Nikolić, Kristijan, Mirjana Tonković and Jorge Díaz Cintas. 2026. "Working conditions of audiovisual translators in Europe". *Parallèles*, *38*(1).

Working Conditions of Audiovisual Translators in Europe

Kristijan Nikolić

University of Zagreb, University College London

Mirjana Tonković

University of Zagreb

Jorge Díaz Cintas

University College London

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Abstract

Research on the working conditions of audiovisual translators has historically been fragmented, often confined to single-country studies and limited in scope. Empirical data on remuneration, contractual frameworks, and social protection remain scarce, despite mounting concerns about deteriorating conditions in the industry. This article presents findings from a large-scale online survey conducted between June and September 2022 among 1,966 audiovisual translators across Europe. The analysis offers insights into income levels, employment practices, rate negotiation, and professional identity within an increasingly globalised and platform-driven sector. The results reveal significant disparities across countries, persistent precarity despite high educational attainment, and the limited correlation between experience and income. Nevertheless, the data also point to the potential benefits of collective organisation and professional advocacy. By providing the first Europe-wide overview grounded in empirical evidence, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the sustainability of the AVT profession in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

audiovisual translators, subtitling, dubbing, working conditions, freelance translators, Europe

CONTACT Kristijan Nikolić, knikoli@ffzg.unizg.hr, University of Zagreb-Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of English, Ivana Lučića 3, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia , ORCID iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6457-8237

Nikolić, Kristijan, Mirjana Tonković and Jorge Díaz Cintas. 2026. “Working conditions of audiovisual translators in Europe”. *Parallèles*, *38*(1).

1. Introduction

The deterioration of working conditions across multiple sectors of the economy has become a defining feature of contemporary labour debates. In recent years, global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have exacerbated this situation, driving up living costs and reshaping employment structures. The audiovisual sector has been no exception. The surge in demand for streaming content during the pandemic was followed by a sharp contraction in production budgets, adversely affecting not only producers and distributors but also language service providers (LSPs) and, consequently, the translators who localise audiovisual content.

This broader climate of instability mirrors the labour unrest witnessed in the creative industries. The 2023 strikes by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) underscored widespread dissatisfaction with remuneration, residuals, and the encroachment of artificial intelligence on creative work (Beckett, 2023). Their collective action drew international solidarity, including a public statement of support from Audiovisual Translators Europe (AVTE, 2023), the federation representing national associations of audiovisual translators across Europe. The resonance of these strikes among AV translators highlights shared grievances around fair pay, authorship, and recognition.

In this context, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded portrait of audiovisual translators’ working conditions across Europe. In collaboration with AVTE, a large-scale online survey was conducted to document professional realities and identify structural challenges facing the sector. Previous studies on AVT labour have generally been confined to national contexts (Nikolić, 2010; Silvester, 2020; Künzli, 2023), making cross-country comparison difficult. This project thus represents the first pan-European attempt to capture the profession’s socio-economic landscape. The study pursues the following objectives:

1. To map key developments shaping audiovisual translators’ working conditions across Europe.
2. To identify translators’ perceptions of these changes and their impact.
3. To examine correlations between educational attainment, employment status, and remuneration.
4. To generate evidence-based insights that can inform policy recommendations and foster sustainable practices in the AVT sector.

This article starts by presenting an overview of previous research on the working conditions of audiovisual translators. It then outlines the methodology and respondent profile, followed by an analysis and interpretation of the findings. It concludes with a critical reflection on implications for the profession and directions for future research.

2. Previous research

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Although AVT has become an established area of scholarship, research has traditionally prioritised product-oriented approaches, such as the analysis of subtitling norms or dubbing strategies, over sociological or labour-oriented perspectives. As Tuominen (2021, p. 88) aptly notes, AVT is “a visible field, because its products are seen by a wide audience, especially in countries where foreign-language programming is prevalent, but its practitioners can be invisible and undervalued” and therefore “giving voice to practitioners is crucial in combating the invisibility that limits our understanding of audiovisual translators’ work”. One of the reasons behind this state of affairs is the fact that most professionals in the field tend to work on a freelance basis, frequently in isolation, which limits external understanding of their profession and working conditions.

Early empirical studies offer valuable, if limited, glimpses into professional conditions. Abdallah and Koskinen (2007) examined professional translators’ working conditions within a network-based translation economy, drawing on network theory and qualitative interviews with Finnish translators to show how outsourcing, subcontracting, and intermediary-dominated production networks reshape translators’ roles. The authors highlight how asymmetric power relations, lack of transparency, and long production chains undermine trust, limit translators’ agency, and expose them to economic and ethical risks, particularly in the case of freelancers positioned at the periphery of these networks. The authors offer a conceptual explanation of structural factors, such as precarity, reduced bargaining power, and dissatisfaction with working conditions, that are frequently identified in large-scale quantitative studies placing the findings within broader debates on labour organisation and power asymmetries in the European translation industry.

Nikolić’s (2010) pioneering work on the professional situation of Croatian subtitlers, based on a survey conducted with a pool of 27 participants, revealed that while practitioners valued the flexibility of working from home and the constant intellectual stimulation, they were dissatisfied with low pay and tight deadlines. Just over a decade later, Nikolić (2022) carried out a similar study to monitor the evolution of the situation, embracing audiovisual translators in general and not only subtitlers. A total of 111 responses were received. The results confirmed the persistence of these challenges and added concerns about technological disruption, particularly the impact of artificial intelligence (AI). Similar anxieties have been documented in Bulgaria by Kirov and Malamin (2022, p. 12). However, at the time of the study, translators appeared less apprehensive about AI, seeing it “as a helpful assistant, not as a thinking, self-learning machine that jeopardises the existence of their profession”, a view articulated prior to the widespread deployment of AI chatbots that have since become integrated into translators’ everyday working routines.

Abdallah (2012) examined translators’ working conditions through the lens of production networks, focusing on how subcontracting, outsourcing, and multi-tiered commissioning structures shape translators’ agency, professional autonomy, remuneration, deadlines, quality standards, and ethical responsibility. Drawing on interviews and case studies from the Nordic context, she demonstrates that translators are often positioned at the weakest end of these networks, with limited negotiating power and increasing pressure from intermediaries, leading to deteriorating working conditions and risks to translation quality. Abdallah’s analysis offers a valuable theoretical and qualitative framework for interpreting large-scale survey data

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

on audiovisual translators’ working conditions, as it elucidates the structural mechanisms underlying precarity, low remuneration, and limited professional recognition. By foregrounding production networks and power asymmetries, her work helps contextualise quantitative findings within broader debates on labour organisation and agency in the European AVT industry.

Kuo’s (2015) global survey of 429 subtitlers from 39 countries remains one of the earliest attempts to quantify working conditions internationally. The discussion touched on key aspects such as deadlines, rates, use of software, perceived status and negotiation power, among others. The scholar interprets the disparities reported by respondents as a prevalent phenomenon in the subtitling industry and, despite the difficulty to draw firm conclusions because of the broad differences in practice across, as well as within, countries, one of the emerging trends was that the vulnerability of subtitlers seemed to have increased in the years prior to the survey and that divergences between respondents seemed to be less marked in nations with strong associations and unions.

With the aim of analysing subtitling processes in the Danish context, Beuchert (2017) carried out a mixed-methods project articulated around a large-scale quantitative survey as well as small-scale qualitative observations, screen-recordings, and interviews of five Danish subtitlers. Despite being mainly process-oriented, her research provides invaluable insights on professional profiles, work practices and working conditions. The discussions with the practitioners evinced that relatively few subtitlers are given information about the viewers of their translations, that many informal exchanges among colleagues take place on social media, and that some of them regularly receive recognition for their skills and take pride in their profession, even if it “has a low status, is underpaid and underestimated” (Beuchert, 2017, p. 143).

Research in Finland further underscores this tension. Ruokonen and Mäkisalo (2018) explore the self-perception that Finnish translators have of their own status and highlight that working conditions, among other factors, have a substantial impact. They surveyed business, literary and audiovisual translators and, referring to the latter, claim that “[t]he audiovisual (AV) translators’ profile emerges as the most negative. AV translators believe they have the lowest status of these three professions. They also have the lowest income, and their status perceptions are relative to their income level” (Ruokonen and Mäkisalo, 2018, p. 14). In a subsequent work, Ruokonen and Svahn (2024) present a systematic review of 51 empirical studies on translators’ job satisfaction, synthesising findings on overall satisfaction levels as well as the role of job-intrinsic, job-extrinsic, societal, individual, and background factors. While translators tend to report relatively high satisfaction with the intrinsic aspects of their work, the review identifies persistent dissatisfaction with extrinsic and societal conditions, including pay, job security, time pressure, professional recognition, and power relations, with important differences across working modes and specialisations (Ruokonen and Svahn, pp. 12–21). Also in Finland, Tuominen (2021) examines how much attention 25 Finnish subtitlers pay to the different verbal and nonverbal modes of the audiovisual message when they retrospectively discuss their work processes and their views on subtitle quality. Though her emphasis is mainly on multimodality, the scholar also explores audiovisual translators’ work practices and career trajectories by looking into any potential differences between subtitlers performing under different working conditions in their relationship with the multimodal aspects of their work. She concludes that "[t]he only notable tendency was that poorer working conditions appear to reduce subtitlers' willingness or ability to include multimodal phases, such as previewing the video, in their work processes" (Tuominen, 2021, p. 99), a task that is contingent on the current rates and tight turnaround times imposed by the client.

Silverster (2020) showed that collaboration between subtitlers and authors is high on the agenda, with the former being given the opportunity to regularly negotiate their solutions and rates. Although the population observed is rather small, working in a somewhat exclusive segment of the industry, the outlook is very positive, which is partly attributed to the direct relationship between the stakeholders, the greater agency of the subtitlers and the absence of intermediaries, such as LSPs, in the workflow.

By investigating production processes and technologies and paying special attention to the making of quality in the platform subtitling industry, Artegiani (2021) maps out current professional subtitling practices from different standpoints. Part of the added value of this study resides in the broadening of the concept of subtitling quality to embrace not only the final translation output but also processes, environments, working conditions, and social actors. To be able to consider all these multiple factors and their interconnectedness, the scholar adopts an ethnographic approach based on observation of actual working practices at an AVT company as well as interpretation of the feedback obtained from semi-structured interviews with a sample of freelance professional subtitlers. Based on the results, the platformisation of the industry seems to have brought about a certain level of unsustainability in the subtitling ecosystem, perceived in the fragmentation of subtitling tasks which does not require the employment of well-rounded subtitlers able to perform all tasks and can thus lead to professional deskilling in the long-term. The centralisation of the whole audiovisual production workflow through a restricted and controlled technological environment allows LSPs and content creators to maximise their translation labour resources but has the downside of preventing subtitlers from communicating freely and associating with one another, thus potentially curtailing their agency and alienating them.

In one of the few research projects conducted with AVT professionals outside of Europe, Pidchamook (2021) sets out to investigate a subtitle production network in the over-the-top (OTT) industry in Thailand through the perspective of freelance subtitlers. By adopting a qualitative longitudinal research design, whereby a dozen subtitlers were interviewed every six months over a period of two years (2017-2019), the scholar mapped the evolution of the network, focusing on the way in which the work practices are influenced by both human and non-human actors in the network and on how the subtitlers' perception of quality is influenced by changes occurring in the network. The various factors triggering these changes are considered to be either obstructive (tighter deadlines, reduced remuneration, frequent changes of project coordinators, lack of communication and transparency) or facilitating (integration of machine translation (MT), enhanced subtitling platforms and tools, improved provision of support materials, and more frequent feedback). However, as most of these factors are driven by vendors rather than by subtitlers, practitioners are left with little scope for negotiation. The adoption of machine translation (MT) and the consequent reduction in rates have compelled some experienced subtitlers to exit the industry, and certain

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

commissioners appear to disregard the wellbeing of subtitlers, prioritising non-human agents such as cloud-based platforms, tools, and procedures.

Firat (2021), in his PhD dissertation, examines how the digital economy reshapes translation work, with particular attention to platformisation, algorithmic management, outsourcing, and the growing role of intermediaries in organising translators’ labour. Drawing on qualitative data from professional translators working in digitally mediated markets, the study highlights worsening working conditions characterised by income insecurity, intensified time pressure, reduced autonomy, and limited transparency in pricing and evaluation mechanisms. This study is particularly relevant to the present survey as it offers a structural and technology-oriented perspective that helps explain many of the working-condition patterns identified in the quantitative data, especially those related to precarity, power imbalances, and evolving labour relations in platform-mediated AVT.

Künzli (2022) conducted a survey on the working conditions of freelance subtitlers in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Acknowledging that the industry has experienced substantive changes in recent years, the study investigates the professionals’ perceptions of the impact that these changes are having on their labour environment. After nineteen respondents replied to an email interview, the overall theme detected was the subtitlers’ disillusion with the profession due primarily to the precarity of conditions, the acceleration of production processes and the virtualisation of collaboration. They also raised their concerns about quality, in particular the unavailability or low-quality of working materials, the entry of unskilled subtitlers in the market, the replacement of established local subtitling guidelines by international ones and the irruption of machine translation. On the upside, the rising demand for subtitled content and large volume projects guarantees a stable flow of work, technical improvements facilitate some of the subtitlers’ tasks and solidarity among practitioners is strengthening as evidenced by the blossoming of professional associations focused on AVT.

More recently, Caseres (2023) has investigated the workflows, tasks, and interactions of subtitlers in French fansubbing and commercial subtitling contexts, placing emphasis on the concepts of community and production networks. When it comes to industry subtitling, the researcher includes introductory and retrospective semi-structured interviews with seven English to French subtitlers working for cinema and video on demand (VOD) platforms as well as observation of each subtitler’s workday, in a similar fashion as Beuchert (2017). The results yielded by this newfangled investigation largely align with previous studies depicting a rather dispirited pool of professionals who complain about the lack of recognition for their role in society and fear a decline of their working conditions. The scholar calls for a deeper understanding of the current social dynamics governing the subtitling profession, which she considers pivotal to effectively address challenges to effective collaboration, which in turn can impact working conditions and, ultimately, subtitle quality.

Collectively, these studies foreground some of the more pressing issues in the AVT industry and contribute to a better understanding of the workplace since, as highlighted by Tuominen (2021, p. 87), contexts can be highly idiosyncratic and “subtitlers may engage in different working practices depending on location, client, training, available tools, and many other factors”. Highly valuable data can, of course, be retrieved from these very diverse linguistic contexts, highlighting somewhat different but also strikingly similar realities of the subtitling

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

market, processes and workflows in what is increasingly becoming a truly global industry led by ever larger corporations. Many of these findings are not unique to the AVT realm and have been echoed in recent research conducted by scholars in other translation and interpreting fields (Courtney & Phelan, 2019; Moorkens, 2020). Yet, these studies rely mostly on qualitative methods that target a relatively limited number of participants, are geographically and/or linguistically restricted, and take a synchronic snapshot of the situation.

Against this background, a collaborative initiative with AVTE was launched to capture an overview of subtitlers’ professional profiles, their working environments, and their views on the challenges and realities of their profession. Responding to Künzli’s (2023) call for longitudinal and large-scale empirical data, the present study aims to contribute to filling this gap by providing a comparative, pan-European perspective that captures the diversity and complexity of contemporary AVT labour, although it should be noted that the present discussion is based on a synchronic analysis and therefore does not, at this stage, constitute a longitudinal investigation

3. Methodology and profile of respondents

The online survey was developed over several months in early 2022. Its design balanced comprehensiveness with accessibility to encourage participation from busy professionals. The initial version was piloted among AVTE’s Executive Committee, and their feedback informed revisions to ensure clarity, and relevance. The final questionnaire contained 35 predominantly closed questions, organised into four sections[1]. However, we have focused on 27 questions in this paper that we consider the most relevant. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, questions have been numbered between 1 and 27.

The first one focused on participants’ personal and professional background and was made up of seven questions. Section two, the largest one, made use of 15 questions to find out about working conditions. Copyright and royalties were dealt with in section three, where only two questions were asked. Finally, section four contained three questions of a miscellaneous nature.

Ambitious in scope, the project sought to reach as many practising subtitlers across Europe as possible through an online questionnaire hosted on SurveyMonkey and disseminated through AVTE’s social media channels and professional networks, between June and September 2022. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with participants able to withdraw at any time. A total of 1,966 individuals initiated the questionnaire. After excluding 83 responses from outside Europe and 42 from countries with fewer than ten participants, to preserve statistical validity, the final dataset comprised 1,841 respondents from 23 European countries (Figure 2). A minimum of ten respondents per country was established as the threshold required to compute basic descriptive statistics and enable country-level comparisons. This criterion represents a compromise between statistical stability and sample retention, as higher

[1] https://zenodo.org/records/18375003

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

thresholds would enhance representativeness but substantially reduce country coverage. Of the 1,841 respondents, 1,200 completed the questionnaire in full, providing a robust basis for reliable inferences about the working conditions of audiovisual translators in Europe while partial responses were retained and analysed where appropriate to maximise analytical value.

The educational profile (Q1) underscores the specialised and highly educated nature of the AVT workforce. 69.3% of respondents held a master’s degree or higher, 25.1% held a bachelor’s degree, and only 5.6% had completed secondary education as their highest qualification. This educational pattern mirrors earlier findings (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo, 2018; Nikolić, 2022) and reinforces the view that AVT attracts individuals with advanced academic training, well equipped to navigate the technical, linguistic, and cultural complexities of audiovisual material. However, as subsequent sections reveal, higher education does not necessarily translate into higher earnings.

When asked about their main target language (Q2), the largest groups reported translating into French (15.9%), Castilian Spanish (12.2%), and English (10.1%), followed by Italian (8.0%), German (6.4%) and European Portuguese (5.1%). All remaining target languages accounted for less than 5% each, as illustrated in Figure 1:

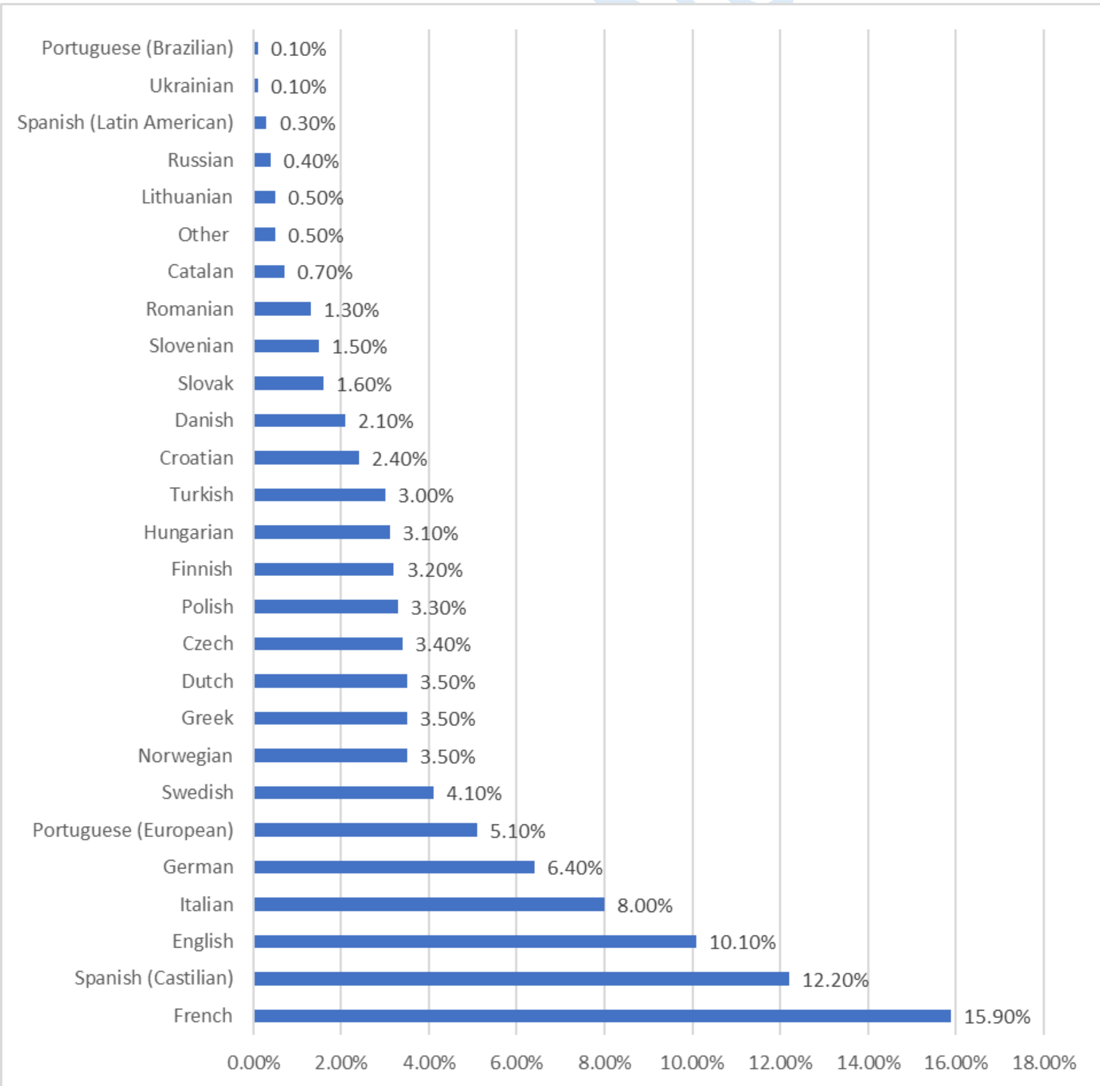

Figure 1. Main target language of translators

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the survey results in accordance with the sequence of questions in the questionnaire. Although means or medians are reported for Likert-scale items for descriptive purposes, these variables are ordinal in nature, and the reported averages should be interpreted as summary indicators rather than as precise measures of distance between response categories. Given that participation varied across items, the total number of responses differs from one question to another. All chi-square tests were conducted using all available responses for each analysis, with cases containing missing data on a given question excluded from the respective analyses. The statistical analyses were exploratory in nature and aimed to identify potential patterns and associations in the data rather than to test a priori hypotheses. Descriptive findings are complemented with interpretive discussion aimed at contextualising emerging patterns within the broader landscape of AVT as a profession. For clarity, the discussion is divided into five thematic subsections.

4. 1. Professional practices (Q3-Q8)

As shown in Figure 2, the largest shares of participants reported their fiscal residency (Q3) in France (*N*=337; 18.3%), Spain (*N*=262; 14.2%), Italy (*N*=148; 8%), and Germany (*N*=117; 6.4%). These four countries, commonly referred to in the industry as the FIGS markets, are characterised by large populations, dynamic audiovisual sectors, and well-established professional associations. Together, they account for nearly half the dataset, underscoring their structural weight within the European AVT landscape:

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

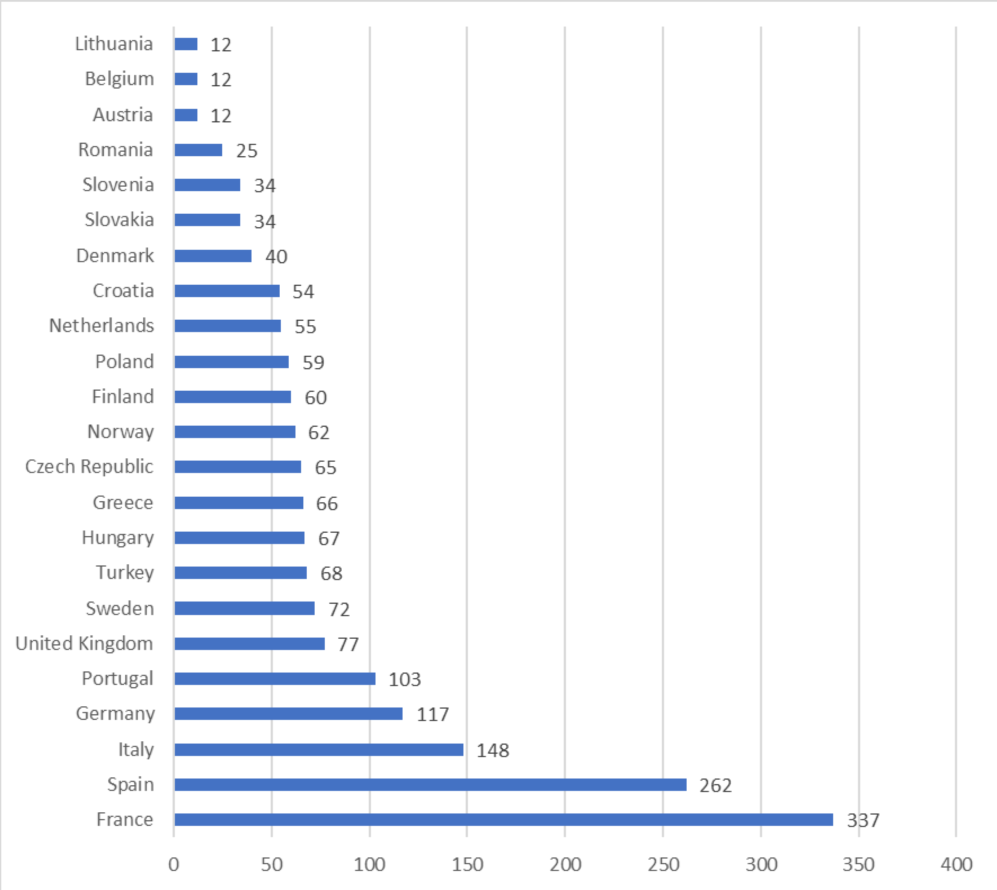

Figure 2. Respondents' fiscal residency

Interestingly, only 77 participants (4.2%) reported being domiciled in the United Kingdom, despite 10.1% listing English as their primary target language. As respondents were not asked to specify their strongest working combination, this discrepancy suggests that a considerable proportion of native English-speaking professionals conduct their work outside of the UK; or, more plausibly, that a significant number of practitioners translate into a non-native language, specifically English. Further research is required to ascertain the implications of this shift for translation quality and professional role perception.

In terms of professional income (Q4), respondents reported that, on average, 75.8% of their annual earnings derives from AVT, confirming that most participants view it as their primary occupation, rather than as a secondary or supplementary activity. This finding suggests a relatively specialised professional profile, which is consistent with the industry's increasing demand for dedicated expertise.

The profession also exhibits a relatively experienced workforce, with respondents reporting an average of 11.4 years (*SD*=9.17) in the field (Q5). Over half (50.9%) have more than eight years of professional experience, pointing to a mature and stable workforce. However, cross-country discrepancies are pronounced. Indeed, as illustrated in Figure 3, translators in the Netherlands (19.4 years), Denmark (18 years) and Slovenia (16.9 years), followed by France (15.3), Norway (14.4 years) and Finland (14.4 years) report the longest average experience, whereas those in Lithuania (2.8 years) and Austria (5.3 years) indicate the shortest, reflecting uneven market maturity and professional longevity in our sample across Europe:

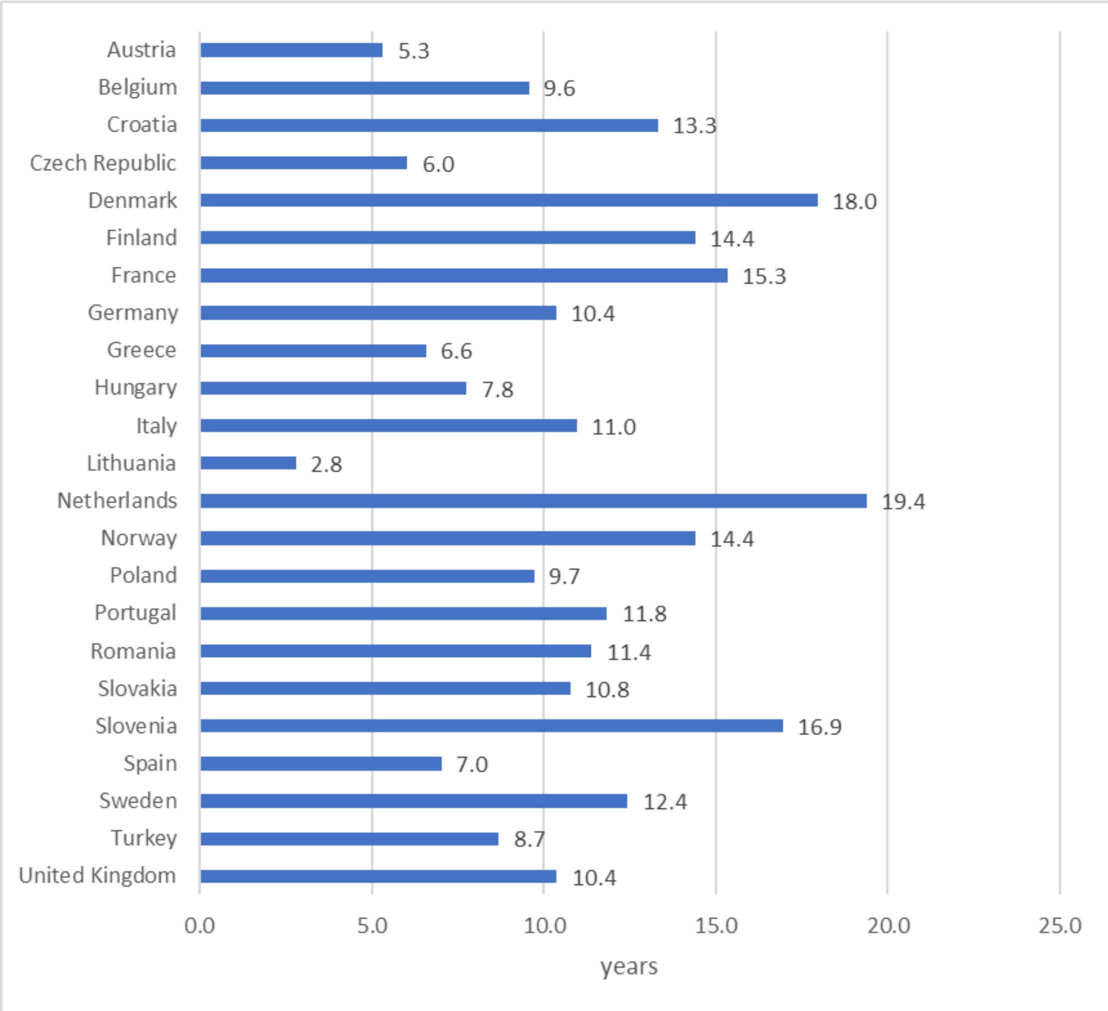

Figure 3. Years of work as AVT translator

Regarding specialisation within AVT (Q6), 70.8% of respondents focus on a single domain, while 29.2% indicated regular activity across multiple domains. This trend suggests a market structured around specialisation that often encourages professionals to develop expertise in one dominant service. Of those who predominately work in a single domain (Q7), subtitling is the prevailing speciality (74.9%), followed by dubbing (14.3%), voiceover (4.1%) and game localisation (3.2%). Other specialities such as subtitling for people who are d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing, audio description and screenplay translation are chosen by 1% of respondents or less.

In terms of contractual employment (Q8), the profession is overwhelmingly freelance, with 95.5% respondents reporting being freelancers or self-employed and only 4.5% being on salaried positions. The dominance of freelancing confirms the persistence of a project-based, outsourced model in AVT that limits job security and access to social protections.

4. 2. Working for clients and access to social protection (Q9-Q15)

When asked whether they work primarily for local or international clients (Q9), 48.6% reported that work came from local clients (including local branches of international companies), 38.9% from international clients, and 12.5% reported an even division between the two categories. This distribution suggests that while many AVT professionals operate in a globalised market, national markets continue to play a significant role in sustaining employment. Figure 4 shows a more granular distinction according to countries:

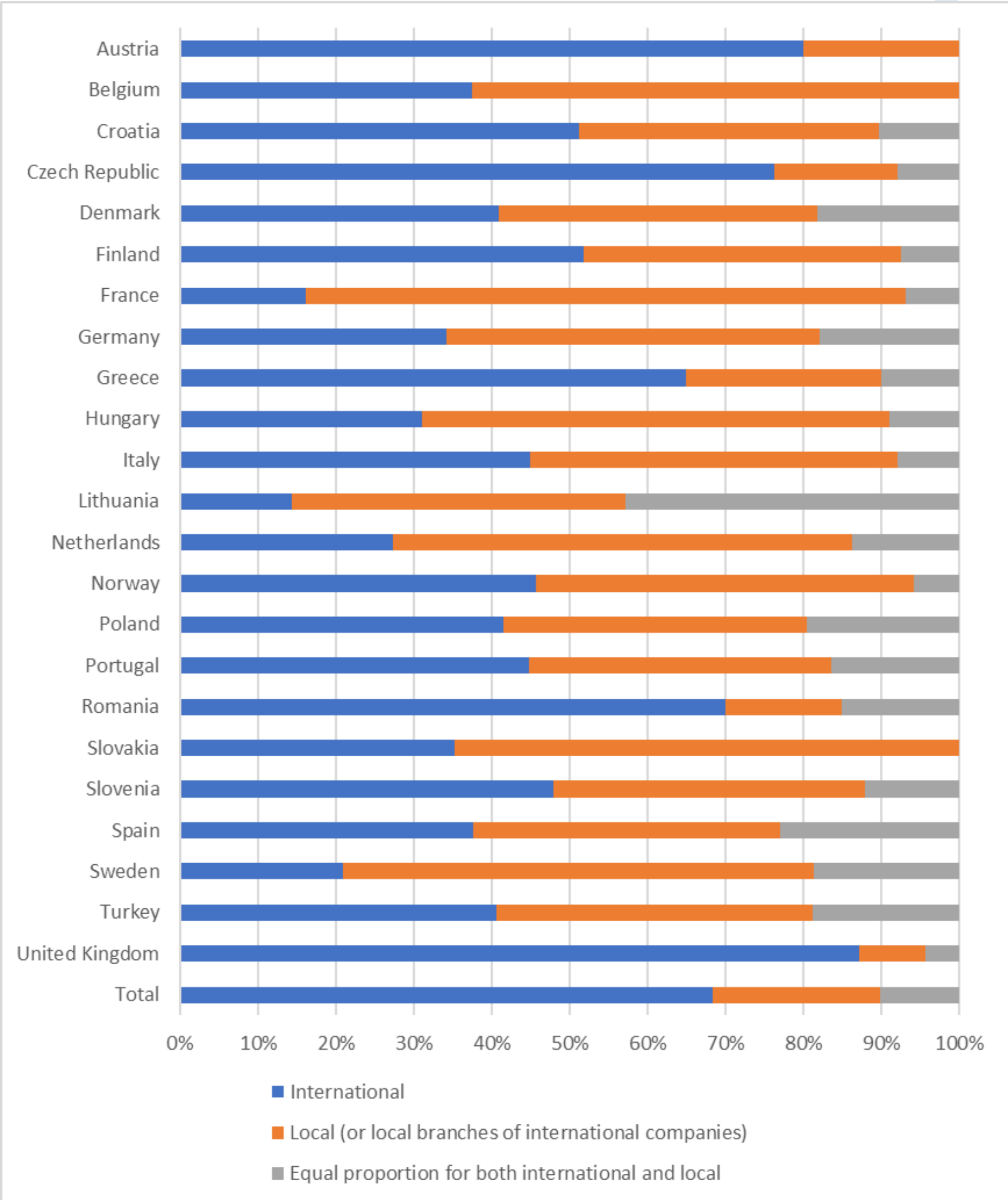

Figure 4. Local vs. international clients

From the chart, countries like France (76.9%), Slovakia (64.7%) and Belgium (62.5%) stand out with a high proportion of local clients, suggesting a strong domestic focus in their business environments, whereas the UK (87.2%), Austria (80%) and the Czech Republic (76.3%) rely heavily on international clients. Translators dependent on international clients often face both expanded opportunities and heightened vulnerability, as they must adapt to transnational pricing standards and remote workflows.

