The Swedish presidency: Behind the scenes


The Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (JICS) of the European Commission, the interpretation service of the European Parliament and the Swedish government will be the three largest procurers of interpretation services during the Swedish EU presidency. To get a clearer idea of the current state of affairs, AIIC Sweden have talked with a few key individuals at these three institutions.

The European Commission

Annica Östlund, head of Swedish interpretation services at the European Commission, says that the Swedish presidency will present "A huge challenge requiring an enormous effort." High demands will be placed on the Swedish booth in terms of both quality and quantity. During the presidency, Swedes will chair a number of groups that usually do not require Swedish interpretation and will both speak and listen to Swedish. At the Commission, "smaller" language booths work mainly at Council of Minister meetings, and for the Swedish booth there will be more of these than usual during the presidency.

Today the Swedish booth consists of seventeen staff interpreters and forty freelancers, and they are all needed. During the Swedish presidency, JICS will provide for Swedish interpretation at between eight and twelve meetings per day in Brussels and Sweden (all institutions), as well as for an additional 40 to 60 meetings to be held in Sweden over the six-month period. However, not all the meetings in Sweden will include Swedish.

Efforts to prepare the interpreters for the presidency began as soon as Sweden joined the EU. Interpreter training courses have been offered in Brussels as well as in Sweden. Language courses for Swedish interpreters wishing to add languages to their combination and for interpreters from other booths wanting to add Swedish as a passive language have been organised. This autumn a series of talks has been offered by members of the Swedish representation, often the very people who will be chairing meetings during the presidency. Both staff interpreters and freelancers have attended. Indeed, there is generally very close co-operation between the two and the quality of their work is on the same level. Today, freelancers comprise two-thirds of the Swedish booth!

There is also daily contact between the Swedish interpretation service and the 2001 Secretariat in Sweden. The coordinator of the Swedish booth has now made three trips to Sweden to help the secretariat learn more about interpretation, the ISO standards and matters of often-complicated
The European Parliament

"Naturally, more Swedish will be spoken at the European Parliament during the Swedish presidency!" says Anne-Marie Widlund, head of the EP's Swedish interpretation service. The Acting President of the EU Council of Ministers participates in plenary sessions of the European Parliament so as to be able to respond to questions, and for the first six months of 2001 that will always be a Swede. So there will, of course, be more Swedish spoken in the chamber and the Swedish ministers will listen to interpretation in Swedish, relying on the Swedish booth as their ears.

This is a task for skilled, experienced interpreters, and they are already being recruited. It's important to book them well in advance. However, Anne-Marie Widlund says she hasn't yet noticed any problem with recruitment or any shortage of interpreters. The number of meetings at the European Parliament is relatively constant, which makes it easier to plan in advance.

It is also possible that during the presidency there will be more meetings with Swedish as an active language, but it is too early to know about concrete plans to that effect. By tradition, the various political groups tend to visit the country holding the presidency. However, there are not yet any definite plans in that respect either.

Anne-Marie Widlund does not think it likely that only meetings with a reduced number of languages will be held. This is not usually done at the European Parliament. As the MEPs are chosen by popular election, they must have the right to speak in their mother tongue.

In anticipation of the presidency, the Swedish booth has been making preparations and also helping other booths to prepare by arranging practice sessions in simultaneous interpretation from Swedish. Speakers have also been invited, including Kenneth Larsson, language co-ordinator for Swedish at the translation division of the European Commission and Sven Backlund from the documentation division of the European Parliament. There will also be a meeting with someone from the Swedish representation.

The Swedish government

Christina Tillfors and Maria Sjöström-Gisslén work at the Swedish government's 2001 Secretariat. Their responsibilities include language issues, co-ordination of interpretation services and organisation and planning of meetings, as well as assuring that chairs are appointed for all the various Council committees.

Work began in spring 1999 and today there are some forty staff members in the secretariat. There will be a phasing out period after the presidency and the secretariat will complete its work by the end of 2001. In addition to the language division, there are also departments for protocol, transport logistics, IT, press logistics, the budget, meeting co-ordination and questions relating to commerce and industry.

Christina Tillfors has worked with recruitment at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years. She was also briefly on the staff of DG 9 at the European Commission. She came to the secretariat from a job at the Nobel Foundation. Although she has not worked with interpretation in the past, she has a great deal of experience in international work and staffing/personnel.

Maria Sjöström-Gisslén has a degree in Business Administration. When Sweden joined the EU, she applied for and was granted a post as a translator at the European Commission, where she worked for 18 months before moving on to the Commission's Stockholm office for three years. Maria has some experience using interpretation, which she has found useful in meetings and discussions.
In anticipation of the Swedish presidency, the staff of the 2001 Secretariat has followed other presidencies with great attention. Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked closely with the Finnish and Portuguese secretariats during their countries’ terms in the presidency and these individuals are now working at the 2001 Secretariat. The Finnish presidency serves as a prototype for Sweden. It was also their first presidency and their ambitions were great, as are Sweden's. Although the meetings held in Finland were more centralised than the ones planned for Sweden, efforts were still made to involve the entire country in the presidency, which is somewhat unusual.

The secretariat put out a call for tender for interpretation services and provision of interpretation and conference equipment. The outcome was that interpreters for all the meetings on the official calendar will be recruited by JICS, and Informationsteknik will supply the equipment. Once the procurement process was complete, discussions began with liaison officers from JICS and Informationsteknik. JICS has appointed a special co-ordinator who works in close collaboration with the 2001 Secretariat.

A total of some 80 meetings will be held at 44 venues in Sweden, posing tremendous logistical challenges despite the fact that not all meetings will necessarily be held with interpretation. A project group is in charge of organising each meeting and discussions to determine the need for interpretation services are ongoing. Past experience and the actual requirements of each situation are taken into account. For instance, the language of the country holding the presidency is usually included in informal ministerial meetings, although many Swedish officials and ministers tend to speak English.

Christina and Maria have visited the various venues and scrutinized the facilities. Most meetings will be held at conference and exhibition centres. Since interpretation equipment and booths require adequate space, careful measurements have been made. Christina and Maria will also be travelling with the delegations to the meetings themselves, so interpreters can expect to meet them during the Swedish presidency.

For more information, please go to:

**Commission**
- [http://europa.eu.int/comm/index_sv.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/index_sv.htm)

**The Joint Interpreting and Conference Service**
- [http://europa.eu.int/comm/scic/index_sv.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/scic/index_sv.htm)

**The European Parliament**
- [http://www.europarl.eu.int](http://www.europarl.eu.int)

**The interpretation service of the European Parliament**

**The Swedish 2001 secretariat**

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**Recommended citation format:**
