

Serving the people of Europe

What the European Commission does for you



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Introduction

The European Union is now home to the citizens of 25 European countries. Decisions taken by the EU, like the introduction of the euro or action to protect the environment, can directly affect our daily lives. Not only are these decisions taken in Brussels, headquarters city of the Union, but many people see these decisions as taken 'by' Brussels. It is as if hidden forces are at work, detached from the rest of Europe, whose task it is to impose their will on its 455 million citizens.

Nothing is further from the truth. Decisions are the result of open and democratic processes, involving the three main EU institutions: the European Parliament, the Council of the EU (made up of ministers from the member countries) and the European Commission. With decision-taking shared in this way and with the interests of 25 countries to reconcile, the detailed mechanisms are bound to be complicated. But they are fully transparent.

The present booklet looks at the European Commission, the largest of the three bodies. It tells very briefly and simply what the Commission does and how it works. It also profiles some of the people, ordinary Europeans like the rest of us, who work for the Commission and whose job is to make sure the EU is run in our common interest.

The Commission's role

The European Union exists because its member countries have agreed to pool their interests and even their sovereignty in certain key sectors and policies. They have done so in the name of peace, prosperity and security for their citizens. All this is set out in the EU's founding treaties.

The European Commission plays a crucial role in enabling the EU to deliver on its promises. Its powers and responsibilities have increased over the years as the Union has expanded and moved into new areas of activity. The Commission has three distinct, and equally important, functions.

The first is to draft new laws and regulations. The Commission draws up proposals which are submitted to the Council and the European Parliament for debate and decision. It is they who, in the end, formally adopt – or reject – the Commission's proposals.

The second is to take charge of the day-to-day management of the wide range of EU activities from farming and food safety to protecting consumers from being ripped off by unscrupulous firms. The Commission can, for instance, impose fines of hundreds of millions of euro on the worst offenders who manipulate markets to keep prices – and profits – high.

The Commission's third area of responsibility is to make sure that the laws adopted by the Council and the European Parliament are applied correctly and even-handedly in all member states. In the European Union, with its single market and freedom of movement, it is essential that all citizens are equal before EU law, whatever their country of residence. Because of this function, the Commission is sometimes called the 'guardian of the EU treaties'.

Making a real impact



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The idea that Commission officials make rules without worrying about their impact is far from the reality of EU decision-making. It is, in fact, a democratic process involving the Commission, 25 national governments, the European Parliament and many others. Matthias Langemeyer, a negotiator involved in the 2004 EU enlargement to 25 countries and in talks with potential future members, works at the heart of this democratic process.

'In its role of handling entry negotiations, our Commission department has the primary responsibility for listening to candidate countries' concerns. We try hard to accommodate these, but we take into account the views of other departments too – in my case colleagues responsible for agriculture and for health and consumer protection. We must also be fair to Europe's farmers and consumers.'

The EU negotiating position is drafted by the Commission but must be validated by the member states before being presented to the candidate countries. Validating the Commission's proposals is a process Matthias sees as problem-solving, not confrontation.

'To be in the Council of the EU with the 25 member states and the Commission and find a compromise which satisfies everyone, you can feel Europe evolving day-by-day. And I love working on subjects which affect so many people.'

After schooling in France and his native Germany, Matthias picked studies in agronomy in Bonn and Toulouse as a likely route to an international career. This paid off. Matthias has worked continuously for the EU in various functions ever since.

He first spent two years in Brussels analysing agricultural legislation under a work experience scheme run by European universities. Then followed secondment as a 'young expert' to the EU delegation in Barbados, an auxiliary contract in Brussels managing aid projects in the Middle East, a spell as a temporary EU official in Belgrade helping Serbia's farmers in the aftermath of conflict, before becoming a fully-fledged EU civil servant in 2003.

Matthias Langemeyer

BORN:
1967 in
Celle, Germany
POSITION:
Negotiator for agriculture
and food safety with
candidate countries

Structures

Let's start with a definition. The term 'European Commission' applies in the first instance to the 25 men and women Commissioners who run the organisation. They are appointed for a period of five years by the governments of the 25 EU countries – one per country – and vetted by the European Parliament before they take office. This establishes their democratic legitimacy. They then swear an oath of independence before the EU Court of Justice.