Intermediation remains a defining feature of AVT. Respondents were asked (Q10) to rate, on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always), how often they work directly for end clients (e.g., producers, broadcasters, game developers) versus through intermediaries like language service providers (LSPs). 43.4% reported never working for end clients, while only 6.2% always do. Their average responses by country are illustrated in Figure 5, with Slovakia a clear outlier and a score nearly double that of many peers. One possible explanation is that Slovak AV translators in this study may include those working for the public broadcaster, which, as in some other European countries, can provide more direct assignments, or for film festivals, which can also offer work directly to translators without going through agencies.

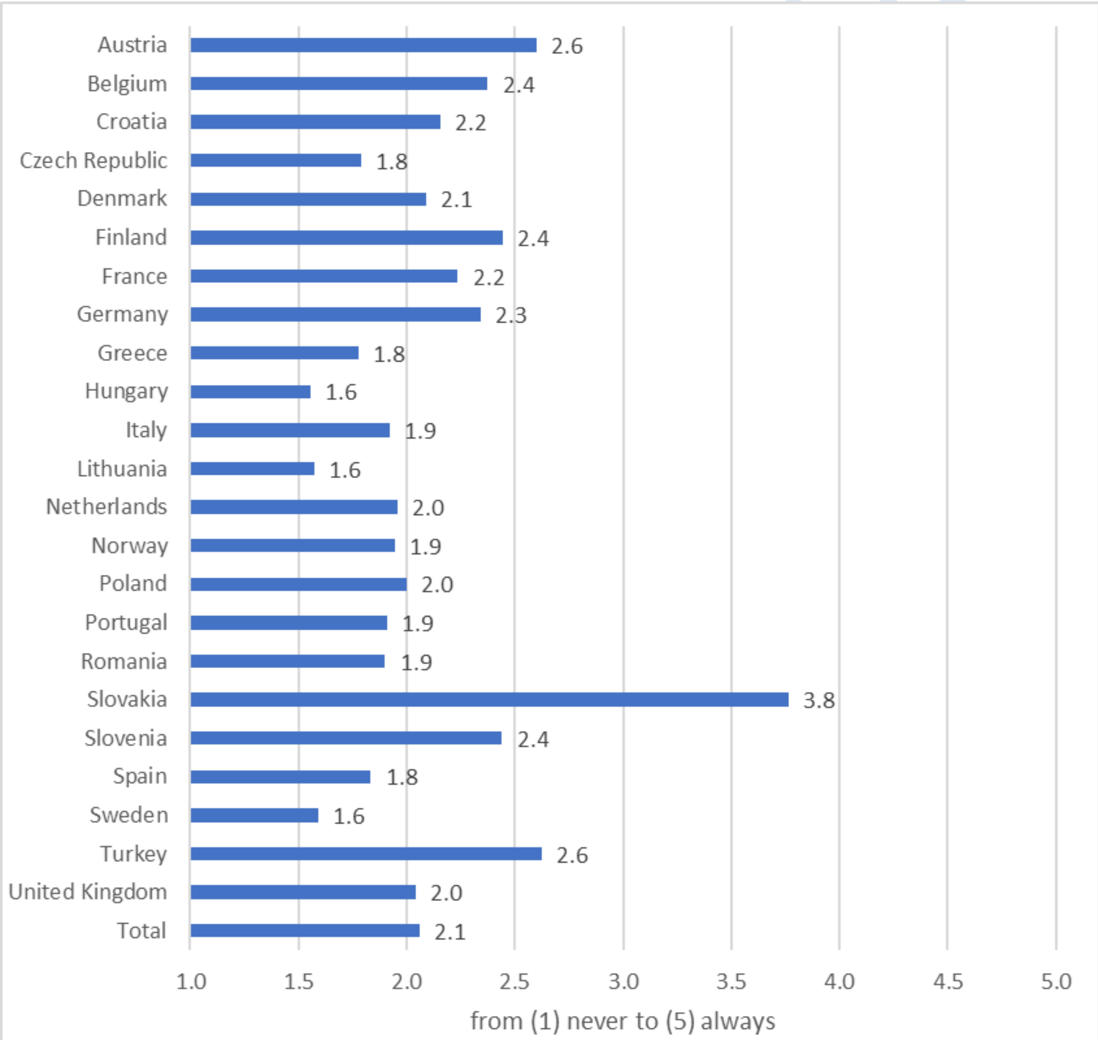

Figure 5. Frequency of working for end clients by country

The above data indicate that most translators operate through LSPs, who exert considerable control over pay rates, turnaround times, and quality standards. The resulting loss of direct negotiation power significantly constrains professional agency.

Access to unemployment schemes was explored through Q11, which asked respondents whether they benefit from such support mechanisms. While 63.7% reported being eligible for such schemes and 14% indicated that they were not eligible, what is particularly concerning is that 22.3% of practitioners were unsure of their eligibility status. This significant level of uncertainty highlights the opacity of social protection schemes for independent workers and the widespread lack of information regarding eligibility criteria.

Time-off patterns indicate sustained overwork. When asked how much annual leave they typically take (Q12), 53.4% participants take three weeks or less and 33.2% enjoy two weeks or fewer, well below the European average of 25 days, or five weeks, of paid holidays, excluding public holidays.[2]

In Q13, respondents were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always), how often they work long hours and weekends. The results, illustrated in Figure 6, reveal that such practices are widespread across Europe, with mean scores of 3.62 for extended working hours and 3.53 for weekend work:

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

[2] https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/which-country-eu-has-most-annual-holidays

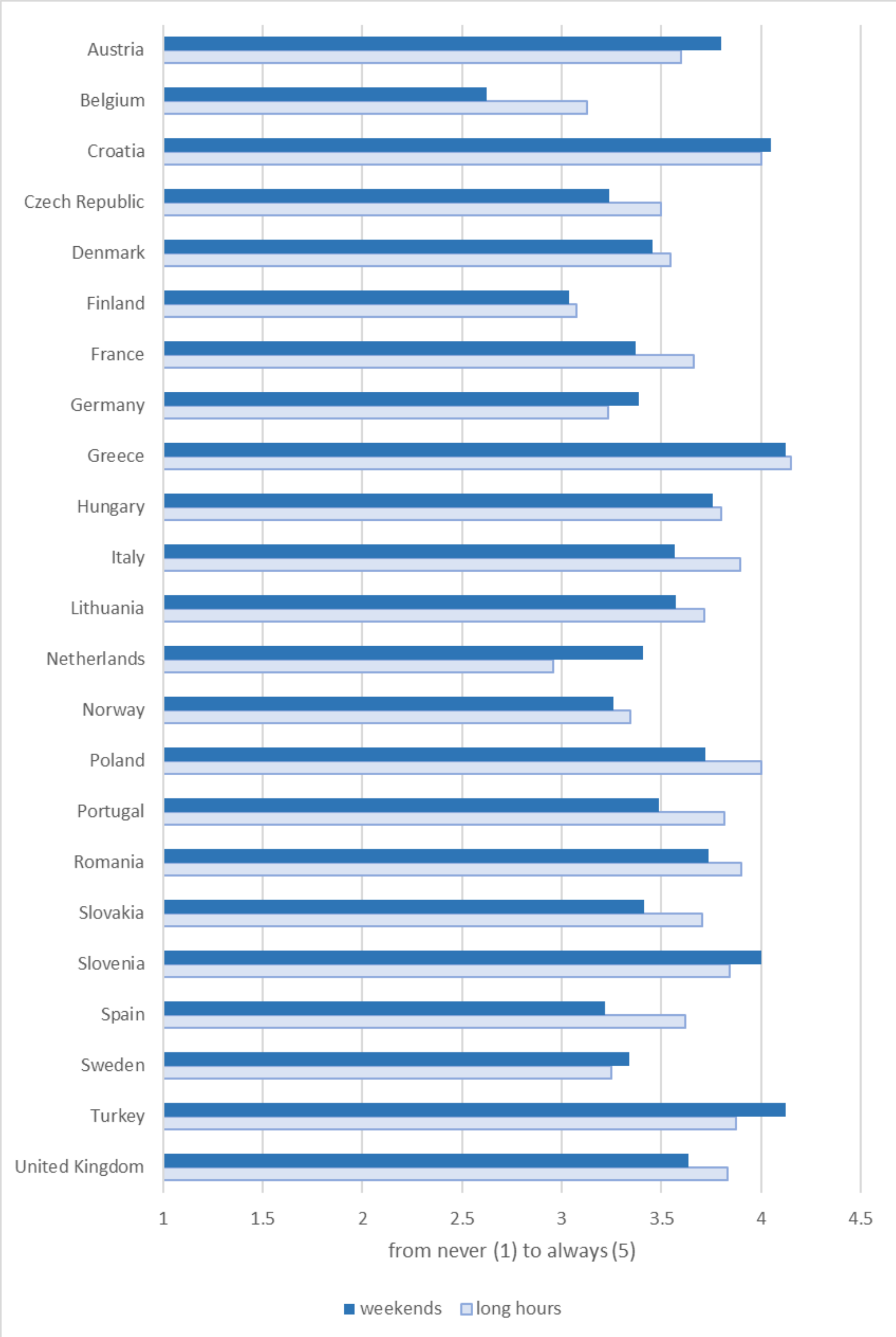

Figure 6. Working long hours and weekends

These figures reinforce qualitative accounts of client expectations encroaching on personal time, often driven by tight deadlines. The prevalence of extended and irregular working hours raises important questions about work-life balance, family wellbeing, mental health, and the long-term sustainability of freelance translation careers.

