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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Official languages of the Council of Europe

Report

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Rapporteur: Mr Basri AKTAŞ, Turkey



A. 1. Draft Order

The Assembly,

Considering that, in connection with the institutional reform of the Council of Europe, the question of official languages might usefully be examined,

Instructs the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe :

(a) to send all Representatives in the Consultative Assembly and their Substitutes the following questionnaire :

"Please indicate in the order of preference :

1. In what language(s) other than your own could you follow the debates?
2. In what language(s) other than your own could you speak?";

(b) to notify the Assembly of the response to the questionnaire at the third part of the present Session.

B. II. Explanatory Memorandum

1. Introduction

1. The use of languages other than English and French, which have so far been statutorily accepted as the official, languages of the Council of Europe, has been considered on a number of occasions by the different organs of the Council.

2. In a decision dated 20th March 1959, the Political Committee instructed me, as Rapporteur, to examine the problem, giving due consideration to its political aspects, and to supply additional information on the financial and administrative effects of introducing other languages. My first report was discussed by the Committee on 10th July 1959, and my present report takes into account what was said on that occasion.

2. Present arrangement

3. Article 12 of the Statute stipulates that "the official languages of the Council of Europe are English and French. The rules of procedure of the Committee of Ministers and of the Consultative Assembly shall determine in what circumstances and under what conditions other languages may be used".

The relevant, rules of the Assembly are Rules 17, 18 and 19, which read as follow :

" RULE 17 - Official languages

- (1) The official languages of the Assembly shall be English and French.
- (2) All documents of the Assembly shall be drawn up in both official languages.

RULE 18 - Sittings of the Assembly

- (1) Speeches delivered in one of the official languages shall be simultaneously interpreted into the other.
- (2) Speeches may be made in a language other than the official languages. In such cases the speaker himself shall be responsible for arranging for consecutive interpretation into one of the official languages, which shall be simultaneously interpreted into the other official language.

RULE 19 - Meetings of Committees

- (1) If an interpretation is required in Committee, there shall only be consecutive interpretation from the one official language into the other.
- (2) Nevertheless, a representative who cannot use one of the official languages may bring his own interpreter, who may interpret into one only of the official languages. There shall be an interpretation into the other official language only if a member of the Committee specifically requires it."

3. Amendment tabled by M. Azara in 1952

4. On the 16th September 1952, M. Azara and others tabled in the Committee on Cultural and Scientific Questions an amendment to a Motion by M. Jaquet ([Doc. 19](#)) concerning "the introduction of a European linguistic community based on the application of Anglo-French bilingualism". M. Azara's amendment (Doc. AS/CS (4) 8) recommended to the Committee of Ministers that English, French, German and Italian be adopted as the official languages of the Council of Europe. M. Jaquet's Motion in its original form failed to get the necessary support in the Committee on Cultural and Scientific Questions and was withdrawn (see Docs. AS/CS (4) PV 5, PV 6 and PV 7). The amendment tabled by M. Azara lapsed in consequence and was not taken up again when the Committee on Cultural and Scientific Question passed a new revised recommendation on the establishment of a European linguistic community on 11th May 1953 (see Doc. AS/CS (5) PV 2). [In the end this recommendation was not adopted in the Assembly.] In the course of the debate in the Assembly on 24th September 1953, M. Jaquet stated that this Motion had nothing to do with restricting the number of languages that could be used in international organisations.

4. A Motion by M. Pünder in 1953

5. On 14th January 1953, M. Piinder and others tabled a Motion for a resolution in the Assembly "to allow simultaneous interpretation of speeches delivered in the German, Italian and Dutch languages" (Doc. 100). This was referred on the same day to the Committee on Rules of Procedure and Privileges. Two amendments were tabled on 16th January 1953, one by M. Christiansen and others with the object of including "one of the Scandinavian" languages in the simultaneous interpretation system and the other by M. Mercouris and others to allow simultaneous interpretation for Greek and Turkish. The motion by M. Punder was as follows :

"The Assembly,

Having regard to Rule 18, paragraph 2, of the Rules of Procedure, which reads as follows :

"Speeches may be made in a language other t h a n the official languages. In such cases the speaker himself shall be responsible for arranging for consecutive interpretation into one of the official languages, which shall be simultaneously interpreted into the other official language";

Having regard to Article 12 of the Statute of the Council of Europe, which leaves it to the discretion of the Assembly to determine in what circumstances and under what conditions other languages may be used :

Considering that the technical installation with which the Assembly Hall has been equipped for the services of the Common Assembly enables simultaneous interpretation to be made into several languages;

Considering that use should be made of the facilities thus available,

Decides to include the German, Italian and Dutch languages in the simultaneous interpretation service of the Assembly."

6. This Motion was discussed extensively in the Committee on Rules of Procedure from May 1953 to May 1954.

7. On 8th July 1954, the Bureau of the Assembly discussed a letter from M. Van Cauwelaert, Chairman of the Committee on Rules of Procedure containing the following paragraphs : "Before considering the question of amending Rule 18 of t h e Rules of Procedure, the Committee on Rules of Procedure and Privileges proposes that the Bureau should arrange for the simultaneous interpretation into French and English of speeches made in German and Italian during the September session. A summary report of these speeches would appear in French and English in the stencilled official reports. A verbatim record, however, should be made in the original language and then translated and printed in the final official reports." The Bureau's decision was a follows : " The Chairman felt t h a t this request should be granted on the understanding that, since Rule 18 remained unchanged, the necessary administrative measures such as t h e engagement and remuneration of such interpreters, verbatim reporters and translators as the Secretariat-General considered necessary would be the responsibility of the German and Italian delegations. This was agreed." (Doc. AS/B (6) PV 2).

