Court of Auditors' special report No 9/2006 on the translation expenditure incurred by the Commission, the Parliament and the Council

2007/2077(INI) - 06/07/2006 - Non-legislative basic document

PURPOSE: to present Special Report 9/2006 from the Court of Auditors concerning translation expenditure incurred by the Commission, the Parliament and the Council.

CONTENT: the Court of Auditors carried out this audit in order to assess the extent to which the Commission, the Parliament and the Council manage their translation resources and expenditure efficiently and effectively. In particular, the Court addressed three questions:

1. Is translation demand met and are there adequate procedures to avoid unnecessary translations?
2. Are translations timely and of adequate quality for their purpose?
3. Were the institutions able to keep the cost of translations under control?

The audit has shown that the institutions have adopted different approaches when responding to rising translation demand. Both the Commission and the Council have taken adequate measures to reduce the number of documents translated into all languages. A significant part of all translation requests is, however, not governed by the translation guidelines adopted by each institution, and **none of the institutions has a clear and coherent procedure for requesting translations**.

The three translation services audited generally manage to deliver translations into the EU-15 languages on time and with the required quality. However, in 2004 there were significant problems for the EU-10 languages.

With the exception of the Commission for 2002, none of the institutions had calculated their total translation cost or the average cost per page translated. A calculation made by the Court shows that in 2003 the full cost of translation was about EUR 100 million each for the Parliament and for the Council and EUR 215 million for the Commission. Following the increase in the number of languages after the May 2004 EU enlargement, the cost of translation has risen to approximately EUR 128 million for the Parliament, EUR 126 million for the Council and EUR 257 million for the Commission in 2005. The average cost per page in 2003 was EUR 150 at the Parliament and at the Commission, and EUR 254 at the Council. In 2005, the average cost per page rose to EUR 194 at the Commission and EUR 276 at the Council, but dropped to EUR 119 at the Parliament.

The report states that **internal translation is more expensive than freelance translation**, but comparison is difficult as texts translated externally are of a different nature and the quality of internal translation is recognised to be higher.

While the Commission and the Council have certainly been successful in reducing demand for translations into the EU-15 languages this has also resulted in overcapacity and below-average productivity. The Court, however, noted significant differences in the productivity and the outsourcing percentages of the different language units of the different institutions.

The Court considers that **savings could be achieved by further increasing interinstitutional cooperation**, in particular by ensuring that spare capacity in one institution is made available to other institutions in order to reduce their outsourcing to freelance translators. However, lack of forecasts and

insufficient communication of available translation capacity make it difficult for the institutions to take full advantage of temporarily available capacity at other institutions.

The report highlights that while advanced IT tools are available at the audited translation services, they are not used in a consistent manner. At the Parliament the actual use of IT tools thus varies widely from one translation unit to another. The efficiency and the harmonisation of the translations could be improved by increased use of computer tools, better planning, stricter adherence to deadlines for requesting translations and closer supervision of outsourcing decisions in order to avoid the use of freelance translators while staff translators are available. Furthermore, consistent monitoring through the use of performance indicators and procedures for ensuring adequate management information should be implemented.

The Court's analysis of the nature and the timing of supply and demand shows that whereas all institutions face structural difficulties in providing a sufficient volume of translations of an acceptable quality into the EU-10 languages, there are clear differences as far as the EU-15 languages are concerned. English translators, for instance, face the highest workload of all languages at the Commission DGT, but the lowest at the Council and the Parliament. As Council and Parliament work with very short delivery deadlines and widely fluctuating demands, they also have temporary spare capacity during some periods.

The audit showed that translation needs in the EU-15 languages can generally be met. However, the accession of small countries has created a large increase in demand in small translation markets, where supply is rather limited. The difficulties encountered with the launching of EPSO competitions to select staff translators for the EU-10 languages have meant a shortage of translators from the new Member States. As a result, during the first year after enlargement, the institutions were not capable of satisfying translation needs for the new languages.

There is a **current weakness in the current system of workload balancing** that documents which are normally outsourced and translations into the EU-10 languages are excluded from the system. In addition, the institutions do not sufficiently inform each other of the spare capacity available and have no real incentive or obligation to accept a translation request just from another institution. In 2005, the Parliament and several Commission DGs outsourced a large number of pages of non-urgent documents in the same languages which could have been translated by another institution. Total payments of about **EUR 11 million for freelance translations** could thus have been avoided.