The present Commission, headed by José Manuel Barroso of Portugal, began its five-year term in November 2004.

But the 'Commission' is also the organisation itself and the 25 000 people who work within its operational departments, called directorates-general

(DGs). Each DG is in charge of a specific policy area: agriculture, competition, economic and financial affairs, and so on. Every DG comes under the direct responsibility of one of the Commissioners.

Based on the number of staff, the Commission is about as big as the local authority of a medium-sized European city. In this respect, the European taxpayer is getting value for money.

Most Commission staff work in Brussels, although more than 2 500 are based in Luxembourg and there are Commission offices in all 25 EU countries. In addition, the Commission runs more than 100 delegations located around the globe, dealing with matters like trade, development and humanitarian assistance.

The Commission's Directorates-General

Policies

Agriculture and Rural Development
 Competition
 Economic and Financial Affairs
 Education and Culture
 Energy and Transport
 Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
 Enterprise and Industry
 Environment
 Fisheries and Maritime Affairs

Health and Consumer Protection
 Information Society and Media
 Internal Market and Services
 Joint Research Centre
 Justice, Freedom and Security
 Regional Policy
 Research
 Taxation and Customs Union

External relations

Development

Enlargement
 EuropeAid – Co-operation Office
 External Relations
 Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO)
 Trade

General and internal services

Budget
 European Anti-Fraud Office
 Eurostat
 Bureau of European Policy Advisers

Informatics
 Internal Audit Service
 Interpretation
 Legal Service
 Personnel and Administration
 Press and Communication
 Publications Office
 Secretariat-General
 Translation

Working with developing countries



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The EU is the world's largest trader and aid donor, and has a special partnership with 78 countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP). Jeremy Lester specialises in working with these countries.

In his Commission career, Jeremy has always worked with developing countries, the field for which he obtained a Master's degree from the UK's University of East Anglia. He first spent three years in Lesotho before joining the Commission in 1976.

Since then, he has been involved in policy-making in Brussels as well as on-the-spot assistance working in EU delegations in Madagascar, Rwanda and now Niger. Delegations have a dual function: they serve the people of the host country, but are also the local listening post and a forward base for Commission departments in Brussels dealing with overseas development, trade, external relations, humanitarian aid and much else.

As head of the delegation in Niger, Jeremy manages a staff of 45 and the largest development assistance pro-

gramme in that country. 'Although we are more than 4 000 km from Brussels, it is often in countries like this that Commission programmes give the EU its highest visibility. I am proud that in Niger the Commission has supported change management and development, and been prepared to support risky projects. Not to take risk guarantees failure. A well that is dug by and with the local community will be maintained. A well dug by outsiders will be useless soon after they leave.'

To relax, Jeremy has his garden. 'The measured pace of growth of a garden helps me maintain a sense of balance. I am not a particularly good gardener, but I have been very happy to potter in my different gardens – in Lesotho, in Madagascar, in Rwanda and now in the harsh conditions of Niger, where a garden is an oasis in the midst of goats, dust and sand.'

Jeremy Lester

BORN:
1949 in
Colchester, United Kingdom
POSITION:
Head of EU Delegation,
Niger

People

The 25 000 people in the European Commission come from all member countries of the EU – and beyond. They also come from all walks of life. Like civil servants everywhere, they cover many sectors of activity and apply their skills at different levels as policy-makers, managers and support staff. Their diversity reflects the very diversity of the European Union itself, making the Commission a melting pot of European languages and culture.

There are no stereotypes. Walk along a corridor in any of the buildings in Brussels housing Commission departments and you will meet people from a wide range of national, cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds speaking several different languages.

But the Commission is no tower of Babel; it uses only three internal working languages – English, French and German – although formal documents are produced in all 20 official EU languages. All staff are expected to speak their own and at least one other EU language.

There is no set career path leading to a job in the European Commission. Previous age limits for new recruits have been removed, making space for older candidates with relevant work experience. Full-time civil servants can be joined by short-term experts with specific skills or by national civil servants on secondment from member governments. But these latter groups make up a small minority.

Although the Commission strives to create and maintain a broad balance among nationalities, there is no quota system. Adaptability and the taste for working in a multicultural and multilingual environment are key attributes. So is the willingness to become an expatriate for a long period.

Making money for Europe



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It was the multicultural and international dimensions that attracted Anne Ropers to the European institutions. Her job in Brussels deals with the most tangible symbol of European integration – the euro.

Using a Finnish euro coin to buy a bus ticket in Athens is something we now take for granted. But harmonising the size, weight and other technical characteristics of the 74 billion euro coins of the 12 countries using the single currency is a complex task. This is not a Commission responsibility because minting coins is a very old sovereign right belonging to member states. However, the Commission provides the secretariat for the necessary coordination between governments and that is Anne's current job.

Anne has nearly always worked in this area. Her first Commission job involved calculating the daily exchange rate against other currencies of the ecu, a notional currency used mainly

to define EU budgets and payments, 'but also quite important for large companies. They used to ring me up to get the rate'.

The ecu disappeared with the launch of the euro. As the currencies of participating member countries also disappeared and the European Central Bank in Frankfurt took over responsibility for the euro exchange rate, Anne moved on to dealing with euro coin specifications. 'The main task now is to provide the new member states with the relevant information. A number will be using the euro within a few years.'

After 32 years in Brussels, the international environment is still the part of her work she likes best. 'You learn about a lot of countries without even leaving your office. And after so many years here, while I still have a strong link to France, this is now where I most feel at home.'

Anne Ropers

BORN:
1945 in
Paris, France
POSITION:

Secretary to the Mint
Directors Working Group on
euro coins

Notes and coins

Euro notes in denominations ranging from 5 to 500 are the same in the 12 countries using the single currency. Coins, on the other hand, have one common side stating the coin's value and another side showing a distinctive national emblem. Mini states like the Vatican also mint their own euro coins – but in such small numbers that they have already become collectors' items.



Recruitment

The usual way to join the Commission is to sit an 'open competition'. Although there is no set timing, these are held at frequent intervals in line with staffing requirements. The nature of the job – working in an international team for the good of Europe and its citizens – means there is no shortage of candidates.

Advance notices of competitions are published in the national press of EU countries and on the internet. In 2003, the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) was set up as a one-stop shop to handle and coordinate recruitment to the Commission and the other EU institutions. The EPSO website at europa.eu.int/epso provides news of current and future competitions and guidance for candidates.

The competitions, which take place in all EU languages, consist of a pre-selection test followed by a written examination. Successful candidates at this stage are then invited to an oral examination, usually held in Brussels.

Jobs in the Commission fall into two broad categories: those for people with university degrees and those

without. If you pass the entry tests for a graduate you will become an 'A' grade civil servant or administrator. Non-graduates can apply for posts as assistants ('B' grade), secretarial staff ('C' grade) or support and logistics personnel ('D' grade).

Competition is fierce, so prepare yourself well for the entry exams if you want to succeed. Successful recruits will join a stimulating and challenging work environment, dealing with a variety of policy areas during their Commission career. Initiative is rewarded. Given the range of Commission activities and its relatively small size, you can reach a high level of responsibility in a fairly short time.

Commission staff are well paid. Although they earn less than people in similar international jobs in the private sector, they are generally paid more than their colleagues of equivalent level in the national administrations of member states.

Helping the poorer regions



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From the World Bank to the European Commission via a spell at home to help prepare Slovakia for EU membership. This is the career path of Katarina Mathernova, who took over as director in the Commission's department for regional policy in early 2005.

Katarina is responsible for the way EU-funded development programmes and projects for poorer regions are selected, funded and implemented in seven countries. She runs three units: one for Spain, the second for Ireland, Finland and Estonia, and the third for Belgium, Luxembourg and the Czech Republic. 'The Commission's decision to put old and new member states together is a sound idea,' she says. 'There are things new countries can learn from old ones and ideas the old can pick up from the new. This is particularly relevant when they are neighbours like Estonia and Finland, or Slovakia and Austria.'

