

Brüssel, den  
K/2008/1366 - 5 MARS 2009

*Sehr geehrter Herr Präsident,*

*ich danke Ihnen für den Beitrag des Bundesrates zur Mitteilung des Europäischen Parlaments und des Rates über die Mehrsprachigkeit {KOM(2008) 566}.*

*Die Kommission begrüßt es, wenn sich die nationalen Parlamente zu ihren Vorschlägen äußern und so dazu beitragen, den Prozess der Politikgestaltung zu verbessern. Gerne möchte ich Ihre Bemerkungen aufgreifen und hoffe, dass Ihnen die beigefügte Antwort der Kommission nützliche Anregungen für eigene Überlegungen geben kann.*

*Ich freue mich darauf, unseren politischen Dialog weiter zu vertiefen und verbleibe mit freundlichen Grüßen*



Margot WALLSTRÖM

*Vize-Präsidentin der Europäischen Kommission*

Herrn Peter Müller  
Präsident des Bundesrates  
Bundesrat  
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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Brussels, February 2009

**COMMENTS OF THE COMMISSION ON AN OPINION FROM  
THE GERMAN BUNDES RAT**

**COM (2008)566<sup>FINAL</sup> - COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE  
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS  
MULTILINGUALISM: AN ASSET FOR EUROPE AND A SHARED COMMITMENT**

The European Commission thanks the Bundesrat for its very careful reading of the above-mentioned Commission Communication and its detailed comments. The European Commission gladly notes that both institutions devote great attention to multilingualism and globally share the same view on the desirability of better language skills for citizens and the need to communicate with the citizens in their languages.

In the Commission' view, the Bundesrat Resolution concerns two different aspects of multilingualism:

- (1) the promotion of language teaching and learning and linguistic diversity in the European society (ref. statements 1-9). These issues were treated in the above-mentioned Communication
- (2) the way the Commission functions and interacts with citizens and other stakeholders. This aspect (so-called "institutional multilingualism") was not part of the scope of this Communication, but is subject to ongoing management and reflections on the Commission's part, taking account of stakeholders' views.

However, in this document the Commission replies to both aspects: it clarifies the official position stated in the Communication and informs on current and future initiatives aimed at maintaining the improvement pace of the operational service it provides, within the current financial framework. The Commission is aware that both aspects matter to Member States, as recalled in the recent Council Resolution on a strategy for Multilingualism.

The Commission applies the subsidiarity principle and acts upon invitation of the European Council of Barcelona (2002), which called for teaching two foreign languages from an early age and for developing an indicator of language competence. The Commission Communication "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment" provides a

policy framework for joint action, in the full respect of subsidiarity and with a view to promoting the exchange of good practices while availing of the right of initiative conferred by the treaties.

While the Commission agrees that language learning is not an end in itself and should match individual needs, evidence shows that it is an enabling factor, including for the promotion of any language in private and public organisations in today's society. An increasing share of people needs to speak more languages and this holds true also for low-skilled workers and older people.

The Commission takes note of the attitude of the Bundesrat towards the language indicator and benchmarks and can only restate its position:

Following the political decision to develop a linguistic indicator taken in 2002 at the Barcelona European Summit, in May 2006 the Council concluded on a number of key issues concerning the European Indicator of Language Competence<sup>1</sup> and stressed that a survey should be carried out as soon as possible.

In its Conclusions on a coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training<sup>2</sup>, the Council has explicitly invited the Commission "*with regard to those indicators which are still in the process of development and which would be based on new EU survey, to further examine the development of indicators on language skills*". The Commission would propose to cover language learning in a new set of benchmarks to be developed to support policy co-operation in the years ahead under the open method of co-ordination in education and training. The Commission has set out its ideas in this regard in its communication "An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training" which was adopted on 16 December 2008 (COM(2008)865 final).

The Commission welcomes the support of the Bundesrat for the mobility of teachers and students and will release a green paper in 2009 to seek views on what future action might be desirable (ref. point 6). In line with its intention of providing a strategic framework for action, it has proposed, by way of example, good practices already in place in some Member States to widen the choice of languages taught, such as networking of different schools and the use of new technologies. These approaches are echoed also by the recent Council Resolution on Multilingualism. As for the shortage of qualified teachers of lesser used languages, the Commission takes note of the statements that Germany is not affected by this problem, which was widely reported by most Member States through the online consultation and the hearing sessions (ref. point 8).