Q14 examined how many hours per week respondents devote to secondary activities related to AVT, such as finding new clients, invoicing, and bookkeeping. As shown in Figure 7, many participants spend a substantial amount of time on these essential yet unpaid tasks. Mean reported hours for total sample was 2.97:

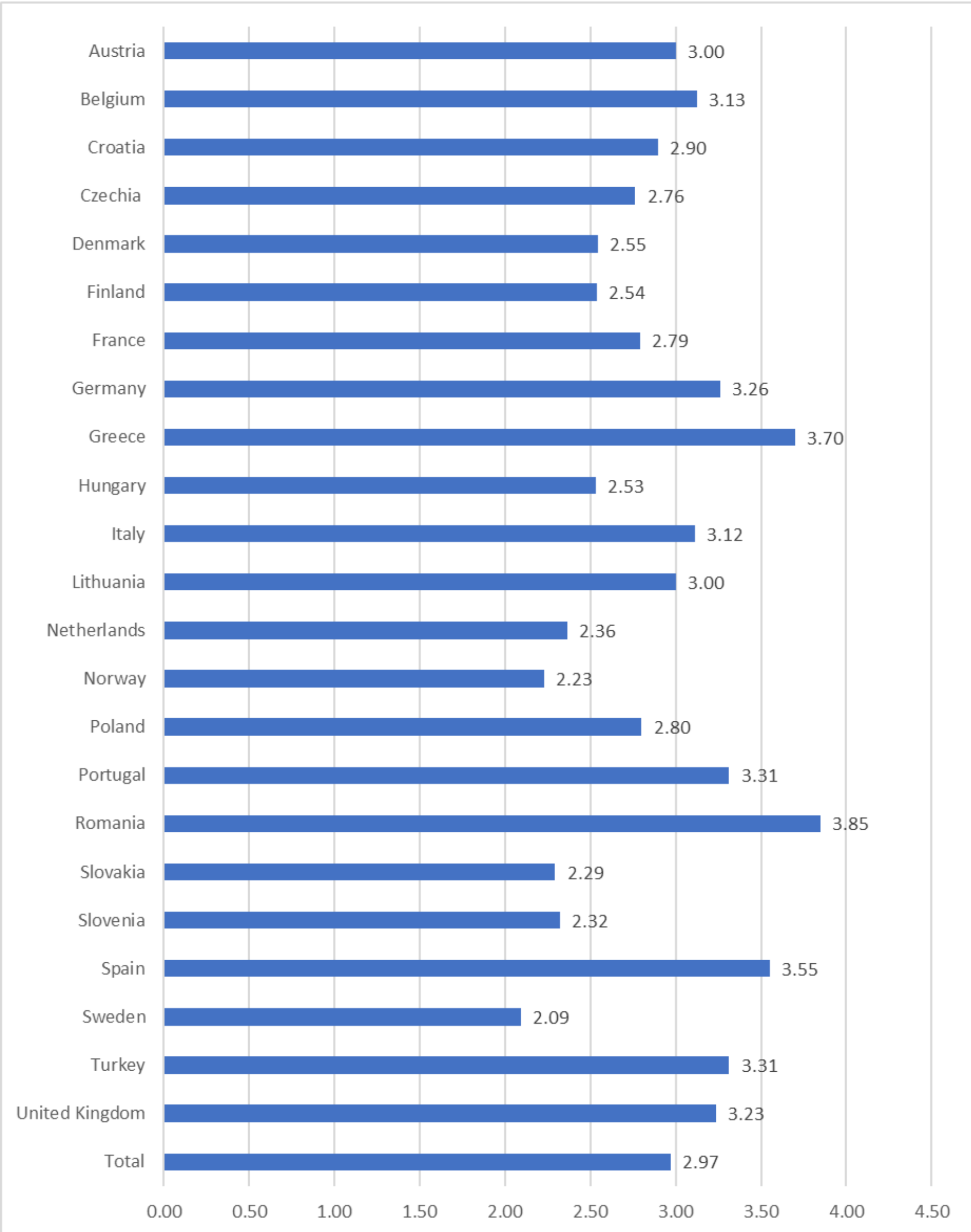

Figure 7. Average hours spent working on secondary activities by country

Asked whether they include administrative work and time off when calculating their rates (Q15), responses reveal a critical gap in pricing practices. Specifically, two-thirds (66.7%) fail to incorporate such activities into their rate calculations, effectively undervaluing their labour and perpetuating income instability. This gap underscores the need for greater financial literacy and professional training in sustainable freelance management.

4. 3. Income and its determinants (Q16-Q18)

Income disparities emerge as one of the most salient findings. Q16 invited respondents to compare their net income after taxes, assuming a 35-40-hour workweek, to the median wage in their respective countries. The data contained in Figure 8 reveal notable income differences: despite the fact that 69.3% of respondents hold a master's degree or higher, 62% reported earning at (24.4%) or below (37.6%) the national median, while only 38% earned above it. These results confirm the economic fragility of the AVT sector, even among highly qualified professionals.

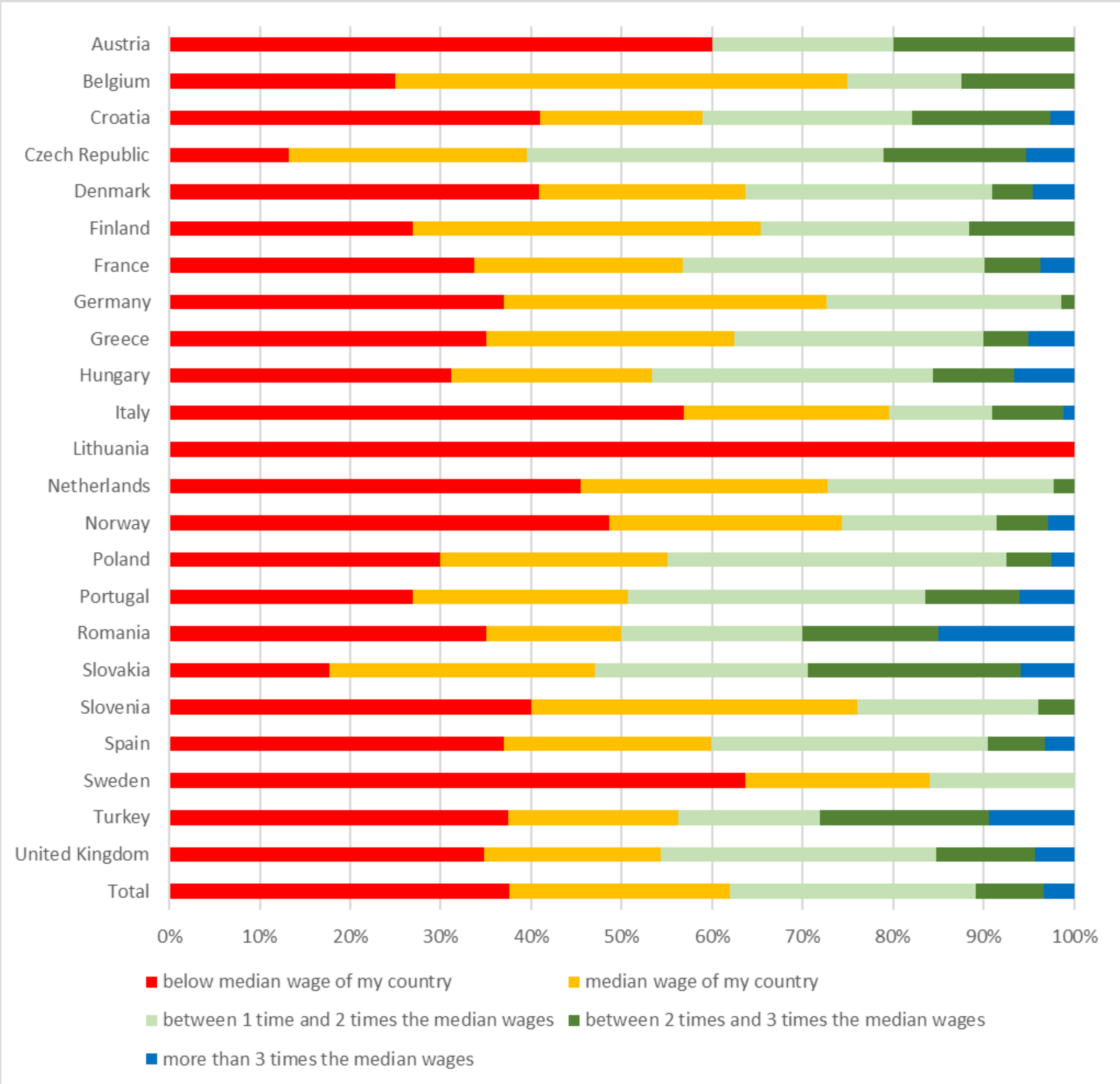

Figure 8. Net income compared to median wage

To contextualise the findings from Q16, income data were cross-referenced with responses to other survey questions, to explore how professional and demographic factors, such as educational level (Q1), years of experience (Q5), area of specialisation (Q7), client location

(Q9), and client profile (Q10), may influence earning potential. By examining these intersections, the analysis aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the financial realities of audiovisual translators and to identify patterns or factors that may contribute to income disparities within the profession.

Analysis of educational attainment (Table 1) revealed that, despite 69.3% of respondents holding an MA or higher degree, no significant relationship was observed between level of education (Q1) and earnings (χ^2=17.2; df=12; p>.05). Notably, substantial shares of MA (62.1%) and PhD (49.1%) holders earned at or below the national median. These findings underscore a disconnect between advanced academic credentials and financial returns in the AVT profession.

	Level of education				
	High school	BA	MA	PhD	Total
Below median wage of my country	33.3%	40.6%	37.3%	32.1%	37.7%
Median wage of my country	35.0%	22.3%	24.8%	17.0%	24.4%
Between 1 time and 2 times the median wages	18.3%	24.8%	27.8%	37.7%	27.0%
Between 2 times and 3 times the median wages	10.0%	6.8%	7.7%	7.5%	7.6%
More than 3 times the median wages	3.3%	5.4%	2.5%	5.7%	3.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0 %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0 %

Table 1. Level of education across wage categories

To assess how professional experience (Q5) influences income levels, participants were grouped into three cohorts: (1) less than five years, (2) six to nineteen years, and (3) twenty years or more, as shown in Table 2:

	Years as AV translator			
	Less than 5	6 - 19	More than 20	Total
Below median wage of my country	42.6%	35.9%	34.3%	37.7%
Median wage of my country	26.9%	23.2%	23.0%	24.4%
Between 1 time and 2 times the median wages	22.3%	28.8%	30.1%	27.0%

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Between 2 times and 3 times the median wages	5.5%	8.3%	9.2%	7.6%
More than 3 times the median wages	2.7%	3.8%	3.3%	3.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0 %	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2. Years of experience as AV translator across wage categories

Years of experience showed a modest influence on income levels. Among translators with less than five years of experience, 42.6% earned below the national median, compared to 35.9% of those with six to nineteen years, and 34.3% of those with over twenty years. Conversely, the proportion earning more than twice the national median rose from 8.2% among early-career professionals to 12.1% among the most experienced. At first sight, income thus seems to increase slightly with professional experience, particularly among those earning between two and three times the median wages. However, a chi-square test found no statistically significant relationship between years of experience and income (χ^2=13.5; *df*=8; *p*>.05), suggesting that pay rates remain largely standardised regardless of skill or tenure. This lack of correlation may stem from industry practices, as many LSPs offer uniform rates to audiovisual translators, regardless of their experience or years in the profession, thereby limiting opportunities for substantial income progression.

The survey also examined whether income levels among translators vary according to their primary area of specialisation (Q7), whether subtitling, dubbing, voiceover, audio description, or game localisation, and whether diversification across multiple practices influences earnings. Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in income based on predominant specialisation (χ^2=23.3; *df*=28; *p*>.05), suggesting that neither focused expertise nor diversification across specialisations yields a measurable impact on income.