With a first law degree from the Comenius University in Bratislava and a post-graduate degree from the University of Michigan, Katarina joined the World Bank in Washington in 1993. She took time out to return to Slovakia from 1999 to 2002, where she was involved in economic restructuring policy and preparing for EU membership.

'I was very involved as special advisor to the deputy prime minister in the accession negotiations. This gave me a taste for the EU and I believe in the process of European integration.' She then returned to the World Bank and came back two years later to join the Commission.

'I am keen to see how the new dynamic in the EU created by the entry of eight countries from central and eastern Europe will play out in the Commission,' she says. Katarina was also drawn by the international working environment in the Commission, which she had already encountered at the World Bank. 'But there are clear cultural differences between the two bodies,' she says.

Katarina Mathernova

BORN:
1964 in
Bratislava, Slovakia
POSITION:
Director for regional policy

Life in the Commission

Once you join the Commission, what can you expect? You will probably join one of the directorates-general in Brussels. These can have as many as 1 000 staff members, but the average number is much lower.

The actual unit you join within a directorate-general will be made up overwhelmingly of people from countries other than your own. The Commission is, of course, an equal opportunities employer but, despite its efforts, women are still under-represented at senior levels.

As a European civil servant, you will pay income tax to the EU and not to the country where you work or where you come from.

Commission civil servants can – and most do – send their children to the European Schools. These provide a full primary and secondary education up to university entrance level in all 20

EU languages. Special attention is paid to language teaching. The European *baccalaureat* is recognised as an entry qualification by all universities in the EU, and many outside.

In 2004, the Commission began introducing a series of major reforms to increase efficiency and cut administrative costs. The main component is a more performance-based career structure for its staff, to be in place by 2006. This provides non-graduates with a greater chance (including special training) of moving to administrative positions if they demonstrate proven ability. Administrators will also have a clearer path to promotion to senior level.

The distinction between grade 'B' and 'C' among non-graduates is being removed. The 'D' grade is being gradually phased out and the functions carried out by this staff transferred to outside contractors.

The starting salaries

Under the new career structure, a non-graduate secretary with at least three years experience will earn €2 341 per month as a basic starting salary. An administrator with a university degree, also with a minimum of three years work experience, can expect to earn a basic salary of at least €3 837 per month on joining the Commission. In each case, the amounts are topped up by allowances which can add 16% or more to the basic salary, while tax and health insurance are deducted.

Providing the tools for the job



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The Commission is updating its management practices, outsourcing non-essential services and encouraging greater internal job mobility. Frans Rijpstra has first-hand experience of both.

From 20 years as a Dutch navy cook to deciding which IT equipment best suits a particular Commission official may sound like a quantum leap, but that has been the career path for Frans. In between came more than 10 years working in the kitchens of the Commission, the job which enabled him for the first time to live full-time in the home country of his Belgian wife, son and daughter.

When the Commission decided in 1999 to outsource its catering, Frans was told he could look anywhere in the Commission for another job. Then aged 49, a time of life when it is hard to find new work, he got the first job he went after – the seemingly totally different business of ordering computer equipment, particularly PCs, screens and printers. ‘It’s the best job I have had. I’m sure I wouldn’t have had the same opportunity in the private sector.’

What his new bosses recognised was that Frans knew about ordering and dealing with outside suppliers from his previous work and spoke the main languages needed to deal with those suppliers, Dutch, French and English. He also had a long-standing personal interest in IT. That does not make him a soft touch. ‘Everyone wanted a flat screen as soon as they came out, but that does not mean they can have one. I spend a lot of time working out what people really need.’

‘This is a dream job. I have contact with people inside as well as outside the Commission. I have responsibility. It changes all the time and the atmosphere with colleagues is magnificent. In addition, I feel I’m helping build Europe by helping people do their job better.’

