We have just won a decisive battle in our campaign to fend off plans that would have put the functioning of interpretation at the European Parliament at risk. Chances are good that our approach to managing interpretation in an ever larger EU will prevail. (See former reports to Council and article and documentation in the December 2001 issue of Communicate).

On Wednesday this week in Strasbourg, the working party on post-enlargement multilingualism presented its conclusions. The group, which had been created following strong intervention from AIIC, included high ranking EP officials, staff and auxiliary interpreters. AIIC was represented by Elisabetta Zanca, Michel Lesseigne and myself. Elisabetta Zanca, spokesperson of the AIIC negotiating team at the EU, was the spokesperson for all interpreters on the working group.

We had half a dozen extremely tough meetings, and more than once we were close to a break-down of the negotiations. In the end, we reached what we believe are reasonable conclusions:

- Maintaining the existing system (direct interpretation from a number of C languages into A) for all present working languages.
- "Bi-active" (retour) interpretation for future new working languages for which "C to A" interpreters do not (yet) exist in sufficient numbers.
- 2 or 3 interpreters per booth in case of "C to A" interpretation, depending on the number of working languages in a meeting.
- 3 interpreters per booth whenever a retour is provided, no matter how many working languages are involved.
- Systematic training programmes for interpreters to help integrate new languages.
- Evaluation of this "mixed" system, and decision on further development, 5 years after the first enlargement wave (i.e. approximately in 2009); provisional mid-term evaluation.

The working party has invited the author of the EP report on managing enlargement, EP Vice-President Mr. Podestá, to take its conclusions into account in reviewing his report, and especially the draft decisions it contains. (The plans we fought against and which had been frozen awaiting the outcome of the working group were based on the original version of Mr. Podestá's report).

We have strong indications that Mr. Podestá will change his report as suggested. It would be difficult to imagine that the EP Bureau would not follow suit and change its original decision.

To be on the safe side, we have kept our joint general assembly open, so that we can immediately react should anything go wrong. We have made sure that our counterparts are well aware of this.

Also, we continue informing parliamentarians wherever we can, and this work clearly has already
made a great difference: More and more MEPs are aware of the problem and support our campaign.

Most recently, we have been heard by the petitions committee, and by the new rapporteurs on the EU budget. Members of the cultural affairs committee are keen on having a say on the matter and are grateful for the thorough briefing we gave them.

They were greatly impressed by our "Declaration on the preservation of world linguistic heritage", as was the interpreters' joint general assembly on Wednesday where we read out the text. We were asked to spread it as widely as possible to rise awareness on what is much more than an administrative or budgetary problem.

We have also given interviews to EU correspondents from Germany and the UK. The first one was triggered by "Communicate!", the second by "Lingua franca", the EP's interpretation monthly.

In conclusion: We have indeed won a decisive battle, but we must remain vigilant and make sure that words become deeds, and promises facts.

At this juncture, we owe a vote of thanks to all those who have helped us to get this far:

Elisabetta and Michel, the colleagues on the "lead team"; the EP staff delegation; the AIIC professional delegation at the EP; Linda Fitchett, AIIC member and president of the joint general assembly of EP interpreters; Claude Durand and the AIIC staff interpreters' committee; Luigi and the web editors; the AIIC Bureau and Council; Josyane Cristina, always; and, above all, hundreds of colleagues whose unflinching solidarity was with us all the way.

Kind regards to all of you.

Silke Gebhard, 09 February 2002.

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Recommended citation format: