



# The dynamics of public service interpreting and translation: specificities and challenges in education and professionalisation / La dinámica de la traducción e interpretación en los servicios públicos: especificidades y retos en materia de educación y profesionalización

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**Abstract:** This feature article outlines the common characteristics in the process of providing for the needs of multilingual communication in practice and education in different countries, the trajectories that countries may be going through in the field of PSIT and the challenges that stakeholders face in this process. The article also analyses the situation in the field of PSIT in Slovakia, describes the crisis solutions implemented in the initial phase of increased demand for PSIT services and defines the context for PSIT education and further developments in PSIT.

**Keywords:** PSIT practice; PSIT education; PSIT stakeholders; Professionalisation

**Resumen:** Este artículo de fondo esboza las características comunes en el proceso de atención a las necesidades de comunicación multilingüe en la práctica y la educación en distintos países, las trayectorias que pueden estar siguiendo los países en el ámbito de los TISP y los retos a los que se enfrentan las partes interesadas en este proceso. El artículo también analiza la situación en el ámbito de la TISP en Eslovaquia, describe las soluciones de crisis aplicadas en la fase inicial de aumento de la demanda de servicios de TISP y define el contexto de la educación en TISP y la evolución posterior de la TISP.

**Palabras clave:** Práctica de las TISP; Educación de las TISP; Partes interesadas en las TISP; Profesionalización

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## 1. Introduction

Dynamic developments (not only) in Europe caused by geopolitical, economic or climatic changes also affect the need for and ways of ensuring multilingual communication in a wide variety of contexts. The situation in public service interpreting and translation (PSIT) practice, education, and research evolves over time and varies across countries and regions. As Ozolins (2010) notes, many countries are struggling to adequately meet multilingual communication needs and comprehensively deliver PSIT services in the context of increasing linguistic diversity and pressure on public financial resources.

Differences are found in the intensity of demand and supply of translation and interpreting services, the portfolio of languages, the forms of training (future) translators and interpreters, the level of professionalisation, and the legislative anchoring of PSIT. These divergences are related to the geopolitical context, the history of admission and integration of foreign nationals in individual countries, the education system and many other aspects, i.e. developments in public service interpreting and translation are determined primarily by institutional factors.

According to Ozolins (2000, In: Ozolins, 2010), national responses to multilingual communication needs range on a spectrum from denial, to ad hoc solutions and generic language services, to a comprehensive approach involving the provision of specialised services, a certification system, the offering of training opportunities, and policy planning and evaluation. The author also defines universal macrofactors that influence the provision of PSIT:

- the reliance on government funding to provide language services in the public sector, and the changing ideologies of public sector finance that affect the nature and quality of language services;
- the increasing diversity of languages that must be catered for, preventing any easy meeting of needs and standards in languages of lesser diffusion (LLD), and constantly bringing new demands and practitioners into the interpreting environment;
- the institutional basis of language services, making it an institution-led field rather than a profession-led field where a set of standards and practices have evolved and been established through a professional socialisation process;
- the inevitably cross-sector needs for interpreting: non-speakers of dominant languages may have many interactions with the public service. Language policy thus entails cross-portfolio policy making, as opposed to the usual sector-specific public policy development processes.

In addition, there are also individual context-specific factors - political and social perceptions of other cultures and languages, relations between central and local government, public policy models and the structure and functioning of the third sector, the status of court translation and interpreting in comparison to other PSIT domains, the prestige of the interpreting profession, including the comparison of PSIT with conference interpreting (Ozolins, 2010).

In this context, Corsellis (2002a) defines the different phases through which a society progresses to the time when systemic structures begin to take shape in the field of public service interpreting:

1. absent awareness of the existence of the problem;
2. denial of the problem and the search for solutions that are not very rational (e.g. children acting as interpreters or communicating through gestures);
3. recognition of the problem;
4. analysis and implementation of solutions;
5. formal solutions at the local level implemented through private initiatives;
6. institutionalisation of solutions at national level;
7. general measures and the existence of rules in a national framework (code of ethics, professional services, professional associations).

The current issue of FITISPos International Journal presents the situation of PSIT in different European countries that are at different stages of the journey towards adequately meeting the needs of multilingual communication within their national contexts. The aim of this feature article is to outline the main challenges in the field of professionalisation and PSIT education (in LLD) and to demonstrate them on the specific situation in Slovakia.