Frans Rijpstra

BORN:
1954 in
Hilversum, Netherlands
POSITION:
Responsible for ordering
computer equipment for
staff

Budget

One of the Commission's tasks is to manage the EU budget, which currently runs at about €115 billion a year. This is just one per cent of the combined gross domestic product (GDP) of all EU countries, or about €250 per citizen of the Union. This, however, is an average figure; in fact, poorer countries pay a lower relative contribution to the EU budget than rich ones.

The biggest individual items in the budget are agriculture and support for less developed regions of the Union. Together they account for nearly 80% of the 2005 budget. The administrative costs of running the EU, on the other hand, are small: just over 5% of EU spending.

The rest of the budget goes on other policy areas – chiefly energy and transport, research, education and culture, justice and home affairs. Technical and financial assistance to needy countries around the world is another key spending area.

The Commission draws up the draft budget each year within an overall ceiling defined by EU governments. It is also member governments and the European Parliament who have the final authority to approve each year's budget.

In managing the budget, the Commission cannot spend money as it wishes. The Parliament and the governments of the EU countries require transparency and accountability at all stages. At the end of each financial year, the Commission has to submit its accounts to the Parliament for approval.

Spending for solidarity and innovation



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Part of the EU's money goes on promoting innovation and making the European economy more competitive. Giorgio Clarotti has worked in two areas crucial for success: research, which promotes competitiveness, and social policy, which helps European citizens take advantage of change.

Giorgio is a second-generation Commission official: 'Like Obelix, I fell into the potion as a child,' he says, though he initially became a biomedical researcher, thinking that better suited to his desire to bring about change and innovation.

However, by age 29, he was in the Commission and running its €60 million biomedical research budget. Having experienced at first hand the lack of resources available to European researchers compared with those in the United States and Japan, 'I was now able to help 100 Giorgios'.

Next came a research programme for small and medium-sized enterprises. 'SMEs tended to see the Commission as putting obstacles in the way of their development, but our programmes showed we could offer them opportunities to develop.'

Just over 10 years after joining the Commission, Giorgio moved to the department for employment and social affairs, where he ran the communication unit. 'This is the area that, for me, is the EU's biggest challenge – creating an innovative, dynamic economy in an ageing society. The European model is about solidarity. Social policies are a productive factor, giving opportunities to all citizens and ensuring that change does not leave people behind. The European Social Fund plays a vital role in steering change and helping even the less competitive take advantage of change.'

In the meantime, the challenge of keeping up with the United States and Japan in research and development had not gone away. In early 2005, Giorgio moved back into this field, this time promoting closer cooperation between the national ministries and agencies which fund public research, so as to exploit economies of scale.

Giorgio Clarotti

BORN:
1963 in
Turin, Italy
POSITION:
Promoting cooperation
between national research
programmes in life sciences

Your voice in Brussels

The Commission takes many decisions which directly affect the lives of its citizens and the companies and organisations they work for. It therefore tries to be as open and accountable as possible, enabling citizens to obtain information on items that concern them. In preparing draft legislation, the Commission also consults widely with representatives of the business community, consumer organisations and other interested bodies. Their input is invaluable, enabling the Commission to draft texts which are balanced and which reflect the interests of all stakeholders. This helps the Commission fulfil its responsibility to reflect the common European interest when drawing up EU legislation.

Through the interactive Commission website, *Your voice in Europe*, at **europa.eu.int/yourvoice**, individual citizens can play an active role in the policy-making process. The site allows everyone to comment, to share his or her experience and to take part in policy consultation forums.

You can have access to all official publications and to internal documents as well. More than 2.1 million documents are available on the EU website. Anyone can request a non-published document, regardless of their professional status and without giving a justification for the request. Only information of a personal nature or which could endanger legitimate business interests may be refused.

You can also write, phone, fax or e-mail the Commission in any of the 20 official EU languages. The Commission is obliged to send a reply in the same language within 15 days.

The simplest way of getting information from the Commission is to telephone or to e-mail *Europe Direct* at **europa.eu.int/europedirect**. This is a tailor-made service providing practical answers to your questions about the Commission. It can also help you obtain legal advice.