By contrast, two variables significantly influence income levels: client geography and direct client relationships. A statistically significant difference emerged when comparing translators’ income depending on the location of their primary clients, whether local or international (χ^2=47.6; *df*=8; *p*<.01; Cramér’s *V*=.14), as shown in Table 3:

	Client profile			
	Internatio nal	Local (or local branches of international companies)	Equal proportion for both international and local	**Total**
Below median wage of my country	30.2%	43.5%	37.5%	37.6%
Median wage of my country	22.7%	23.6%	32.6%	24.4%

Between 1 time and 2 times the median wages	29.6%	26.1%	22.9%	27.1%
Between 2 times and 3 times the median wages	11.9%	4.6%	5.6%	7.6%
More than 3 times the median wages	5.5%	2.1%	1.4%	3.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0 %

Table 3. Client geography across wage categories

Individuals working predominantly for international clients were more likely to earn above their national median wage than those serving local clients, with 11.9% of international-focused translators earning between two and three times the median compared with only 4.6% of those serving local clients. Conversely, 43.5% of translators working directly for local clients reported earnings below the national median, highlighting the relative economic advantage of engaging with global markets. Yet, while international work may offer higher financial returns, it is also associated with greater competition and variable pricing structures, thus reflecting the complex dynamics of the AVT labour market.

Finally, a weak but significant association can also be observed between working directly with end clients (Q10) and higher earnings (χ^2=36.2; *df*=16; *p*<.01; Cramér’s *V*=.09). Indeed, translators who never or rarely interact directly with clients were more likely to earn below the median, whereas those who frequently or exclusively maintained direct client relationships reported higher incomes. These findings indicate that economic advantage derives not from formal credentials or experience, but from strategic positioning within the market and the ability to bypass intermediaries.

Two additional questions helped contextualise income relative to everyday costs. In Q17 (Fig. 9), respondents were asked to estimate the number of minutes of audiovisual material they need to translate to cover the average monthly household expenditure for one adult in their country:

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

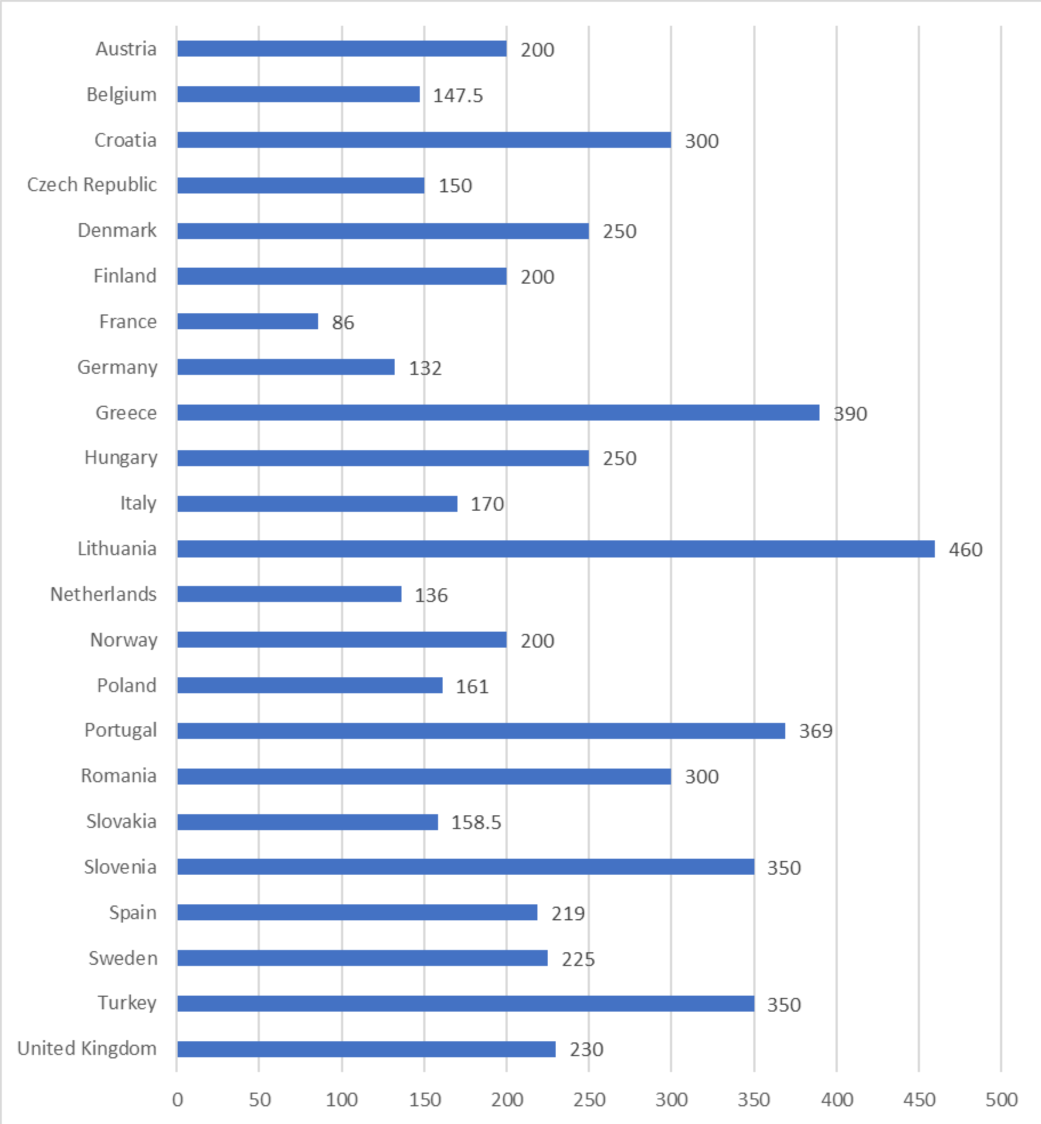

Figure 9. Median minutes of audiovisual material

needed to be translated to cover basic expenditure by country

As expected, the results reveal substantial variation across Europe, reflecting differences in national living costs and remuneration rates. In countries such as France (86), Germany (132), and the Netherlands (136), translators reported needing to translate fewer than 140 minutes to meet basic living costs, suggesting higher pay per minute or more favourable economic conditions. Conversely, respondents from countries such as Lithuania (460), Greece (390), Portugal (369), Slovenia (350), and Turkey (350) required between 350 and 460 minutes, pointing to lower compensation rates relative to living costs. These disparities underscore the uneven economic landscape of AVT across Europe and highlight the challenges faced by professionals in lower-income regions striving for financial sustainability.

Q18 explored the minutes of audiovisual material that translators typically need to translate to afford a basic monthly Netflix subscription (€7.99), offering a tangible benchmark for income-to-effort ratios across countries. The results across countries are contained in Figure 10:

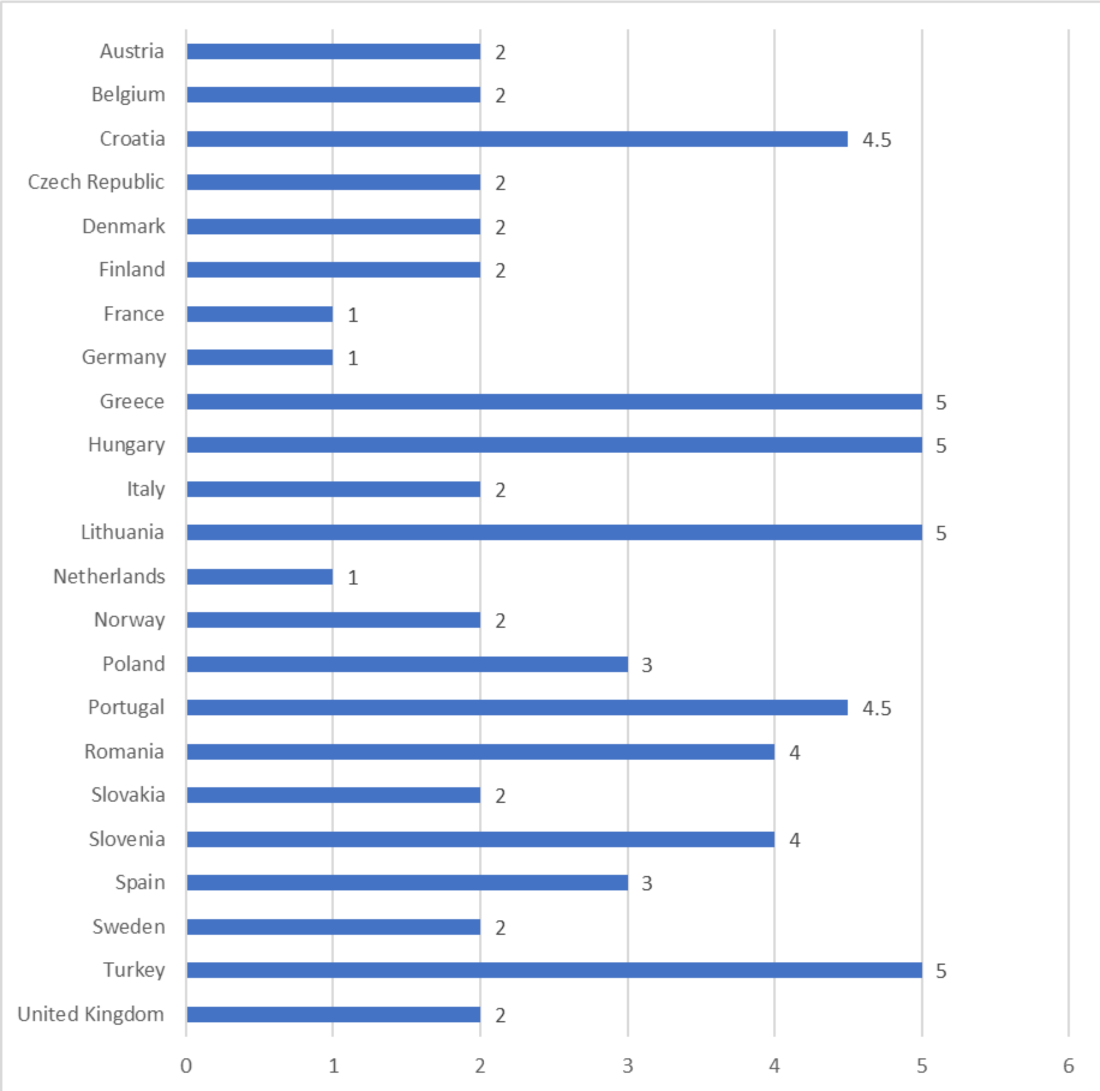

Figure 10. Minutes of audiovisual material

needed to be translated to cover Netflix subscription

Median of total reported minutes is 2, although a more granular approach reveals stark disparities. In higher-income countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Germany, professionals reported needing to translate one minute, suggesting relatively strong compensation rates. In contrast, respondents from countries like Turkey, Lithuania, Hungary, and Greece often required five minutes of translation work to cover the same cost, highlighting significant income gaps and underscoring broader regional inequalities in the AVT sector.

4.4. Rate negotiation, contracts, and professional organisation (Q19-Q24)

Professional agency is closely linked to translators' capacity to negotiate rates and formalise agreements. Diversification of clients is a common strategy for mitigating professional precarity, as reflected in responses to Q19, "For how many clients do you regularly work?". The data indicate that most freelancers avoid reliance on a single client, with 84.9% working for more than one and 53.9% maintaining relationships with two or three clients. While such diversification can reduce financial vulnerability, it also introduces additional administrative and organisational responsibilities.

