

# Sustaining Europe's multilingual literary heritage

*Findings from the EU report*  
Translators on the Cover

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*Translators on the Cover – Multilingualism & Translation* was published in English on January 31st 2022 and is currently being translated into the 23 other official languages of the EU. The report was prepared by the Open Method of Cooperation Group (OMC) “Multilingualism and Translation” under the EU Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022. The work took place between the summer of 2020 to January 2022. The OMC group was made up of experts in multilingualism and translation from 20 EU countries as well as Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. The majority were from national literary agencies, funding bodies or representatives from national ministries of culture, but the group also included four professional literary translators and a publisher. The author of this article represented Denmark, both as chair of the *Danish Translators' Association* and – not least – as a literary translator for the past 15 years.

“United in Diversity” is EU’s official motto, and a very great deal of this diversity resides in the many languages and cultures spoken and written within the union. Some of the main practitioners within this area and the ones upholding this diversity in a concrete sense, are (literary) translators. These days, however, there is a general decline in the dissemination of translated literature from so-called small languages. To counter this tendency and develop viable policy solutions, the EU Commission decided to gather a group of national experts to discuss and pinpoint the main issues creating barriers to the spread of literature within Europe and beyond. The underlying thought is that multilingualism and cultural diversity should be seen and used as a strength, not as a problem – and to this end, translation and translators are needed.

The work of the group of experts has resulted in the report *Translators on the Cover*, the first comprehensive charting of this particular area on a European scale. The introduction to

the report makes the importance of translated literature clear: *“Translation plays a strategic role in Europe’s cultural development. It allows for the passage of ideas, knowledge and cultural expressions between different languages and cultures, and thus contributes to a stronger shared knowledge among European citizens of their history, their creations and their shared concerns.”* [p. 15]

So, the OMC-group definitely had their work cut out for them. Amidst Covid-19 restrictions and general lockdown, the experts met online in the course of almost 18 months to discuss the problems facing the dissemination of translated literature and to give recommendations on how to deal with these problems in a constructive way. Thus, *Translators on the Cover* outlines the problematic issues within the field and gives concrete recommendations, based on the hands-on knowledge of the experts involved.

### Three main issues

After initial discussions within the group, three main areas of interest were identified. Accordingly, it was decided to split the group into three sub-groups, each addressing one of the main problems for the current dissemination of translated literature in Europe: language education, working conditions for literary translators and funding for translated literature. The reasoning behind focusing on these areas was, in short, as follows: if nobody learns languages, nobody will be able to translate. If the working conditions for translators are deteriorating, nobody will want to become a translator, and if funding for translated literature is not

readily available, nobody will be able to publish books that are not bestsellers.

In the area of education, it seems clear that fewer and fewer students at university level study languages other than English. When and if a European publisher decides to publish a book translated to or from ‘small’ languages, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find qualified translators. So the recommendations in this area mainly deal with improving the possibilities for student mobility, and for stronger cooperation between publishers and educational institutions and more mentor-based learning, which could help bridge the gap between formal training and actually working as a literary translator.

**“The ones upholding this diversity in a concrete sense are (literary) translators”**

The other main issue, and probably the most immediately interesting to the (potential) publishers reading the report, is funding. As it is, the mechanics of the global book market favour bestsellers and English language writers. Hence, publishers typically feel they would be taking a

considerable risk in translating from other languages. This is why funding, made as easily available as possible, is needed, on both EU and national levels. More funding, and better access to the existing funding is essential. Also, if you compare literature to another high-profile artform receiving considerable support, namely film, it is relatively cheap to produce if you consider the individual work. Accordingly, EU and the national and regional cultural institutions could get a lot of 'value for money' by supporting translated literature to an even higher degree.

One of the key recommendations concerning working conditions in particular is having the [DSM directive](#) implemented properly, since important parts of the directive deal with fair remuneration and transparency. This might seem evident, but many problems with implementation are being reported, e.g. in [Austria](#). Also, to get legitimate exceptions to EU competition law restrictions and making it possible for translators and their associations to engage in collective bargaining, would help translators better their conditions considerably.

### Sharing information

Although more funding is certainly needed, working on the report showed that sharing information and knowing how to make contact with the appropriate people are some of the keys to bettering the conditions for translated literature. Apart from the main body of the text which deals with the three above-mentioned issues, the report also contains a number of annexes with useful links for 'Opportunities for Continuous Training', translator

associations and translator databases, centres for regional cooperation and funding opportunities for translated literature in Europe, among other things.

It will help publishers if they can easily access information on funding schemes and qualified translators with the specific language skills they need. Translators, on the other hand, need to be able to share information on remuneration, translators' rights and availability of individual funding and grants with each other. This links directly into the third issue, namely the working conditions for translators in Europe these days.

### The problem of remuneration

Of course, the most pressing problem for most literary translators, and probably the single thing that would make it more attractive to become a translator and stay within the profession for a longer period of time, is the issue of fair remuneration. Getting better payment for the highly qualified work being done would make it easier to attract students to the language professions. And it is also clear that in the way the book market is organized now, publishers would have a stronger incentive to pay their translators fairly if funding was more abundant.

To illustrate the very real problems of remuneration, the report gives concrete examples from Austria, Denmark and Spain, where average earnings of a literary translator are compared with earnings of the rest of the workforce in each country. Because of the still relatively great differences between income levels, social security systems, PLR systems, cost of living etc., it is of course hard to compare one translator's conditions with another's. However,

two CEATL surveys from 2008 and 2020 support the claims of the report with actual statistics. Looking at how the level of remuneration has developed in the 12 years between the two surveys, is, however, not encouraging: in a majority of countries, the level of fees is exactly the same or only slightly higher than 12 years ago – even though prices everywhere have increased considerably.

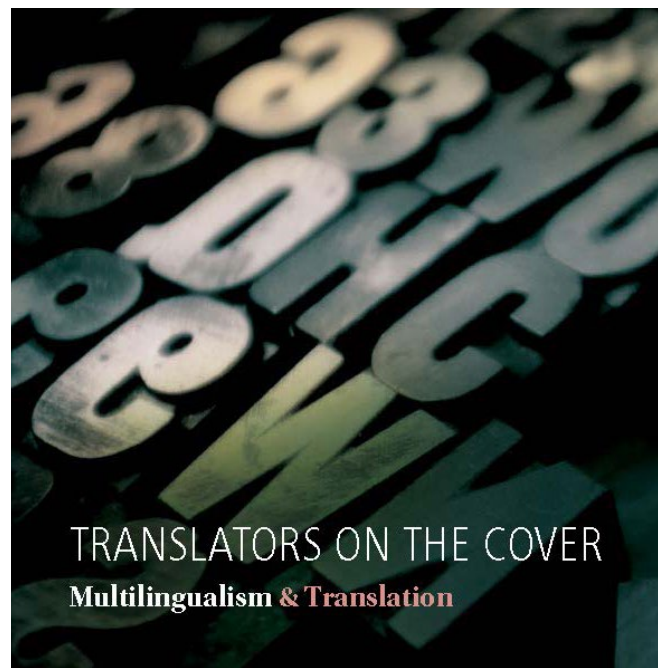
### What next?

What is encouraging, however, is that several countries in the EU, and the EU Commission, are working actively to ease the restrictions of competition law. The group of experts – most of whom were not themselves practising literary translators – broadly agreed that stronger support for literary translators' associations is needed, including umbrella organisations working on a European level, such as CEATL, the audio-visual translators' AVTE, the European Theatre Convention and other similar bodies. This is essential to match the powerful organisations already lobbying for the interests of publishers and booksellers. Sharing information on rights and fees, giving qualified (legal) advice to match the publishers' legal counsel and upholding a community of qualified professionals is best achieved by the individual translators' associations and their federations. Translators themselves need to strengthen their bargaining positions, just as much as the publishers need better funding schemes.

All in all, after working on the report it seems clear to me that the issues I had suspected to be a problem – i.e. language education, remuneration, dissemination of information and the contractual

situation in very general terms – are, in fact, problematic and constitute great barriers to upholding the diversity of the literature being published in Europe. On the other hand, it is also clear that things can be done, and are already being done, to improve the situation, in the short and especially long term.

So, my hope – and no doubt the hope of the many others who have worked on the report – is that it will be read with openness and in the spirit of cooperation by policy makers and others with deciding power. There are many people deeply interested in sustaining and developing Europe's multilingual literary heritage and the recommendations in this report might just hold the key as to how to go about this.



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