## 2. The PSIT professionalisation process

On the way to comprehensive provision of PSIT and to professionalisation in the field, D'Hayer (2012) identifies common challenges, particularly in the following areas: defining the profession, providing interpreting services for languages of lesser diffusion, educating stakeholders, moving from training to education, and interpreting and translation quality.

The definition of a profession is influenced, among other things, by the specifics of translation and interpreting in public services compared to other established genres, which include in particular (Müglová & Hodáková, 2024):

- specifics of the communication situation - PSIT as an intrasocial genre (Pöchhacker, 2000), triadicty of communication, asymmetry in power relations between communication participants, psychosocial factors influencing speakers' utterances, visibility of the interpreter (Angeleli, 2004), discrepancies in clients' expectations, etc.
- translational and linguistic specificities - bidirectional nature of interpreting, use of various interpreting techniques, including hybrid and remote forms (Giambruno, 2014); need for switching style registers (Tužinská, 2015), turn-taking coordination, etc.

- specific demands on the interpreter's personality - e.g. higher levels of empathy (Baistow, 2020), need for effective emotional regulation;
- pragmatic specificities - e.g. absence of teamwork, non-standard working conditions.

Professionalisation in PSIT represents both a component of and a goal within systematic solutions. Prunč (2012) sees the professionalisation of PSIT as an ultimate goal that can only be achieved through the joint efforts of research and education and well-organised professional associations. Professionals in this field should possess competencies reflecting the very specificities of PSIT that distinguish it from other genres, and should be able to make consistent and ethical decisions on a continuum between neutrality and advocacy. At the same time, it is necessary to develop mechanisms to motivate practitioners to acquire adequate education.

Mikkelson (2004) adds that the path towards professionalisation requires consensus on the role and function of practitioners in the field and the education of all stakeholders. According to Corsellis (2002b, p. 30), there are five main interdependent stakeholder groups to be involved: 1. public services; 2. language profession; 3. academics; 4. citizens of the country, their civil service and government; 5. those who do not have an adequate command of the language of the country in question.

### 3. PSIT in LLD training and education: common challenges

Closely linked to the professionalisation process is the offer of training and education in PSIT and its individual domains. In this respect, we also find differences between countries, e.g. in the demand for specific languages (of lesser diffusion), or in training opportunities for (future) translators and interpreters, but we also identify overlaps and commonalities. A summary of the most important initiatives, describing specific education possibilities, is given e.g. by Valero-Garcés (2019), Pöllabauer (2020), Tiselius & Herring (2023). Valero-Garcés (2003) also identifies the most common challenges for PSIT education and LLD in general:

1. variety of available training and diversity of student profiles;
2. trainers' background and availability (recruitment);
3. directionality and the axiom of L1 in translation and interpreting;
4. the need to transcend traditional notions of interpreting and translation;
5. interpreter and translator positioning;
6. language resources and translation technologies for LLD.

Valero-Garcés (2019), building on the recommendations of D'Hayer (2012), considers the following to be important contributions to addressing the above challenges:

- the flexibility of universities and training centres and the sharing of resources;
- the contribution of all stakeholders to the professionalisation of PSIT;
- the creation of virtual learning environments that would also support practice in LLDs;
- use of new technologies and innovations.

In all these areas, the exchange of experience between experts from different countries is also crucial. Examples of such transnational platforms include initiatives such as ENPSIT (European Network for Public Service Interpreting and Translation)<sup>1</sup>, the Knowledge Centre on Translation and Interpretation of the European Commission<sup>2</sup> or the Working group on PSIT and LLD of the European Masters' in Translation<sup>3</sup>, which connect stakeholders from academia and practice, facilitating the creation of projects and solutions towards professionalisation in the field of PSIT.

We also find specificities across countries in the needs of multilingual communication in terms of the portfolio of required languages to which practice and education must respond. The TrailLLD project (Balogh, Salaets & Van Schoor, 2016) offers a list of key elements of LLD that takes into account different contexts, needs and perspectives. The authors describe specific criteria, the more of which a particular language in a particular country meets, the more likely it is to be an LLD. LLD:

- is a language that has relatively few speakers in one specific region in relation to the population as a whole;
- is an isolated language;
- has often no official status;
- is often a non-standardised, oral language with minimal written resources;
- is often subject to greater language variation;
- is a language in which legal terminology is not always firmly established or may be non-existent;
- is a language with which we have little experience and/or contact;
- is confronted with a lack of interpreter training resources (no training material, no bilingual trainers combining language and interpreting skills, no facilities for online training, etc.);
- is a language where the organisational challenges for interpreter training are significant due to a combination of linguistic factors and context;
- is a language for which no university level interpreter training programme is available;
- is a language for which few or no accredited interpreters can be found (in a specific geographical area).

As the current issue of FITISPos specifically focuses on presenting the situation of PSIT practice and education across Europe, this feature article also presents one case study that will highlight the specificities of the different phases on the way to more systemic solutions in PSIT as defined by Corsellis (2002a) and Ozolins (2010), addressing the challenges in practice and education identified by Valero-Garcés (2003) and the recommendations formulated by D'Hayer (2012) and Valero-Garcés (2019).

<sup>1</sup> ENPSIT (2024) <http://www.enspit.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Knowledge Centre on Translation and Interpretation of the European Commission (n.d.) <https://knowledge-centre-translation-interpretation.ec.europa.eu/en>

<sup>3</sup> WG PSIT and LLD (n.d.) <https://knowledge-centre-translation-interpretation.ec.europa.eu/en/knowledge-centre-communities/emt-psit-working-group-lld>

#### **4. From crisis response to first formal solutions at local level in PSIT: the case of Slovakia**

The aim of this part of the paper is to analyse the current situation of PSIT in practice and education in Slovakia, to describe the crisis solutions applied in the initial phases of increased demand for PSIT, to define the different phases and levels of the search for more systemic solutions, to contextualise LLD in the specific Slovak case and to outline potential further developments.

##### *4.1. Slovakia and migration: background*

Slovakia has never been a traditional destination country for migrants in the past and was not significantly affected by the increase in migration in the 20th century. Before joining the European Union in 2004, the Slovak Republic was rather a country of origin of people who migrated to other countries for various reasons. And although EU membership and the formation of the Schengen area brought an increase in the number of foreigners on the territory of the country, their proportion remained relatively low compared to other EU countries. A total of 167,519 foreigners were resident in Slovakia in 2021 (Ministry of the Interior, 2022), the largest part of them being citizens of the neighbouring Czech Republic, i.e. persons whose access to information and services was not restricted due to language barriers<sup>4</sup>.

A radical change was brought about in February 2022, when the war conflict in Ukraine broke out. In the first year of the war, a total of 1,772,990 crossings of the Ukrainian-Slovak border were recorded, with 127,355 people seeking temporary refuge in the country. The number of foreigners with a residence permit in Slovakia has thus doubled compared to the situation in 2021. According to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior (2023), citizens of Ukraine currently constitute the largest group of foreigners on the Slovak territory (176,522), with 80% of them being women, elderly people, children and persons with specific needs (UNHCR, 2023). All of these groups use various types of public services and come into contact with public, state and private institutions and organisations. In 2023, citizens of Ukraine accounted for approximately 80% of all non-EU foreigners residing in Slovakia. Other larger groups were citizens of Serbia (8.7%), Vietnam (4.2%), Russia (3.9%) and Georgia (2.4%) (Ministry of the Interior, 2023).<sup>5</sup>

The increase in the number of foreigners on the territory of Slovakia is associated with an increase in the demand for public services for these groups of citizens. In the case of the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, initially it was mainly the provision of services at the offices of the Foreign Police, at border crossings, at first contact points, in large-scale refugee centres, accommodation and health care facilities, and over time also at the regional Offices of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, at schools and educational institutions, in community centres, and so on (Müglová & Hodáková, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> However, PSIT does not necessarily refer to language and cultural mediation for migrants, but the target group may also be national and cultural minorities or other groups of people living in Slovakia. In this sense, Slovakia can be understood as a multilingual country, where the law currently defines 15 national minorities and grants them the right to communicate in the language of the minority in official relations at the local level (Act No. 204/2011 on the Use of Languages of National Minorities).

