Reply by DG SCIC to the request for information sent out by MEP ZVER

Introduction:

Rather than referring to "remote interpreters", our answers concern the general issue of meetings with "distant participation". Indeed, in the vast majority of those meetings, interpreters are present in a meeting room with the meeting organiser and part of the participants and the other part of participants disseminated in distant sites. We consider that the term "remote" applies to the way the meeting is conducted.

Before the pandemic, most meetings were exclusively in person, with occasional participation via video conference of a very limited number of speakers. Since March 2020, distant participation is the only possible solution for many meetings. Therefore, DG SCIC had to take steps to respond to this crisis demand by adopting the tools needed to transmit interpretation to the distant participants: Simultaneous Interpreting Delivery Platforms (SIDPs) integrated into the audio-visual infrastructure of our meeting rooms equipped with standard interpretation booths. This solution requires that interpreters are physically present in the booths.

1. *working conditions of remote interpreters in the EC*

As soon as DG SCIC started using those tools in May, it adopted temporary crisis working arrangements for simultaneous or consecutive interpretation delivered through SIDPs or video-conferencing tools, which were considered necessary to attenuate the impact of the technical limitations and the novelty of the tools. In accordance with these arrangements, DG SCIC increased the number of interpreters sharing the workload and the number of breaks, limited the working time in the booth, , and provided for relief teams to redeem interpreters attaining that time limit (rotation of teams). These arrangements were adopted in agreement with SCIC's staff representatives, and updated in December 2020, to take into account the experience gathered until then.

2. *most used methods and variations of RI in the EC*

Meetings with distant participation are organised via SIDPs or video-conferencing tools. In most cases, some participants are present in the meeting room together with the interpreters.

3. *best practices of RI*

DG SCIC has identified best practices when working with SIDPs or video-conferencing tools, which it has shared with meeting chairs, meeting participants and meeting managers in many ways. DG SCIC has issued guidelines containing advice about the internet connections, the participants' IT equipment and meeting etiquette in all EU languages and has shared them extensively with all its customers. It has issued guidelines for interpreters and heads of interpreting teams. To protect interpreters, it has also issued a disclaimer about service interruption due to technical problems and has authorised individual interpreters and heads of teams to stop interpreting when the minimum technical and other conditions are not met. In parallel, DG SCIC has raised awareness among different internal and external stakeholders, including Member States' permanent representations to the EU, and gives training to meeting managers ahead of meetings. DG SCIC also runs regular training sessions for Commission officials about the use of SIDPs and video-conferencing tools. DG SCIC has run an extensive survey of interpreters about their experience with SIDPs and videoconferencing tools and acted on the basis of the results. Before starting using them, DG SCIC tested the new configurations with the help of interpreters and has taken their feedback in account. Moreover, DG SCIC runs or participates in connection and operational tests before meetings with SIPS or videoconferencing tools take place so as to give customised preventive advice to meeting participants, chairs and technical staff in order to improve the technical and practical conditions for interpreters. Finally, DG SCIC has

set up a task force with the participation of DG SCIC's staff representatives and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) with observer status, which is preparing a Charter about the use of SIDPs.

The rationale behind these initiatives is to enable the best possible sound and image conditions for all participants and interpreters working in the meeting. Interpreters send their feedback after each meeting via an online questionnaire, allowing DG SCIC to identify room for improvement or issues to be tackled.

4. how often is it used, and for what kind of meetings

The number of meetings with platforms and video-conferencing tools varies from one day to the other, as DG SCIC provides interpretation according to demand.

In 2020, DG SCIC provided 15353 interpretation i-slots in meetings with distant participation via an interpreting platform or with videoconference technology. An i-slot corresponds roughly to a half-day of work of one interpreter.

This represents around one-fourth of the total interpretation provided.

For the type of meetings, please refer to question 7.

5. what are the technical requirements for RI at the EC

All the technical requirements are based on the standards related to simultaneous interpreting.
- *Interpreters work in permanent booths compliant with the EN-ISO 2603;*
- *They use interpreting equipment compliant with the same standard or with the EN-ISO 20109 in renovated rooms;*
- *The combination of the SIDP and its integration in our AV infrastructure to connect distant participants complies with the ISO PAS 24019;*
- *The interpreter interface for work from distant locations is also referred in the PAS mentioned here above.*

RI in the times of the Covid-19 pandemic

6. how often was RI used during the Covid-19 pandemic

SIDPs were only adopted in May 2020. Until March 2020, meetings with distant participation were exceptional. See question 4.

7. for what kind of meetings and which variation

Meetings including working groups, press conferences, ministerial meetings and other high-level encounters were serviced with SIDPs and videoconferencing tools, either in simultaneous or consecutive interpreting mode.
Meetings with distant participation range from meetings with 2 languages in consecutive mode to meetings with 23 languages in simultaneous interpretation.

8. was interpreting from home a possibility for interpreters, or did they had to be present at the EC premises?

In the vast majority of cases, interpreters work from ISO-compliant interpretation booths in premises.

Due to travel restrictions, DG SCIC has to revert, in some very limited cases and for specific types of meetings, to interpretation from either a meeting room in the Member State where the distant participants are, a meeting room in a Commission Representation or – as a last resort – from home, when none of these possibilities is available and with the interpreter's consent.

9. How did the working policies change for the interpreters during Covid for RI?

As interpreting requires a presence in the workplace, DG SCIC adopted a set of measures suited to interpreting assignments to ensure interpreters' safety. They translate corporate health protection and business continuity guidelines. DG SCIC has thus been in a position to continue providing essential interpretation with the highest possible degree of multilingualism throughout the pandemic, and adjusting its approach to changing needs until the health situation allows a return to normal working conditions. Measures focus on physical distance, hygiene and limited exposure.

The European Parliament

In March 2020 when the European Parliament switched to business continuity mode, DG LINC deployed a multilingual remote participation tool allowing MEPs and other participants to connect to parliamentary meetings from a distance. To date, and in addition to the plenary part sessions, DG LINC has serviced over 2 700 meetings with remote participation. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the EP did not deploy remote meeting participation beyond the occasional video link up, nor did it have recourse to remote interpretation.

Due to the social distancing measures and travel restrictions in place, the ability to offer full language regimes in parliamentary meetings has been severely hampered since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is because in order to reduce the risk of contagion and the spread of the virus, interpreters currently sit one per physical booth, instead of the usual two to three. In addition, freelance interpreters living outside Brussels have not been able to travel as freely as before, meaning the supply of available interpreters has been greatly reduced. To overcome these hurdles and to gradually increase the availability of languages, DG LINC's services have been deploying several solutions where interpreters have been working in situ on EP premises in Brussels:

- Adding mobile booths to meeting rooms
- Coupling of meeting rooms - interpreters working in booths in additional meeting rooms on EP premises connected to the main meeting room
- Setting up mobile booths in the Yehudi Menuhin area to service multiple meetings

These measures allowed us to provide a full language regime in all Plenary part-sessions from April 2020 and to increase step-by-step the language coverage in other meetings, but have not been enough to meet the demand for interpretation, so the services have looked for alternative, novel solutions.

Given the state of the art interpretation facilities in the EP premises in Strasbourg, a remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) "bridge" was created to allow booths in Strasbourg to be connected to meeting rooms in Brussels. This solution was first deployed in December 2020 and by calendar week 11 of this year, 24 freelance interpreter colleagues from a range of booths able to reach Strasbourg by car were deployed from Strasbourg to service meetings being held in Brussels. To date, more than 200 hours of interpretation have been provided from the Strasbourg bridge.

As current travel restrictions and poor flight connections continue to prevent many freelance interpreters from reaching Brussels, DG LINC is working on creating regional RSI hubs in four locations – Riga, Vienna, Ljubljana and London. The hub in London was first used in calendar week 12. However, as creating a hub is a complex technical operation, which does not always provide the flexibility required, and travelling to hubs is not always possible either, hubs might not always be the most viable solution. In view of this, providing interpretation remotely from interpreters' private premises during the business continuity mode is now being trialled as a more robust covid-proof mode of interpretation, which does not require travel or unnecessary exposure to risk. The trial of Non Co-Located Remote Simultaneous Interpretation (NCRSI) was launched by DG LINC in early 2021 and to date there have been 8 live meetings involving 36 interpreters working from their homes in their home countries. Without the deployment of NCRSI, these meetings would not have benefitted from interpretation at all and may not have been able to go ahead.

Furthermore, and as a result of the prolonged nature of the crisis, a new regulatory framework for the deployment of NCRSI during the EP business continuity mode was negotiated between the AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters) and the European Parliament in February 2021. The NCRSI agreement contains provisions on technical requirements and best practices for NCRSI deployment (as well as guidelines on data protection, technical setup at home and ergonomics), and includes specific assignment guidelines for interpreters working in this mode from their own premises. All freelance interpreters working in NCRSI receive tailored training and benefit from technical compliance checks prior to their first NCRSI assignment.

Taking into consideration the increased complexity of interpreting remote speakers and servicing meetings with the interpreters working remotely (from coupled rooms and mobile booths on EP premises, and in some cases off EP premises), the working time for interpreters has been revised and significantly reduced under business continuity mode. The reduced daily and weekly caps introduced per interpreter in early spring 2020 are gradually being increased as the multilingual remote participation tool becomes more reliable and in line with the EP Bureau implementation plan on interpretation capacities. Additionally, sound quality is of utmost concern for DG LINC and a number of actions have been taken to improve sound and the overall experience of remote meetings for all users:

- Working together with the platform developer and interpreter representatives to improve sound quality

- Raising awareness about the way remote speakers' behaviour influences sound quality (importance of adequate microphones, the location where speakers are connecting from).