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POLICY ANALYSIS · MARCH 2026

EPSO'S AD5 DILEMMA: VICTIM OF THEIR OWN SUCCESS?

András Baneth · EU Training · eutraining.eu

174,000+

candidates registered

~50,000

originally projected

~2,235

EUFTE evaluation target

1,490

reserve list target

01 THE PROBLEM

The AD5 Graduate (Generalist) competition is EPSO's flagship competition and the main gateway into the European civil service, open to anyone holding a university degree. More than **174,000 candidates registered** — several times the originally projected ~50,000 (with 80,000 considered an absolute upper-end outlier). Actual participants are likely to remain well above 120,000 even accounting for no-shows. This is not simply “more candidates”: the operational, legal, and fairness problems it creates grow **disproportionately** with scale.

DILEMMA 1

Quality ↔ Scale

The tests best suited to selecting the right candidates are the hardest to run at this volume.

DILEMMA 2

Fairness ↔ Feasibility

Running all tests for 120,000+ creates fairness risks of its own across test days, IT, and assessor load.

DILEMMA 3

Legal Safety ↔ Operational Reality

Staying within current rules may be operationally undeliverable. Amending them creates new legal exposure.

02 HOW THE CURRENT MODEL WORKS

Under the current NoC, **all candidates sit all tests** — including the EUFTE (Free-Text Essay on EU Matters), scored by human assessors. A preliminary combined score — verbal reasoning (40%) + EU Knowledge (30%) + Digital Skills (30%) — then determines ranking. The EUFTE response is evaluated and eligibility checked **in parallel** for the top ~2,235 candidates in that ranking (the Selection Board may extend this for tied scores). Numerical and abstract reasoning tests are threshold-only — pass or fail, not scored for ranking.

The calibration trap: Thresholds on verbal, EU Knowledge, and Digital Skills determine who enters the composite ranking — but small shifts in average scores can move that number by tens of thousands. Set too low: far too many qualify for EUFTE evaluation. Set too high: too few qualify, creating legal risk from unreasonably demanding standards. **A ranking-based hard cap solves this by fixing the volume upfront.**

03 THE THREE PATHS EPSO FACES

0 CURRENT MODEL

No NoC amendment needed.
All candidates sit everything. Batching over multiple days is possible but calibrating who reaches EUFTE evaluation is structurally very hard.

A STAGED THRESHOLDS

NoC amendment required.
Tests split into Part 1 (reasoning) and Part 2 (EU Knowledge, Digital Skills, EUFTE). Only Part 1 passers sit Part 2. Reduces load — but volume remains hard to predict.

B RANKING FUNNEL

NoC amendment required.
Reasoning tests rank all candidates. Hard cap: only top 4,500–9,000 proceed. EU Knowledge and Digital Skills for Stage 2 only. EUFTE evaluation for ~2,235. Every number set in advance.

04 THE CASE FOR REASONING-BASED RANKING

Under the current NoC, verbal reasoning already contributes 40% to the preliminary ranking. The key question is whether **numerical and abstract reasoning should also contribute to ranking**, rather than remaining purely pass/fail. A composite reasoning score (verbal + N+A) would provide greater granularity and is the only instrument meeting all three Stage 1 criteria at 120,000+ participants:

Professionally designed question banks

Large enough to run reliably across 10–12 days at 10,000–12,000 per session without security risks.

Standardised & scalable

Fully standardised, deliverable remotely, proven at very large candidate numbers.

Generally equitable

More so than unstructured methods. Caveat: some literature notes Language 1 verbal tests may understate ability for candidates less fluent in their chosen Language 1.

Four scoring options for Stage 1:

Option	Mechanism	Volume control	Verdict
1 — Raise thresholds	Increase per-test minimum scores. Small raises pass most; high ones filter significantly.	Partial	Insufficient alone
2 — Raise composite cutoff	Higher combined V+N+A threshold; individual pass marks unchanged. Weaker test offsets stronger one.	Smoother	Not ideal
3 — Ranking only	Rank all by score; top X proceed; no minimum threshold.	Precise	Viable but sensitive
4 — Threshold + ranking + cap ★	Per-test pass mark → combined score → ranking → hard cap. At this scale, the threshold does little practical filtering — its value is legal and psychometric.	Full control	Best overall

05 POLITICAL RISKS & OPEN QUESTIONS

HIGH RISK

“This reduces EU Knowledge weight”

EU Knowledge (30%) and Digital Skills (30%) form 55% of the preliminary ranking. Path B removes them from Stage 1, provoking the argument that substantive knowledge is replaced by abstract aptitude.

HIGH RISK

Legitimacy challenges from excluded candidates

Candidates below the ranking cut-off may argue arbitrary outcomes. Some literature raises Language 1 verbal test concerns — not established for EPSO specifically, but weighting must be carefully documented.

MEDIUM RISK

Italian nationals: a structural problem in every scenario

~45% of registered candidates are Italian nationals (~78,300 of 174,000+). Proportionate advancement draws displacement claims; below-proportionate draws exclusion claims. The question is how to make the process legally robust enough that any outcome can be defended.

1 Can the ranking approach survive the political objection that it reduces EU Knowledge weight? What framing, process, or stakeholder engagement would be needed?

2 Is there a design variant giving meaningful weight to EU knowledge early enough to satisfy critics, while still achieving the volume control the situation demands?

3 How should EPSO handle the national distribution imbalance? Is there a transparency mechanism making outcomes defensible regardless of direction?

4 What is the institutional decision-making timeline? If the Management Board cannot agree quickly, delay itself becomes the de facto choice — with consequences for the 2026 calendar.

EPSO may not be choosing between good and bad options. It may be choosing between different sets of trade-offs. Mid-September 2026 is the earliest realistic start date. Every week of indecision narrows the options further.

Analysis by Andrés Baneth, EU Training (eutraining.eu) - March 2026. With thanks to Rita Revy, László Zlatarov, Ben Williams, Adam Idrissi, John Harper, Luc Gillis and others. Not official EPSO communication.

You may see a more detailed presentation here: [EPSO AD5 Graduate Competition | Dilemma & Analysis | Andras Baneth](#)

Best wishes,

Raúl Trujillo Herrera

TAO-The Independents
www.taotheindependents.eu