<sup>5</sup> Ukrainian, Russian, Serbian and Vietnamese are also official languages of national minorities in Slovakia (Národnostné menšiny, n.d.) <https://www.narodnostnemensiny.vlada.gov.sk/narodnostne-mensiny/historia-a-sucasnost-nm/?csrt=2983075055819185405>

#### *4.2. Education in translation and interpreting and language offer in Slovakia*

In Slovakia, the education of translators and interpreters is carried out at universities in the form of a study programme at bachelor's and master's level, focusing jointly on translation and interpreting. In the field of translation, the course offer is mainly focused on literary and specialised translation, and in the field of interpreting, it is mainly concentrated on training in conference interpreting in the relevant techniques (simultaneous interpreting and consecutive interpreting with or without notation) and in the relevant topics. PSIT is thus not represented at all or only marginally.<sup>6</sup> As far as the supply of working languages is concerned, training is provided in the 'big' world languages (which have traditionally been the focus of the education system in primary and secondary schools), in particular English, German, Spanish, French and Russian<sup>7</sup>. An exception is one study programme focusing on translation and interpreting in the Ukrainian language offered at the University of Prešov<sup>8</sup>, but even in this case it is not PSIT education. The nationality composition of translation and interpreting students and their mother tongue and other working languages follow the general trends in the field of migration in Slovakia, i.e. by 2022 the vast majority of students at Slovak universities were of Slovak origin with Slovak as their mother tongue<sup>9</sup>. From 2022 onwards, Slovak universities in general, and translation and interpreting programmes in particular, see an increased proportion of students with Ukrainian and/or Russian as their mother tongue. As the offer of studies in Ukrainian is very limited, these students most often choose combinations with Russian or a combination of other foreign languages. However, as the skills and competences that students acquire during their university training are to a large extent transferable, it is in this development that we see the potential for increasing the availability of translators and interpreters in the languages required in practice.

#### *4.3. Communication with foreigners in Slovakia: practice, barriers and needs*

The massive increase in the number of migrants immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine caused that the state did not have sufficient capacities to deal effectively with the crisis, either in terms of staff, administration or logistics. Therefore, most of the activities in this area, especially in the initial phase, were covered by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in intensive cooperation with national and local NGOs, non-profit and charitable organisations, civic associations and groups of volunteers (Hodáková & Ukušová, 2023). These organisations covered a variety of services for migrants (legal assistance and counselling, medical and psychosocial care, material and financial assistance, accommodation, etc.), including the provision of communication with migrants, whether through volunteers in the role of bilingual staff or ad hoc interpreters.

<sup>6</sup> A specific position within the PSIT has, as in many other countries, the training or certification of sworn/ court translators and interpreters (for a more detailed description of the requirements and legal provisions applicable to sworn translators and interpreters in Slovakia, see, e.g., Štefková, 2020). However, court translation and interpreting is not the subject of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> The tradition of teaching Russian in Slovak schools is mainly connected with the affiliation of the former Czechoslovakia to the so-called communist bloc in the second half of the last century.

<sup>8</sup> University of Prešov (n.d.) <https://www.unipo.sk/filozoficka-fakulta/instituty-fakulty/iuass/>

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of a limited number of students belonging to national minorities in Slovakia (e.g. the Hungarian minority living in the south of Slovakia).

#### 4.3.1 *Who provides PSIT?*

As mentioned above, there is no systematic training in public service interpreting or dialogue interpreting in Slovakia, and the offer of general studies in translation and interpreting from/into Ukrainian is limited to one study programme. At the same time, research into the language needs of refugees from Ukraine in Slovakia (Štefková & Šveda 2022, Hodáková & Ukušová 2023) confirms that these groups of people predominantly use Ukrainian and/or Russian.

We were therefore interested to explore who the interpreters working in the public service spheres are who help to meet the above-mentioned demand. In our research in 2022 (Hodáková & Ukušová, 2023; Müglová & Hodáková, 2024), we focused on interpreters working directly at border crossings, which at that time were experiencing an intense workload related to registering and providing assistance to refugees from Ukraine. We conducted a series of individual semi-structured interviews with volunteers acting as interpreters for national NGOs under the auspices of UNHCR in the so-called hotspots, i.e. points of first contact on the Slovak-Ukrainian border after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The aim of the research was to map different aspects of the profile of the interpreters and the interpreting practice in this specific context.