Giving you the facts



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The Commission's dialogue with EU citizens takes many forms. The Commission consults very widely, but it also provides user-friendly information on key policies – both in print and on the internet. Valerie O'Brien has daily contact with citizens looking for information on the environment.

Valerie and her husband moved to Brussels from Dublin in 1990 when he got a job with the European Parliament. Five years later, she moved to the Commission from a job in an international accounting firm.

Initially a secretary in the department for transport, she then sought a job where she could have more contact with people, work more independently and have direct responsibilities. 'The Commission offers good opportunities from that point of view. If heads of unit see any kind of potential, they try to use it.'

Valerie found what she was looking for in the information centre of the department for the environment. 'I am involved in producing our publications, which involves liaison with outside contractors. I also deal with requests for these publications from the general public.'

'Our publications are not technical. They try to explain environment policy in lay terms, including special series for school students. I am also responsible for seeing that e-mail queries get answered within the time limit of 15 working days the Commission has set itself. That is sometimes quite difficult. We get hundreds of enquiries that are often quite technical.'

In the afternoons, the centre's library is open to the public. 'We get visitors from all over the EU. That makes every day very different, because you don't know who'll come in or what they want to know. Often the information is available on the internet, but people don't always know where to look or how to search efficiently, so they end up with a lot of useless information. I enjoy helping them find exactly what they need.'

Valerie O'Brien

BORN:
1965 in
Dublin, Ireland
POSITION:
Library Assistant/
Publications Officer

Checks and balances

The way the European Union is run provides for checks and balances at every stage. The European Court of Justice controls the action of the Commission and the other EU institutions. The Commission can take member states to the Court if they fail to implement EU legislation correctly or break the rules.

The Commission itself is accountable to the citizens of Europe via the European Parliament which can sack all 25 Commissioners through a vote of no confidence. The Commission is also accountable to the governments of member countries through the Council of the Union. In the EU law-making process, the Commission drafts proposals but it is the Council and the Parliament that debate these proposals, call for amendments and, finally, enact or reject them. Dialogue among the three institutions is therefore ongoing and permanent.

Citizens and companies who believe decisions by the Commission have harmed their interests can appeal to the Court of Justice. Individuals and small companies can also take their case to the European Ombudsman whose job is to ensure that citizens' rights are upheld and that any abuse of power or maladministration by the Commission, or other institutions, is stopped and the situation put right. The Ombudsman's website is at www.euro-ombudsman.eu.int.

Commission spending is checked by auditors both external and internal. The external role is played by the European Court of Auditors, a separate EU institution based in Luxembourg. Within the Commission, the Internal Audit Service checks Commission financial procedures to make sure the taxpayer's money is well spent and not subject to fraudulent claims.

Keeping your food safe



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To ensure our food is safe to eat wherever it comes from, the EU has a common set of strict standards. Dorota Lewczuk-Bianco from Poland is a lawyer checking compliance with these standards.

Dorota came to the Commission in 2004 with qualifications which included study at the College of Europe's Polish campus at Natolin, and work in the Polish Ministry of European Affairs. Immediately before moving to Brussels with her Italian husband, met while studying in Milan, her job was to adapt Polish food law to EU membership requirements.

Now Dorota works in the department responsible for consumer affairs, public health, food safety and animal welfare. Her job is to check that food safety rules adopted by ministers in the Council of the EU are incorporated into national food law on time and correctly applied. The Commission can take member states to court if they breach these rules.

'Having EU-wide rules and knowing that all our food meets certain criteria is important. For example, you can't have one level for permitted pesticide residues in one country, a second in another and a third for imports. Because of the single market, it is important that we all work together. From a personal point of view, I find it very satisfying to be working for the whole of the society in which we live in a sector which affects daily life.'

Dorota's job includes dealing with complaints from the general public. 'Any citizen can complain to the Commission and we often do get complaints, particularly about food safety and animal welfare. All complaints are followed up.'

But the job involves more than policing existing rules. 'Better legislation is one of the Commission watchwords, so we also work on simplifying food safety legislation so that citizens and the food industry can understand it more easily.'