Q20 examined how frequently translators negotiate their rates, offering insight into professional agency and market dynamics. The data in Figure 11 show that while a majority of respondents (58.8%) engage in rate negotiation at least occasionally, a notable proportion (41.2%) rarely or never do so:

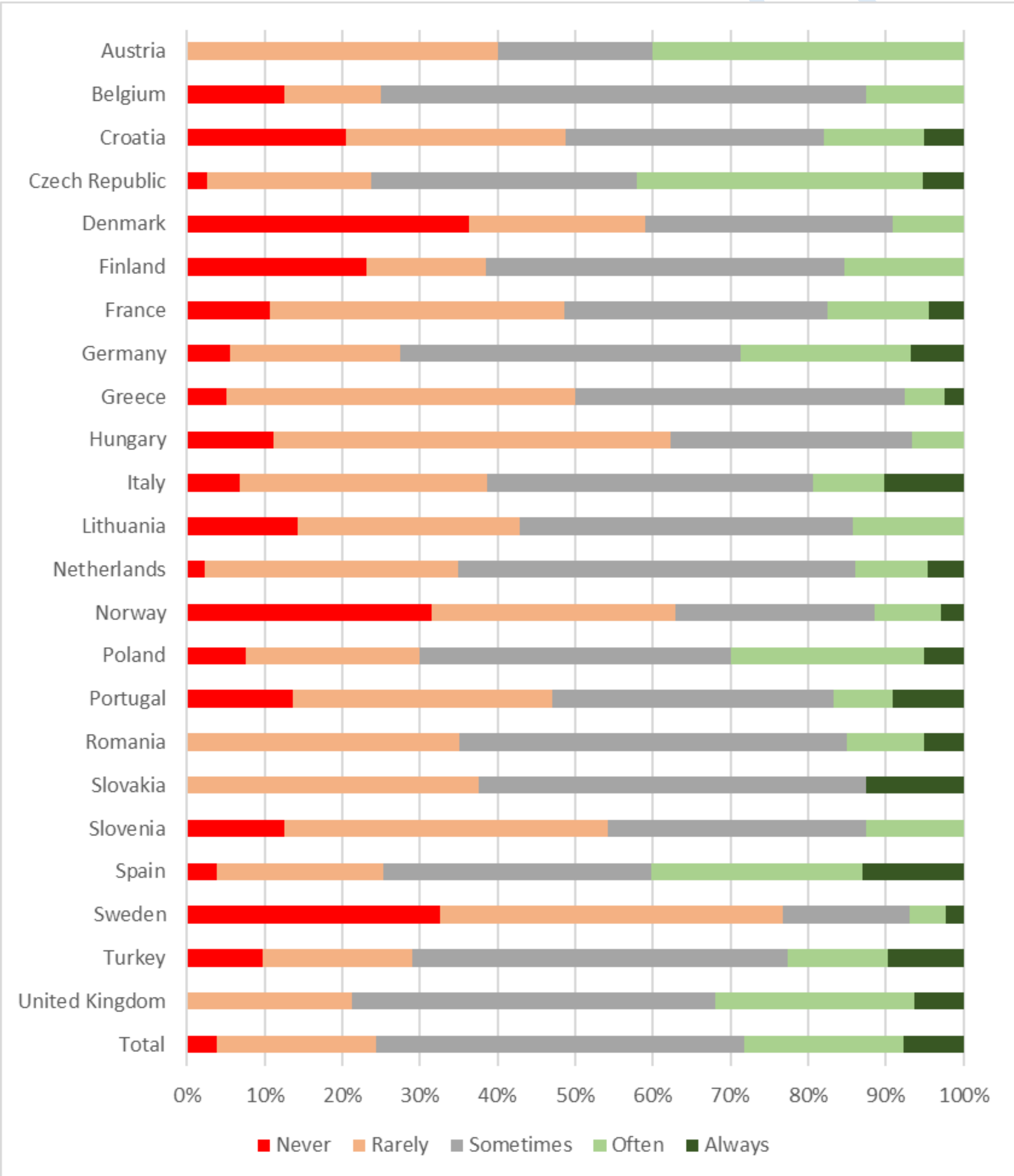

Figure 11. Rate negotiation per country

This pattern suggests disparities in bargaining power, confidence, access to opportunities across the profession, or reluctance to challenge established pricing norms, the established fees paid to freelancers, which are usually set by LSPs. A more granular enquiry of the data shows that regular negotiation, measured by the percentage of respondents who often or always negotiate their rate, varies markedly by country. Higher rates of negotiation are observed in the Czech Republic (42.1%), Spain (40.3%), and Austria (40%), whereas Hungary (6.7%), Greece (7.5%), and Sweden (9.98%), exhibit notably lower levels.

Contractual practices remain inconsistent. In response to Q21, which asked whether they sign any form of written contract with clients, 41.4% reported that they do so regularly, while for 42.6% it depends on the client. A significant minority (15.9%) work entirely without a contract (Fig. 12):

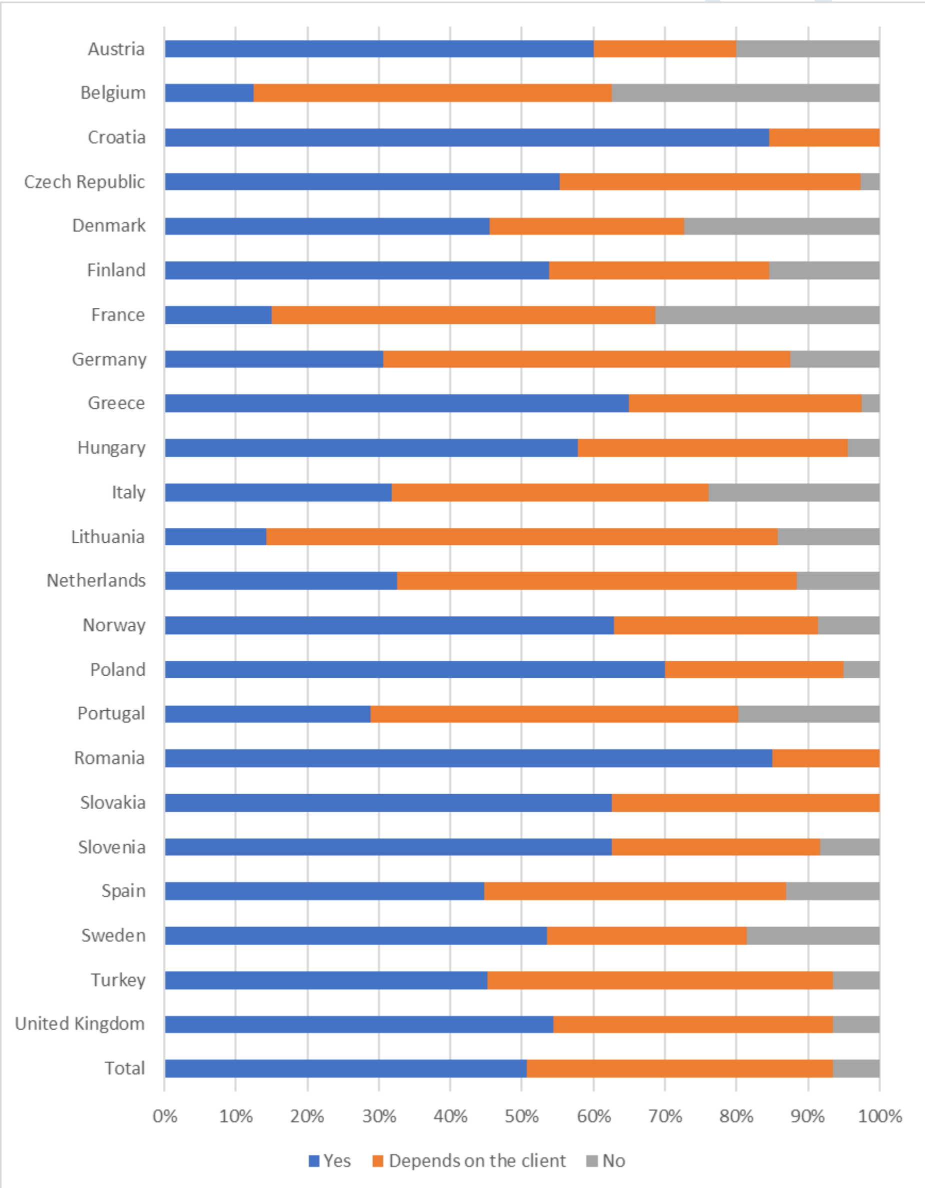

Figure 12. Signing contracts with clients

Cross-country differences are striking. In some contexts, such as Romania (85%) and Croatia (84.6%), contracts are nearly universal, while in Lithuania (71.4%), Germany (56.9%), and the Netherlands (55.8%) whether a contract is signed depends on the client to a large extent. In many countries, practices are highly mixed, with no single approach dominating. These patterns highlight not only the diversity of arrangements across Europe but also the persistence of insecure, informal working conditions in parts of the sector.

Further insight into contractual practices is provided by Q22, which examined the types of agreements most commonly signed by translators. As displayed in Figure 13, non-disclosure agreements, which legally bind translators to keep client information confidential, are the most prevalent (42.7%), followed by service agreements (30.6%), which outline the terms, scope, and remuneration for the work provided, and authors' rights contracts (16.8%), which govern the ownership and usage of the translator's intellectual property. A small minority (1.6%) reported working under other forms of contract while 8.3% did not provide an answer, likely reflecting the share of professionals who do not formalise their work through written agreements. The low prevalence of rights-based contracts reveals the limited penetration of copyright frameworks intended to safeguard translators' intellectual ownership.

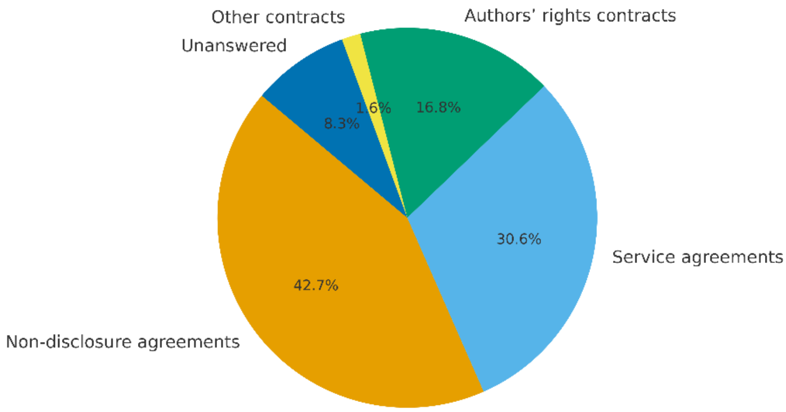

Figure 13. Types of contracts

The survey reveals a notable gap between translators' awareness of authors' rights and the actual implementation of related contractual protections. Although 88% of respondents reported being familiar with the concept (Q23), only 16.8% had ever signed an authors' rights contract. This disparity highlights the limited practical reach of formal legal safeguards and underscores the ongoing vulnerability of translators in asserting and securing their intellectual and professional rights.

To explore potential factors influencing this situation, respondents were asked whether they belonged to a national organisation of audiovisual translators (Q24). Slightly more than half (53%) reported being members, while 47% were not. Awareness of authors' rights was found to vary significantly depending on professional affiliation: 93.2% of members were familiar with the concept compared to 81.6% of non-members, a difference confirmed to be statistically significant (χ^2=38.0; *df*=1; *p*<.01; Cramér’s *V*=.18). This suggests that institutional membership plays an important role in promoting legal literacy and reinforcing professional standards within the sector. Nevertheless, despite higher awareness levels among members, the rate of formal contract adoption remains remarkably low across all groups.