The majority of the interpreters were Ukrainian citizens, mostly Ukrainians studying in Slovakia with Ukrainian and/or Russian<sup>10</sup> as their mother tongue, with a smaller proportion of Slovak students with Slovak as their mother tongue. None of the interpreters had undergone specific interpreting training or a course in public service interpreting. The most frequent barriers or problems in interpreting identified by the participants were as follows:

- unclear definition of roles and related responsibilities and powers (different expectations of clients, ethical dilemmas);
- lack of terminological knowledge (especially in the field of legislation, law, medicine);
- insufficient interpreter training (lack of relevant education, no offer on courses, no previous training);
- insufficient experience in public service interpreting;
- low resilience (problems with emotional regulation in stressful situations).

Our research amongst interpreters working at border crossings confirmed that, as in other areas, public service translation and interpreting at that time offered emergency solutions for services that needed to be offered on a large scale within a very short timeframe. Interpreting in this specific context was carried out by bilingual (or multilingual) volunteers, mostly students at a very young age with no previous training or practical experience in interpreting. Despite their young age and lack of experience, they have also acted as interpreters in challenging crisis situations associated with emotional strain, bad physical and/or psychological state of clients and feeling responsible for the fate of clients in need. In doing so, they themselves perceived the need to increase their own mental resilience and to work with their emotions, as well as to clearly define the roles of individual communication partners and to develop their own linguistic and translational knowledge and skills (Müglová & Hodáková, 2024).

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<sup>10</sup> Ukrainian as a mother tongue was more frequently represented compared to Russian.



The studies mapping the situation in the field of PSIT in Slovakia (Štefková & Šveda 2022, Hodáková & Ukušová, 2023; Chlebušová 2023), as well as research from other countries (e.g. Valéro-Garcés, 2005), confirm that students are often involved in PSIT. Yakunkina (2024), who conducted a questionnaire survey with a specific focus on students in the role of interpreters, came to similar findings in her thesis. The research participants were students from Slovak universities from different study programmes and the author found that the majority of them had repeated active interpreting experience. Most of the students with interpreting experience were from Ukraine, Slovakia and Russia, mainly studying foreign languages, translation and interpreting or technical programmes. With regard to specific spheres of interpreting, most students reported that they had provided interpreting in the field of education, in the foreign police department, in health care facilities, in employment services or at border crossings. Regarding the way in which the students became involved in interpreting, a large number of them reported that they volunteered themselves or were approached by a specific organisation. A smaller proportion interpreted at the request and for the needs of a family member. The most common problems experienced during interpreting were stress, lack of knowledge of terminology and generally poor language skills. Thus, the identified problems are consistent with the findings of previous research (Hodáková & Ukušová, 2023) which has confirmed that deploying students to interpret even in very specialised spheres and contexts is a relatively common practice in the Slovak public service system. Also consistent with previous research (Valero-Garcés, 2005; Hodáková & Ukušová, 2023) are findings on the psychological distress experienced by students during interpreting and the problems associated with inadequate preparation (in particular, insufficient linguistic and translational knowledge and skills).

#### 4.3.2 *How do organisations communicate with migrants?*

In order to map the situation from the perspective of organisations and institutions in Slovakia and to find out what forms of communication they use in interacting with clients, Chlebušová (2023) conducted a questionnaire survey among NGOs, organisations and associations assisting migrants. The participants in the survey identified the following as the most common causes of barriers in communication with migrants:

- cultural barriers;
- lack of public service interpreters in general;
- lack of interpreters for specific working languages;
- high error rates of machine translation;
- lack of translations or foreign language materials.

The results of this research also showed that organisations use a relatively wide range of forms of mediated communication to remove language (and cultural) barriers in their work. Most often, mainly because of good accessibility, time and cost savings, also because of the various barriers to engaging interpreters and because of what they consider to be the good quality of such translation, they use automated translation technologies (translation apps in smartphones). Quite often, they also use the services of ad hoc interpreters, i.e. spontaneously called-in bilinguals with no interpreting training. Meanwhile, organisations consider the use of professional interpreters to be the most effective form of mediated communication, although it is not clear from the research how organisations define this group (Chlebušová, 2023).

In 2022, a research was conducted (Müglová & Hodáková, 2024) that focused on the specific context of psychosocial care for migrants in Slovakia. The aim of the survey was to map the barriers and practices in migrants' access to mental health care, as well as the possibilities of removing them. As we conducted the survey in the first year after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, we also consider its findings to be largely a reflection of ad hoc crisis solutions in the field. Most of the organisations represented in our research experienced difficulties in communicating with migrants in providing mental health care due to language barriers. The most common barriers to access to mental health care for migrants with insufficient knowledge of Slovak language were identified by the representatives of the organisations as follows:

- lack of professional staff (healthcare providers, social workers) with good language skills;
- overall shortage of specialists (insufficient capacity to accept new patients);
- lack of information for the target group;
- reluctance of clients to contribute to the removal of barriers, to learn the official language of the host country;
- fear, professionals' concerns;
- unwillingness of staff to contribute to removing barriers;
- reluctance of providers to accept patients/clients of other nationalities (discrimination);
- lack of availability of professional interpretation;
- lack of support from the State;
- non-transparent support system, unclear competences of stakeholders;
- financial unavailability of mental health care services;
- cultural differences in understanding of mental health concepts, stigma;
- inadequate working conditions.

Respondents in our research identified different ways of removing barriers to care, on the part of all stakeholders: on the side of the service providers themselves (at the level of professional and language training, but also at the level of change of personal attitude towards migrants), on the side of educational institutions (adequate, targeted training of PSIT, cooperation with practice), on the side of clients (improving own competence in the language of the receiving country, change of personal attitude) and on the side of the state and the system in general (in the field of financing of professional and language services, education in society, improvement of working conditions, legislative adjustments).

#### 4.4 Local solutions and initiatives

In the intent of the different phases defined by Corsellis (2002a) described in the introduction of the chapter, Slovakia is in the phase of implementation of local solutions, which are facilitated mainly by project initiatives of the third sector - non-profit organisations, national and local associations with the support of international structures of the United Nations and the European Union, but also by some state institutions (e.g. Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices). Within the framework of these initiatives, training of bilingual/multilingual staff in public service areas is also taking place.

In addition to the need for systemic solutions on the part of the state, public institutions and organisations providing services to migrant clients, the research has undoubtedly provided sufficient arguments in favour of the inclusion of more systematic training of (future) public service interpreters, whether in the framework of university training or in the form of further education for translators and interpreters already working in practice. Currently, some initiatives in this area are being implemented through cooperation between universities and practitioners, whether in the form of the creation of interpreting course offerings for staff already working in the field of PSIT in practice (cf. Štefková & Šveda, 2022) or international projects aimed at educating future translators and interpreters at universities (cf. Hodáková, 2024a; Hodáková & Kuklová, 2025).

The range of publications and training modules in different spheres of public service interpreting in the specific Slovak context has also expanded (e.g. Hodáková, 2024b; Hodáková et al., 2024a, Hodáková et al., 2024b), which can be part of the university training of future translators and interpreters in Slovakia in study programmes that have not focused on PSIT so far.

The first dedicated course on public service interpreting was launched by the Department of Translation Studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra in response to the demand for public service interpreters already in the academic year 2023/2024. It is an optional course called Seminar in Community Interpreting in the Master's degree with a duration of 52 hours (including 26 contact hours).

## 5. Conclusion

All of the above-mentioned initiatives, which contribute to meeting the needs of multilingual communication in the country, operate on a collaborative basis, i.e. they involve different stakeholders who reflect on the needs, barriers and possibilities of overcoming them in the field.

The rapid mobilisation of the university sector in Slovakia is also due to strong partnerships with the European academic community. The Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra has in particular drawn extensively on the experience, knowledge and examples of good practice exchanged by experts at regular meetings and forums organised by the WG PSIT and LLD of European Masters' in Translation (DGT, European Commission). It can be concluded that although each country faces challenges within its individual context, it is the intensive cooperation and interconnection of stakeholders, both nationally and internationally, that helps to move towards systemic solutions and professionalisation in the field of PSIT.

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