. This is detrimental for transparency and accountability as well as hampering a more formalised approach to multilingual communication with common standards.

The variability in the provision of multilingual content across and within EU websites implies that this communication channel does not always suit the needs of all target audiences. The analysis of the 13 EU websites with the most multilingual content showed that some performed well in terms of a multi-lingo index that takes account of the different content sections of a website, while others performed more poorly. The highest multilingual ratings were for six sites with scores well above the mean of the 13 websites (Court of Justice of the European Union, Council of the European Union/European Council (shared website), European Court of Auditors, European Parliament, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and the European Ombudsman). A second cluster of websites have a mid-range performance and include the European Commission (closest to the mean of EU websites), and the European Chemicals Agency and the European Committee of the Regions (both with lower scores). The last cluster encompasses four websites that perform poorly and have low availability of multilingual content (European Central Bank, European Economic and Social Committee, European Food Safety Authority, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights). Furthermore, most EU agency websites (which were assessed in addition to the above in a qualitative way) do not publish content in all official languages and are effectively monolingual in English.

An alternative multilingual index 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, very dramatically in some cases such as the European Ombudsman.

Where only English is used, the accessibility to EU-published content is low. Analysis of Eurostat's Adult Education Survey (2016) shows that around one-third of EU residents aged 25-64 speak only their native tongue(s). There is no common language in the EU spoken at a very good level (i.e. as native speaker or as a foreign language at a proficient level) by a majority of the population. About 20% of EU adult residents are able to communicate at a very good level in German, followed by French (about 16%), Italian (14%), and English (13%). If a document is published in English only, a share of 13-45% of the EU adult population are able to understand it (the range depending on the indicator used to measure language proficiency). This share increases to 43-65% in a trilingual communication policy (using English, French and German). A fully multilingual communication policy ensures accessibility to content by 97-99% of EU adult residents.

The lack of attention to the importance of multilingualism in communication policy can potentially fuel perceptions of the EU being distant and disconnected from citizens given the current distribution of language skills in the population. EU language regimes are the result of a balancing act between various interests including significant resource constraints. This presents a policy and operational challenge for the EU institutions. Although not free from a resourcing perspective, a multilingual regime is the most effective and accessible communication policy, considering the current distribution of language skills of EU residents.

Recommendations

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

- **Recommendation 1: Develop a common and transparent framework and standards for multilingual communication including in the digital sphere.** If there is no political appetite for a reform of Regulation No 1, the European Parliament could promote the establishment of a formal common framework and standards via an inter-institutional agreement. EU communication via the internet should be subject to multilingualism obligations not only regarding the content defined in this study as “core” but also for “primary” content.
- **Recommendation 2: Institutionalise regular monitoring of legal compliance, administrative transparency and use of resources to ensure multilingual communication through a Periodic Report.**
- **Recommendation 3: Establish an Officer of Multilingualism to review practices, language regimes and website language policies.** The Officer should be responsible for the periodic monitoring report and be accountable to the European Parliament.
- **Recommendation 4: Promote the use of official languages in digital communication in order to improve accessibility and closeness to citizens.**
- **Recommendation 5: Increase the EU budget allocations for multilingualism.** This will help to counter the cuts to translation and interpretation services witnessed in recent years.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3TpqJ8e>

More information on Policy Department research for CULT: <https://research4committees.blog/cult/>



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Research administrator: Pierre HERIARD, Balazs MELLAR, Kristiina MILT Editorial assistant: Anna DEMBEK

Contact: Poldep-cohesion@ep.europa.eu

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