Coming to the practical arrangements for the follow-up of the Communication, the Commission, while recognising that Member States are its main interlocutors and partners, deems useful to complement and support such cooperation with a structured dialogue with the stakeholders (ref. point 9). This is appropriate since social partners, regional actors and civil society have an important role in promoting a positive attitude towards linguistic diversity in

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<sup>1</sup> Council Conclusions on the European Indicator of Language Competence [C172/01; 25 July 2006].

<sup>2</sup> Council Conclusions on a coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training [C311/10; 21 December 2007].

their respective domains. The Conference referred to in point 7 will bring together stakeholders and Member States representatives to exchange good practices and recommendations and will prepare the ground for the subsequent Commission report to the Council of Ministers.

As concerns institutional multilingualism (points 10-24), the Commission pursues a policy of equal treatment between languages and of EU citizens before the law. German is used on an equal footing with other languages in the Commission's relations with other EU institutions and with citizens. Furthermore, the German language has a significant status in the internal decision making process since it is – alongside English and French – one of the languages in which the Commission adopts its decisions. As a consequence, the documents which are necessary for the Commission to take its decisions are also available in German.

The Commission actively fosters language learning among staff members through a wide range of training measures and in this context the Commission has taken good note of the possibility for EU officials to follow intensive German language courses offered by the German authorities.

The Commission fully shares the Bundesrat's view that bringing the EU's policies closer to the citizen depends on information being available in the relevant languages. The Commission therefore aims to provide the information on its websites in as many official EU languages as possible. Over the last years there has been significant progress in this respect. However, communication also means targeting the appropriate information to the right audience. Hence also considering the limited translation resources available the adoption of an Internet Strategy which takes into account criteria such as the target audience, the nature of the content (technical, specialist, general...) and the amount of information and its lifetime, to determine the content, form and language coverage of information provided.

Furthermore, the Commission's Directorate-General for Translation has a Field Office in Berlin at the Commission's Representation, where translators interact directly with German stakeholders and the language industry, actively supporting this interaction between institutions and people which the Commission equally values.

The European Commission being committed to the greater involvement of national parliaments in EU initiatives, it had decided to make all new proposals and consultation papers directly available to them for consultation as is the case with the European Parliament and the Council. The same language regime therefore applies to all parliaments and to the EU legislator. This has not hindered the successful development of the political dialogue with the national parliaments from whom the Commission has so far received more than 340 opinions.

The Commission's latest update of its translation strategy<sup>3</sup> is the operational transcription of the Commission's legal translation obligations and of its priorities in communicating with citizens. This strategy is an internal management tool which continues to ensure that the delivery of translations by the Commission is made in a qualitative, proportionate and cost-effective way in line with the principles of sound and efficient management and of equal treatment of all official languages, for the benefit of the European taxpayer. Where possible, the Commission has shown flexibility in the implementation of this strategy to address demonstrated needs of stakeholders.

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<sup>3</sup> SEC (2006) 1489 final

Multilingualism in Europe should not be restricted to the work of EU institutions and this is the thrust of the Communication of last September: it is a shared responsibility which requires efforts from all partners and stakeholders in their remit. Member States also have a strong role and responsibility to promote it through their own efforts.

The Commission was faced with a doubling of languages with the recent enlargement in 2004 and 2007, which meant almost doubling the total amount of pages now being translated into 23 official languages. While an increase of just 30% in resources was approved by the budgetary authorities considerable efforts had to be deployed allowing to respect continuously the legal obligation of translating all legislative acts into all languages. The Commission even engaged in responding to growing demand in areas such as web translation. Therefore any further substantial increase in its translation output could not be met without more resources. However, it is open to any proposal from stakeholders that would support its continuous efforts to respond to legitimate interests and has an ongoing dialogue with Member States in particular, in the field of translation and more broadly on multilingualism matters, and listens to varied points of view.

Without prejudice to the results of these ongoing debates, it must be noted that any additional request for translations in one language has immediate repercussions on resources for the other languages, to respect the principle of equal treatment of languages and citizens before the law, to which both the Commission and the Bundesrat attach the utmost importance.

Moreover, among the criterion used by the Commission to analyse different requests, it has to ensure that they would not entail risk of serious delays in the EU legislative process and would endanger the Commission's ability to meet its legal obligations and adequately respond to unforeseen but urgent needs.

Finally, as concerns the points made by the Bundesrat concerning institutional multilingualism, and interpretation practice, no changes have been made as regards the use of German as a working language. In fact, German is used as a relay language for interpretation in the sense that interpretation from less widely known languages is provided via the German speaking interpreters for the benefit of the other interpreters.