



Multilingualism – a challenge for the EU Agencies Network

Speech - **City** Brussels - **Country** Belgium - **Date** 30/09/2021

Good morning everyone and thank you for the invitation to address you today. The work that your agencies do is vital to the wellbeing of every EU citizen and this workshop is a sign of the strategic importance you place in being able to communicate with those citizens and those citizens being able in turn to communicate with you.

Good communication creates better outcomes but also trust. The pandemic showed us the critical importance of communication and of trust and those of you whose agencies worked on the front line of the EU response will be acutely conscious of that. Citizens looked to you to get fast and reliable information, to assess their risk levels, to make sure the vaccines were safe to roll out and to ensure that the funding provided to support those who had lost jobs or were temporarily furloughed was administered swiftly and efficiently.

The pandemic has been a masterclass for all of us in the value of good public services of good administration and good communication lies at the heart of all of that.

Given the crucial tasks EU agencies fulfil, the public has legitimate expectations in relation to your work. It is therefore encouraging to note your Network's strategic objective to position "*EU Agencies and Joint Undertakings as a role model for administrative excellence*", by sharing services and best practices and by pooling tasks and capabilities. Workshops, like this one, are an example of this.

European citizens are also entitled to expect that agencies will play their part in making a reality of two political rights, which are essential to citizenship: the right to know and the right to participate. One fundamental condition for EU citizens to exercise these rights is to be able to receive information and to contribute in a language that they are comfortable and fluent in.

Many people in the EU speak only one official language, if even that and any limitations on the use of official languages when the EU administration is communicating to the public therefore reduces the public's ability to interact with it.

EU agencies therefore become dependent on other actors, at European or national level, to reach and to receive information from the public. This substantially reduces the visibility of EU agencies and direct contact with the public, as a means of building trust and ensuring legitimacy, is jeopardised.



Some of you might feel “far away” from citizens – not physically but also in terms of the substantive matters that you are dealing with. Who is listening to you outside of your agency and wider EU administration bubble and, critically, what is the audience that you are trying to communicate with?

Are you intentionally just speaking to a specialised audience (to experts, authorities in the Member States, companies etc.) or are you trying to communicate information that is (or should be) of interest to the general public? Throughout this pandemic, fake news has played a lethal role when it came to vaccine take up and other measures intended to mitigate the pandemic’s impact. And as a result, and to counter the false information, many citizens became a much more attentive audience to levels of scientific and technical information that they previously might have considered irrelevant to them. Many ‘ordinary citizens, for example, wanted to know the science behind the new RNA vaccines, or the comparative risks as between the virus variants, information that administrations might themselves have previously considered lay in the ‘expert’ domain and not in the domain of the general public.

In order to counter fake news – something that is literally now a life or death issue – relevant agencies will have to pivot to providing much more scientific and technical information to the broadest possible audience and that means ensuring that your language policy is fit for that purpose.

Some specific language rights as you know, do exist (for example, every EU citizen has the right to receive a reply from the EU administration in any of the 24 official languages). However, beyond these specific rights, EU institutions have some discretion about the languages they use in specific situations. How they exercise that discretion is a question of good administration. As Ombudsman, I have received many complaints in the past on how the EU administration exercises this discretion.

Many complaints concern two issues: the languages that the EU administration chooses to use in public consultations and for their websites. Individuals turn to my Office when they feel that they cannot participate in a public consultation (for example, due to consultation documents being published in English only) or if they cannot find the information they are looking for on EU websites in a language they understand.

Through my complaint-based inquiry work, I have observed that there is a lack of consistency and transparency in the use of languages across the EU institutions. Language restrictions and their rules, where they exist, vary from one EU institution to the other. In particular:

Not all EU institutions and bodies have a language policy in place;

The extent to which EU institutions’ websites, or parts of those websites, are available in several or all official languages varies;

And there are different language policies as regards public consultations.

I am aware that using 24 official EU languages poses challenges (such as translation costs,



slower decision-making and discrepancies between language versions). These are challenges that concern every EU institution and body, but are particularly important for smaller institutions and bodies with limited resources - such as EU agencies or my own Office. The challenge is to strike the proper balance between multilingualism, on the one hand, and administrative efficiency and budgetary constraints, on the other.

To better understand this balance, I launched a public consultation on multilingualism in 2018. I received around 300 replies.

The replies showed broad support for multilingualism. Yet, it was also acknowledged that language restrictions may be acceptable, if objectively justified, proportionate and transparent. Particular importance was again attributed to multilingual EU websites and public consultations.

Based on the results of the public consultation, my Office drew up draft practical recommendations, which I shared with all EU institutions and bodies for comments. 64 bodies commented of which 30 were members of your Network.

It was very encouraging to see the positive feedback I received from EU agencies. Most of you considered the recommendations helpful. I also took good note of the concerns some of you voiced, in view of your small sizes, limited resources and the often technical nature of your tasks. The replies I received showed significant variations across EU agencies. For example: some EU agencies already have in place a language policy, others don't; some EU agencies translate parts of their websites, others don't; and there are also very different approaches when it comes to translating public consultations and accepting replies in languages other than English.

We carefully considered your input and the input of the other institutions and we came up with what I consider to be a good balance in our practical recommendations:

- Information of interest to the general public should be translated as much as possible. This, as I said earlier, involves reflecting on what is (and should be) of interest to the general public. Websites and public consultations are of particular importance in this context.
- Make maximum use of all available translation tools and technologies.
- If you consider language restrictions necessary, ensure that they are objective, proportionate and transparent.
- To this end, establish a clear language policy, setting out which languages are used in which type of situation (for example, in public consultations, administrative procedures, press relations, or the use of social media). This allows the public to understand why not everything is translated, countering suspicions that information is hidden and reassuring them that their views are important.

The EU Agency Network is an excellent platform through which to discuss these issues and to learn from each other's experience. One idea raised by several EU agencies in their comments on my draft recommendations was to develop a template for a language policy in the Network that could be adapted by EU agencies according to their individual needs. This could indeed be very useful.



I hope that my suggestions will help you meet the highest standards of administration, as well as the legitimate expectations of the public as your agencies continue to perform their vital functions.