8. This decision was modified on 28th April 1955, when the Bureau agreed "that German and Italian translators should be selected by Assembly services, in agreement with the German and Italian delegations, should during sessions be controlled by Assembly services and, like other translators, be retained after the end of a session until such time as work had been completed". It was agreed further that expenditure connected with translators and stenographers in German and Italian should remain a charge on the respective national delegations (Doc. AS/B (6) PV 11).

5. A Motion by M. Strasser in 1958

9. On the 15th January 1958, M. Strasser tabled a Motion (Doc. 781) on the question of the official languages of the Council of Europe. This motion was as follows :

"The Assembly,

Considering that, in connection with the institutional reform of the Council of Europe, the question of official languages might usefully be examined,

Instructs the Secretary-General :

(a) to send all Representatives to the Consultative Assembly and their Substitutes the following three-point questionnaire :

what is your mother tongue?

which foreign language do you know best?

how many official languages do you think the Council of Europe should have, and which should they be in order of preference?

(b) to report to the Consultative Assembly at the opening of its Tenth Session on the results of this enquiry."

10. The Assembly which, in this case also, could have adopted this Motion, chose instead, on 16th January 1958, to refer it to the Working Party on Institutional Reform (Reference No. 194). This is the Working Party which the Bureau of the Assembly had been instructed to set up. (Order 115).

11. In his preliminary report to the Working Party (Doc. AS/Bur (9) 24) M. Teitgen, Rapporteur, suggested "that M. Strasser's Motion be adopted, in part, by proposing that Representatives and Substitutes be instructed to reply to the following questions :

What is your mother tongue?

What foreign language do you know best?

What working languages should be recognised in plenary debates of the Consultative Assembly?"

12. This suggestion was evidently not followed, and the Protocol (or Summary Conclusions)' of a meeting of the Working Party held in Paris on 10th February 1958, states that the Working Party "felt that the language question did not come within its terms of reference and referred it back to the Bureau of the Assembly" (Doc. AS/Bur (9) 25). - The final report of the Bureau to the Assembly (Doc. 845) does not mention M. Strasser's Motion.

13. In view of this, on 21st January 1959, M. Strasser submitted a new motion for an Order (Doc. 951) which was referred to the Political Committee on 22nd January 1959 and, read as follows :

"The Assembly,

Having regard to the Motion for an Order (Doc. 781) on the official languages of the Council of Europe, referred to the Working Party on Institutional Reform;

Considering that this Working Party has completed its study and that no decision has been taken on the matter,

Requests the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe to submit a detailed report on the action taken on this matter, at the first part of, the Eleventh Session."

6. A study by the Secretariat-General

14. It should be added that the Ministers' Deputies have instructed the Secretariat-General to prepare a detailed study of the financial and administrative implications of introducing changes in the official languages of the Council of Europe.

7. Suggestions

15. There is one point to which I feel special importance attaches. It is my belief that the demand for additional languages is in no sense the outcome of any desire for prestige, of pride or of self-interest. Our institution came into being because the prime movers of the European idea, as well as the broad masses whom they represented and whose opinion they reflected, were able to rise above the selfish interests that had so bitterly divided them in the past. In doing so they were contributing towards the achievement of a splendid task which they regarded, and which we ourselves regard today, as the only safeguard of those moral and material values to which they were and we remain so firmly attached. And it was in this spirit that the question of official languages was settled in 1949.

16. However, since the Statute of the Council of Europe was drawn up in 1949, its membership has changed considerably. The ten signatory countries of the Statute, namely Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom have been joined by five others, namely Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany, Greece, Iceland and Turkey. Since then, therefore, a new factor has arisen in connection with the question of official languages. This was at least partially met, without any national bias, by the decisions of the Bureau, mentioned in paragraphs 7 and 8 of this report, concerning the circumstances in which Italian and German might be used in the Consultative Assembly.

17. Since then it has transpired that a number of members of the Assembly do not consider that the present arrangements concerning languages are consistent with the requirements of efficiency in the Council of Europe and particularly in the Consultative Assembly.

18. I think the time has come to review the whole problem. However, I would not say that such a step implies that the present system is bad. We may even find it best to leave matters as they stand. The following three possibilities should therefore be considered :

- a. retaining the present language system;
- b. introducing either one or two more official languages;
- c. adopting the official languages of all the Member States as official languages of the Council of Europe.

19. The last of these three possibilities must surely be ruled out straightaway. It is quite impracticable in view of the delays, complications and expenditure it would entail.

20. As to the choice between the two possibilities under (a) and (b) in the foregoing paragraph, I cannot yet express an opinion as I am not at present in possession of all the necessary facts, such as the financial and administrative implications of increasing the number of official languages as regards both the translation of documents and the interpretation of speeches in the Assembly and Committees. Furthermore it seems advisable to send out a questionnaire on the lines proposed by M. Strasser in Document 781 to all members of the Consultative Assembly and their substitutes. The replies to this would provide reliable indications on which a final decision could be based, and this is the purpose behind the draft Order I have submitted.