Dorota Lewczuk-Bianco

BORN:
1969 in
Warsaw, Poland

POSITION:
Monitoring compliance with
EU food safety rules

Languages

The language we speak is part of our identity. It is one of the most obvious expressions of our nationality, culture and tradition. While committed to integration among its member countries, the EU actively promotes the linguistic diversity of Europe's peoples.

This is why the Commission funds Europe-wide programmes for its citizens, especially young people, to learn other European languages, both for reasons of professional and personal mobility and as a force for cross-cultural contacts and mutual understanding. The declared aim of these programmes is to get as many EU citizens as possible to speak their mother tongue plus two other languages.

Language and communication are top priorities for the Commission and the other institutions. It is a basic principle that all citizens must have access to all EU documents in the official language of their country. They also have the right to write to the Commission, and receive a reply, in that language. This is one of the many ways the EU ensures that there is no discrimination between citizens from big countries and the others, however small they are.

Between them, the 25 EU countries share 20 official languages: Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovene, Spanish and Swedish.

Because its staff come from every member state, the Commission has native speakers of all official languages (and others) in its ranks. However, no one can be expected to cope with more than a few foreign languages, so for its internal working purposes the Commission often uses just three languages – English, French and German. Draft legislation generally sees the first light of day in one of these languages.

Making sure we understand each other



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Government officials and experts working on new laws that will apply throughout the EU must be able to read and discuss these texts in their own language. So the Commission cannot function without translators for written texts and interpreters for real-time discussions. Marta Sanz Fernández is an interpreter.

'We interpret on every conceivable topic. They are sometimes so technical that I have to learn terminology in my native Spanish before I master it in other languages. And when Spaniards use bullfighting images, it can be hard to find the equivalent in another language. It is very satisfying when a person you are interpreting for takes his turn to speak with a degree of confidence which shows that he has fully understood what previous speakers have said in other languages.'

Marta works in Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese, but – unusually – not in English. 'In fact, I had never thought of becoming an EU interpreter, because I assumed English was essential. I only discovered differently when helping a colleague at the defence ministry in Madrid with the application form.'

Another surprise was that 'the Commission really is an equal opportunity employer. I was seven months' pregnant at the interview and expected to be asked to start work after the baby was born. But I was told "Congratulations, you are hired" and sent on maternity leave one month later.'

Moving to Brussels meant Marta could give her four children the same experience she had of living abroad – she spent part of her childhood in Morocco. It had a downside for her husband, who 'had to leave his company and a rock band in Madrid, but he has found a niche running an association for the Spanish-speaking community. He arranges everything from social events to providing names of Spanish-speaking doctors'.

Marta Sanz Fernández

BORN:
1966 in
Madrid, Spain
POSITION:
Interpreter for Spanish

At your service

Independent yet accountable, the Commission was set up by the EU member governments to act in the overall interests of Europe as a whole, rising above the national interests of any member country or group of countries. Its staff are not an army of faceless bureaucrats, but ordinary citizens who share a common commitment to the future of the Union.

The world is changing, and so is Europe. More EU countries will start using the euro. There will be new challenges in fields like foreign policy, security, defence and justice. The European Union must evolve and, with it, the Commission's role.

Exactly how this happens will depend, in part, on the people it serves. Your view of Europe's future, whatever it may be, is important to the Commission. Via the procedures highlighted in this booklet you can make your voice heard. It is up to each of us to help create the kind of Europe in which we want to live.

Further reading



For general information about the European Commission and the other EU institutions, go to the EU website, which can be accessed through the Europa server at europa.eu.int. This provides news and insights into the way the EU works, its ongoing activities and future priorities – and much more besides.

Practical information on how to get a job in the Commission can be found at europa.eu.int/epso

European Commission

Serving the people of Europe
What the European Commission does for you

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With a staff of 25 000 drawn from the length and breadth of the EU, the Commission works closely with the European Parliament and national governments to run the Union in the overall interests of its 455 million citizens. Its job is to transform into practical everyday action these citizens' aspirations for peace, freedom and prosperity. How does it do this? Who works there? What are their jobs? This booklet gives you the chance to find out.

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