To assess whether professional affiliation correlates with financial status, income data were cross-referenced with membership status (Table 4):

	National organisation member		
	Yes	No	Total
Below median wage of my country	34.3%	42.5%	38.0%
Median wage of my country	25.4%	22.9%	24.2%
Between 1 time and 2 times the median wages	29.8%	23.5%	26.9%
Between 2 times and 3 times the median wages	6.8%	8.0%	7.4%
More than 3 times the median wages	3.7%	3.1%	3.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4. Membership of a national organisation vs wage categories

Among translators affiliated with a national organisation, a smaller proportion (34.3%) earned below their country’s median wage compared with non-members (42.5%). Conversely, a higher share of members (40.3% vs. 34.6%) reported earning more than the median wage. Statistical analysis confirms a significant difference in income distribution between members and non-members (χ^2=10.5; *df*=4; *p*<.05; Cramér’s *V*=.10). These findings suggest that professional membership is associated with modest but tangible economic advantages, possibly reflecting the benefits of collective representation, access to information, and stronger professional networks within the AVT field.

This economic divide is further echoed in professional behaviour since, as illustrated in Table 5, members of professional associations are more likely to negotiate their rates often (18.2% vs. 11.7%) and less likely to never negotiate (9.3% vs. 11.5%) compared to non-members:

	National organisation member		
	Yes	No	Total

Never	9.3%	11.5%	10.3%
Rarely	31.8%	29.7%	30.9%
Sometimes	35.7%	39.5%	37.4%
Often	18.2%	11.7%	15.2%
Always	5.0%	7.6%	6.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5. Membership of a national organisation across negotiation rate frequency

This behavioural pattern aligns with broader survey findings, which reveal a statistically significant difference in negotiation tendencies (Q20) between the two groups (χ^2=13.5; *df*=4; *p*<.01; Cramér’s *V*=.11), suggesting that professional affiliation may not only influence earnings but also empower translators to advocate more effectively for fair compensation.

4.5. Self-perceptions (Q25-Q27)

To gain insight into translators’ lived experiences, participants were invited in Q25 to describe their working conditions in five words. Their responses have been synthesised into the word cloud presented in Figure 14, which provides a compelling snapshot of their perceptions:

Figure 14. Words that best define participants’ working conditions

The term “underpaid” appears most prominently, indicating widespread concern over inadequate remuneration. Closely following is “stressful”, a descriptor that may seem paradoxical given the presumed flexibility and autonomy associated with freelance work. However, the prevalence of this term likely reflects underlying pressures such as stringent deadlines, inconsistent workloads, income instability, and the absence of institutional

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

support, factors that collectively contribute to a heightened sense of professional precarity. Descriptors such as "precarious", "unpredictable" and "exhausting" further reinforce this picture of instability and fatigue, encapsulating the emotional and economic vulnerabilities that define much of the contemporary AVT profession. Although the survey did not solicit detailed qualitative explanations, the relative scarcity of positive descriptors such as "flexible", "creative", and "independent" suggests that, for many respondents, while autonomy remains a valued aspect of freelance work, it is overshadowed by economic and emotional strain. Interestingly, one of the participants remarked, "You get what you fight for", encapsulating the resilience and self-advocacy often required to navigate such an uncertain professional landscape.

Survey responses to Q26, which explored participants' satisfaction with their working conditions, reveal a general sense of moderate dissatisfaction, with an average rating of 2.53 (*SD*=0.99) on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). This overall assessment suggests that many translators perceive their professional environment as falling short of desirable standards in terms of stability, compensation, and workload balance. The sentiment is further echoed in Q27, where respondents indicated whether they would recommend the profession to newcomers or students. The resulting mean score of 2.61 (*SD*=1.06) conveys a tone of cautious ambivalence, pointing to a profession that inspires both pride and frustration, valued for its creative potential yet burdened by systemic and economic constraints.

Based on our findings, with almost 2000 participants, audiovisual translators, from across Europe, we have reached the following conclusions.

5. Conclusions

This study provides the first large-scale, data-driven overview of audiovisual translators' working conditions across Europe. It offers a nuanced portrait of the profession, revealing a highly educated and experienced workforce operating within structurally precarious conditions. Despite widespread professional dedication, income levels remain modest relative to national median wages, and neither advanced qualifications nor extensive experience in the field reliably guarantees improved remuneration. While the survey does not definitively establish how translators respond to evolving work environments, the data suggests that those who actively negotiate rates and contracts, diversify their client base, by working directly with end clients, access international markets, and engage with professional associations tend to report more favourable working conditions. These findings underscore the importance of adaptability and professional awareness in mitigating the challenges inherent to freelance AVT work.

Despite the intellectual and creative rewards associated with the profession, respondents expressed ambivalence regarding their overall satisfaction with their working conditions. The average rating of 2.53 out of 5 for working conditions, and 2.61 for recommending the profession to newcomers, reflects a sector grappling with low remuneration, limited

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

recognition, and increasing demands. These concerns are consistent with Ruokonen and Mäkisalo’s (2018) study in Finland, which identified audiovisual translators as having the most negative professional profile among literary, business, and AV translators. The prominence of terms such as “underpaid” and “stressful” in the language cloud in Figure 14 further illustrates the perceived instability and undervaluation of the profession.

The freelance nature of AVT work compounds these challenges. Freelancers face uncertainty regarding future projects, lack access to collective bargaining mechanisms, and are excluded from some social protections. National associations, while valuable for professional development, do not function as trade unions and therefore lack the mandate to negotiate on behalf of their members. This structural vulnerability is echoed in broader industry analyses. Carreira (2023) highlights the concentration of market power among the top ten LSPs, which control 60% of the industry and leave individual practitioners with minimal leverage to influence their working conditions. Moorkens (2020) found similar patterns among Irish-language interpreters, noting a combination of high educational attainment, concerns over declining remuneration, and apprehension about the impact of automation. These observations align with the present study, which identifies a correlation between higher education levels and increased fears of automation, as well as perceptions of a worsening financial situation. Similarly, the European Council of Literary Translators’ Associations (CEATL, 2022) survey of just under 3000 literary translators across Europe identifies parallel issues related to freelancing, royalties, and contract enforcement. These studies suggest that while translators may derive intrinsic satisfaction from their work, external pressures on the economic and technological fronts pose significant threats to the profession’s sustainability.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Conducted in 2022, it captures a specific historical moment marked by pandemic recovery and economic turbulence rather than a longitudinal analysis. Future research should incorporate extended timelines to capture evolving trends, especially in light of external factors such as the cost-of-living crisis and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, which many respondents perceive as a threat to their professional viability. Moreover, the use in this study of snowball sampling and social media recruitment may have introduced bias, potentially amplifying the voices of more dissatisfied practitioners. To address this, future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches, combining surveys with interviews and focus groups, to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of audiovisual translators. Although this survey focuses on Europe, comparative research across global markets would be valuable in contextualising these findings and identifying region-specific challenges and opportunities.

By documenting current realities and identifying pathways for reform, this study aims to inform both policy and professional advocacy toward a more equitable future for audiovisual translators. Ultimately, the sustainability of the AVT profession depends on recognising translators as integral contributors to the cultural and creative industries, and the results of this survey should serve as a resource for stakeholders, including LSPs and end clients, to promote a well-balanced, rewarding profession. Without fair remuneration, enforceable contracts, and access to social protections, the sector risks losing skilled professionals whose expertise underpins the global circulation of audiovisual culture, which, in turn, would have

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

implications not only for translators themselves but also for the broader media ecosystem and its audiences.

References:

Abdallah, K. (2012). *Translators in production networks: Reflections on agency, quality and ethics* [Doctoral dissertation].

Abdallah, K. & Koskinen, K. (2007). Managing trust: Translating and the network economy. *Meta*, *52*(4), 673–687.

Artegiani, I. (2021). *Production processes and technologies: The making of quality in the platform subtitling industry* (PhD thesis). Roehampton University, London.

AVTE. (2023, August 5). The letter of support to the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. https://avteurope.eu/2023/08/05/avte-statement-of-support-of-the-wga-and-sag-aftra-strikes

Beckett, L. (2023, July 13). Hollywood actors announce strike in first joint action with writers in more than 60 years. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/13/hollywood-actors-union-recommends-strike-as-talks-deadline-passes

Beuchert, K. (2017). *The web of subtitling: A subtitling process model based on a mixed methods study of the Danish subtitling industry and the subtitling processes of five Danish subtitlers* [Doctoral dissertation].

Carreira, O. (2023). Market concentration in the language services industry and working conditions for translators. *Perspectives, 32*(5), 889–904. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2023.2214318

Caseres, S. (2023). *Processes and collaboration in French subtitling: A translator-centred analysis of two production contexts* [Doctoral dissertation].

CEATL. (2022). *Survey on working conditions of literary translators in Europe.* European Council of Literary Translators’ Associations. https://www.ceatl.eu/survey-on-working-conditions-of-literary-translators-in-europe

Courtney, J., & Phelan, M. (2019). Translators’ experiences of occupational stress and job satisfaction. *The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research, 11*(1), 100–111. https://doi.org/10.12807/ti.111201.2019.a06

Fırat, Gökhan (2021). *Translation Work in the Digital Economy* [Doctoral dissertation].

Kirov, V., & Malamin, B. (2022). Are translators afraid of artificial intelligence? *Societies, 12*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12020070

Künzli, A. (2023). How subtitling professionals perceive changes in working conditions: An interview study in German-speaking countries. *Translation and Interpreting Studies, 18*(1), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.20107.kun

Kuo, S.-Y. A. (2015). Professional realities of the subtitling industry: The subtitlers’ perspective. In R. Baños Piñero & J. Díaz Cintas (Eds.), *Audiovisual translation in a global context: Mapping an ever-changing landscape* (pp. 163–191). Palgrave Macmillan.

Moorkens, J. (2020). Comparative satisfaction among freelance and directly-employed Irish-language translators. *The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research, 12*(1), 55–73. https://doi.org/10.12807/ti.112201.2020.a04

Nikolić, K. (2010). The subtitling profession in Croatia. In J. Díaz-Cintas, A. Matamala, & J. Neves (Eds.), *New insights into audiovisual translation and media accessibility. Media for All 2* (pp. 99–108). Rodopi.

Nikolić, K. (2022). *Report on the survey on working conditions of audiovisual translators in Croatia conducted in November and December 2021.* Croatian Association of Audiovisual Translators. http://dhap.hr/Content/Survey_among_subtitlers_Croatia_26_01_2022.pdf

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Pidchamook, W. (2021). *Freelance subtitlers in a subtitle production network in the OTT industry in Thailand: A longitudinal study* [Doctoral dissertation].

Ruokonen, M., & Mäkisalo, J. (2018). Middling-status profession, high-status work: Finnish translators' status perceptions in the light of their backgrounds, working conditions and job satisfaction. *Translation & Interpreting, 10*(1), 1–17.

Ruokonen, M., & Svahn, E. (2024). *What do we know about translators' job satisfaction? An exploratory overview of research results. Translation Spaces, 13*(1), 7–31.

Silvester, H. (2020). Working conditions and collaborative practices in the translation of French film: Subtitling *Banlieue* cinema. *Perspectives, 30*(3), 399–414. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2021.1903517

Tuominen, T. (2021). A subtitler's eye: Multimodal meaning construction in Finnish subtitlers' descriptions of their work. In C. Martín de León & G. Marcelo Wirnitzer (Eds.), *En más de un sentido: Multimodalidad y construcción de significados en traducción e interpretación* (pp. 85–100). Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT