

# From recognition to officialisation

*A European evolution of sign language rights*

Editor:

Alexandre Bloxs



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**Alexandre Bloxs (Editor)**

**European Union of the Deaf**  
Brussels, Belgium

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## European Union of the Deaf (EUD)

Based in Brussels, Belgium, EUD is a not-for-profit European non-governmental organisation (ENGO) comprised of National Associations of the Deaf (NADs). It is the only supranational organisation representing deaf people at a European level, and is one of the few ENGOs representing associations in all 27 EU Member States, as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

The primary aim of the organisation is to establish and maintain EU level dialogue with European Union institutions and officials, in consultation and co-operation with its member NADs. EUD has participatory status with the Council of Europe (CoE), operates as a full member of the European Disability Forum (EDF) as well as being a Regional Co-operating Member of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in tackling issues of global importance. EUD has a consultative status with UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Directorate General for Justice and Consumers at the European Commission financially supports the organisation.

EUD's aim is to achieve equality in public and private life for deaf people all over Europe, so that they can become full citizens in their own right. The organisation's main objectives are:

- The recognition of the right to use an indigenous sign language;
- Empowerment through communication and information; and
- Equality in education and employment.

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# Introduction

**Sofia Isari**, President of the European Union of the Deaf (EUD)

It is my privilege to introduce this volume on national sign languages within the European Union and beyond. The chapters that follow bring together legal analysis, policy insight and lived expertise to address a straightforward proposition with far-reaching implications: national sign languages are recognised languages, and the European Union should ensure they have official status recognised and used across its institutions and public life.

Across many Member States, recognition frameworks now exist. Yet, too often, recognition remains symbolic, with limited effect on how deaf people access information, services and democratic processes. This book sets out why a new paradigm should be set: Moving from the recognition to the officialisation of EU national sign languages, so that deaf citizens can interact with EU bodies in their national sign language on an equal basis with others.

The contributions clarify the distinction between recognition and officialisation, and they offer practical examples in understanding its implications in the daily lives of European deaf citizens. Furthermore, this volume offers a snapshot of the current legal frameworks surrounding the rights of deaf people at the national level. This unprecedented analysis is accompanied by tailored recommendations for meaningful reforms at the national level. These reforms aims to reinforce the legal framework protecting the linguistic human rights of deaf citizens.

This publication is the product of collaboration between scholars, practitioners and our National Associations of the Deaf. I am grateful for their diligence and for the clarity with which they set out both the current state of play and the reforms required. Their work demonstrates that progress is not only desirable but achievable, provided there is political will and administrative follow-through.

The European Union's strength lies in making diversity work in practice. Ensuring that national sign languages are meaningfully embedded in EU decision-making is integral to that ambition. I commend this book to policymakers, officials and advocates across the European Union and beyond, and I trust it will support prompt and effective action.

# Foreword

***Maartje De Meulder, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht***

Over the past four decades, legal and political recognition of national sign languages (NSLs) in Europe has moved from aspirations to concrete realities. Across the European Union, the members of the European Free Trade Association – including Norway, Switzerland and Iceland –, and the UK, NSLs now appear in constitutions, framework laws, education acts and sectoral regulations. This did not happen by accident but is the result of decades of sustained advocacy by deaf communities and their allies.

At the same time, the contributions in this volume show clearly that we have reached a new stage. Recognition, on its own, is no longer enough. We need to move from symbolic recognition of NSLs as “languages of their own” towards a more meaningful status: that of official languages, at both EU and national levels.

The first part of the book sets out the wider legal and political context in which this shift has to be understood. It places NSLs within the international human rights framework, especially the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and asks what this means for the linguistic human rights of deaf people. It then looks at the EU’s multilingualism regime, where national sign languages are still rarely treated as part of the European linguistic landscape. A helpful distinction is drawn here between NSLs as full, natural languages – which they all are – and NSLs as official languages. Only a minority of NSLs currently enjoy official status at national level, and none are recognised as official EU languages.

Part I also traces how a growing body of political commitments and soft law instruments is now creating momentum to move from recognition to officialisation. The 2016 European Parliament Resolution on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters, and the 2025 Concluding Observations of the CRPD Committee to the European Union, are particularly important. Together, they make it harder for the EU and its Member States to hide behind symbolic clauses or occasional references to sign languages. Instead, they make clear that States have concrete obligations to ensure full participation, accessibility and linguistic rights for deaf sign language users.

Within this context, Wilks’ deaf legal theory – developed in earlier work and taken up in this volume as a central analytical framework – challenges the hearing-centric assumptions embedded in EU law and policy and speaks directly to what Joseph Murray and I have elsewhere described as deaf people’s “dual category membership”. Deaf signers are simultaneously positioned as a disability group and as a cultural-linguistic minority. In that earlier work, we argued that deaf communities in practice “butter their bread on both sides”, strategically drawing on both disability and minority-language frameworks, and that insisting on only one side makes little sense. The Deaf Duality Paradox identified in this volume arises precisely where law and

policy refuse this both/and position and instead force deaf people into an either/or: as persons with disabilities or as members of a linguistic-cultural minority, but rarely fully as both at the same time. Disability-focused approaches, without a linguistic lens, risk reducing deaf people to a homogeneous group defined by hearing loss, overlooking their sign languages and cultural identities. Minority-language approaches may celebrate linguistic diversity but fail to tackle accessibility barriers and discrimination based on disability.

Against this backdrop, Part I advances a clear argument for amending Regulation 1/1958 to include the 29 EU national sign languages alongside the existing 24 spoken official languages. Officialisation is framed not as a technical update but as a structural shift: it would acknowledge that deaf people and their languages belong at the heart of the European project. Chapter 6 shows how the European Union of the Deaf uses public critique, especially through social media, to expose the democratic deficit created by excluding NSLs from the EU's official language regime and to set out a roadmap towards recognition and institutional legitimacy. Other chapters explore how NSLs sit uneasily within existing EU approaches to regional and minority languages, and why an intersectional lens – recognising both disability and minority-language status – is essential to do justice to the diversity of deaf sign language users.

Throughout Part I, one issue keeps coming back: data. Across the EU there is an acute lack of reliable data on deaf people disaggregated by their intersecting identities. When deaf people are counted at all, this is usually through narrow medical categories of hearing loss, rather than through language use, identity, or intersecting axes of inequality such as gender, race, class, or migration status. Without better data, evidence-based policies to promote and protect national sign languages remain very hard to design and evaluate.

Part II of the volume shifts the focus from EU-level frameworks to a detailed comparative analysis of national legal frameworks in 31 European countries. A central insight that emerged from this research is that the linguistic rights of deaf people cannot be captured in a single legal instrument. Instead, rights are dispersed across a range of implementing legislation and regulations that either flow from a foundational legal instrument or exist as separate, standalone measures. This leads to one of the book's key methodological choices: to examine legal frameworks, rather than individual laws, around the linguistic rights of deaf people within the EU, the EFTA, and the UK.

My earlier work, including a 2015 article in *Sign Language Studies* and the 2019 volume *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World* (co-edited with Joseph Murray and Rachel McKee), focused mainly on the existence and form of recognition: whether sign languages were recognised at all, in which instruments, and with what immediate consequences. The 2015 article introduced a first systematic classification of sign language recognition laws, distinguishing types of legal instruments. While that framework identified six categories, the present work adds a seventh: “other legislative instrument”, based on the

cases of Greece and Italy.

This new EUD volume builds directly on that foundation but moves beyond it in important ways. Part II develops clear criteria for evaluating sign language legal frameworks, drawing on World Federation of the Deaf guidelines and comparative research, and applies them consistently across countries. It considers not only whether NSLs are recognised, but also how far this recognition reaches into key domains such as education, interpreting, access to information, culture and public life. The results are both encouraging and sobering. Countries perform best where recognition appears in multiple legal instruments and is implemented across several areas of law and policy. Spain, for instance, meets all of the assessment criteria, and together with Portugal is among the few countries that explicitly link sign language recognition to anti-discrimination provisions. A small but growing number of countries recognise NSLs as part of their national cultural heritage. Many provide for the right of deaf learners to be educated in their NSL and to have sign language as a subject in school. Nearly all mention sign language interpreting in some form, and most address access to information, particularly in broadcasting and media. Yet only a minority have created dedicated national sign language councils or boards with a mandate to advise governments and monitor implementation, and significant gaps remain in many areas.

What makes this volume particularly valuable is its combination of rigorous legal analysis with very practical, country-specific recommendations. For each country, it identifies concrete steps that national associations of the deaf and other actors can take to strengthen their sign language legal frameworks. Recognition is treated not as an endpoint but as a starting point for ongoing reform, implementation and monitoring. The comparative insights from Parts I and II are translated into tools that can be used directly in national and EU-level advocacy.

Taken together, the findings from both parts of the book bring us back to a simple but crucial message: recognition is necessary, but it is not sufficient. By insisting on the difference between recognition and officialisation, by naming and confronting the Deaf Duality Paradox, and by turning legal principles into concrete, actionable recommendations, this volume marks an important step in the maturation of sign language legal scholarship and advocacy in Europe. My hope is that it will be used widely – by national associations of the deaf, policymakers, researchers and many others – to ensure that national sign languages, and the communities who use them, can fully claim their place in the multilingual and rights-based project that the European Union aspires to be.

# Acknowledgements

**Alexandre Bloxs, European Union of the Deaf and UCLouvain - Saint Louis Bruxelles**

The journey to write this book has been an epic one, full of intellectual challenges and challenging perspectives, coupled with insightful readings and enlightening conversations. From the moment I wrote my introductory words to the final paragraphs, almost two years passed. During those two years, I got the opportunity to shape this book through a collaborative process with people who share a common vision: a Europe where national sign languages are not merely recognised, but are officially valued as part of our collective linguistic and cultural heritage.

My first and most heartfelt thanks go to **Delphine le Maire**, whose meticulous research and analytical rigour shaped the second part of this book. Thank you for transforming complex comparative data into a meaningful overview of the current legal frameworks surrounding the rights to national sign languages at the national level. I am sure, your contribution will have a critical impact to the human rights of deaf communities.

To the contributors of the present book: **Filipe Venade de Sousa, Rob Wilks, Verena Krausneker, Nicolas Hanquet, Cédric Tant, and Maya de Wit**, your academic and professional contributions have enriched this work immensely. Each of you brought a distinct lens, connecting legal theory, linguistic policy, critical discourse analysis, and data-based analysis with the lived experience of deaf people in Europe. This pluralism of perspectives is precisely what gives the book its strength and will enable it to export the narrative of officialisation beyond the legal realm.

I am deeply grateful to **Maartje De Meulder**, whose foreword sets the intellectual tone of this volume. Her pioneering academic work in deciphering the various sign language legislations in Europe was critical in shaping the second part of the book. Thank you for being a contributor to the strengthening of deaf communities through academia.

The second part of the book was also built by the terrific work of the **World Federation of the Deaf (WFD)** with their Guidelines for Achieving Sign Languages Rights, which established the foundation of our minimum standards analysing National Sign Language frameworks at the national level. Your work had been an inspiration for this book. Thank you for the tireless policy and advocacy work you're doing to safeguarding our human rights at the global level.

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Last, not least, to the **European deaf community**, whose resilience, pride, and shared values as deaf Europeans living in a multilingual and multicultural region drive every page of this book. Thank you. May this book serve as both a recognition of your resilience and a contribution to the path forward: a signing European Union where National Sign Languages hold official status.

Brussels, 2025

## Chapter 1:

# Steering the course towards sign language rights: Reflections on the CRPD Committee's Concluding Observations to the EU

**Alexandre Bloxs, European Union of the Deaf and UCLouvain - Saint Louis Bruxelles**

## Introduction

On 1st April 2025, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereafter Committee) released its Concluding Observations on the European Union's (EU) implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (CRPD, 2025). These observations have unprecedented relevance for the European deaf community, as they echo long-standing calls for the official recognition of the 29 EU National Sign Languages (NSLs) as official EU languages (EUD, 2024a; CRPD, 2025, point 53(a)), as well as the need for comprehensive measures to guarantee the linguistic human rights of deaf people within the Union (CRPD, 2025, point 70(d)).

These tailored recommendations are not merely aspirational suggestions by the Committee to adopt a different approach towards safeguarding the rights of deaf people to their NSLs in the EU. Rather, they are the result of persistent, multilateral, and multistakeholder collaboration by the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) with various regional and global institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the United Nations. Being engaged with such an array of institutions is the natural consequence of EUD's consistent advocacy for the recognition, respect, and fulfilment of the linguistic human rights of the European deaf community since its establishment in 1985.

Throughout this book, EUD will be using the term "NSL" to refer to sign languages that are used by deaf communities in a specific country, and which are legally recognised as such at the national level. The recognition can happen at the national level by federal authorities, such as the case of Finland or Austria, but also at the sub-

national level such as the case of Belgium with its three NSLs, or Switzerland with its recognition taking place at the cantons level.

This chapter aims to present EUD's work and involvement during the EU's review by the CRPD Committee. It will first provide a brief historical timeline of the position of the European deaf community on the promotion, recognition, and – ultimately – the officialisation of EU NSLs. It will then outline EUD's collaborative process with the United Nations before presenting the key elements of the Concluding Observations that bring the potential to significantly enhance the rights of deaf people in Europe.

## The European Union and the UN CRPD

The reason why the CRPD, an international human rights treaty, occupies such a central place in the discourse on human rights in the EU resides in the fact that this Convention is the first and only international human rights instrument ratified by the EU. The European Union ratified the CRPD on 23 December 2010, making it the first and only regional integration organisation<sup>1</sup> to ratify it.

The scope of implementation of the CRPD within the work of the European Union has been discussed, as its implementation is limited to the areas where the EU has full competences, and leaves to Member States the implementation of provisions that are not part of their competences (Cabral, 2015). This is particularly the case of Article 24 CRPD on Inclusive Education, with education being a matter of national competencies. Indeed, Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) emphasises the responsibility of its Member States for the cultural and linguistic diversity within the education systems. Yet, the significance of the ratification of the CRPD by the EU should not be overlooked.

Following the ratification of the Convention, the EU delivered its initial State report (EU, 2014). Then, the CRPD Committee published its list of issues, which prompted the European Parliament to adopt a resolution on the list of issues adopted by the CRPD Committee prior to the adoption of Concluding Observations (CRPD, 2015). Based on the Reply of the EU to the List of Issues and on the interactive dialogue that took place in August 2015, the CRPD Committee adopted the Concluding Observations on the initial report of the European Union in 2015 (CRPD, 2015b). These concluding observations only provided weak and generic references to sign

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of regional integration organisation can be found in Article 44 CRPD, which define it as "organization constituted by sovereign States of a given region, to which its member States have transferred competence in respect of matters governed by the present Convention"

languages through accessible information and communication. However, the Committee did call for the official recognition of sign language and braille.

Building upon these recommendations, the European Union submitted its combined second and third periodic report to the European Union in 2023, following the List of Issues prior to Reporting (LoIPR) requested by the Committee (CRPD, 2022). Following the publication of the LoIPR, several European Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) published their own version of the List of Issues, highlighting and reflecting the realities of various constituencies of persons with disabilities in the EU. This has been reiterated with the alternative report, where, after the publication of the combined second and third periodic report of the EU (EU, 2023), an even larger number of OPDs published their alternatives reports. The EUD published its own responses to the LoIPR (EUD, 2022) and its own alternative report (EUD, 2024c).

After the written procedure, the European Union, headed by H.E. Ms Hadja Lahbib, Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management at the European Commission, was invited to participate in a dialogue at the UN Headquarters in Geneva. The dialogue gathered the members of the Committee, representatives of the European Union, and representatives of the European Organisations of Persons with Disabilities. Representatives of the European Parliament, the European Ombudsman and the Fundamental Rights Agency were also present among the members of the Independent Monitoring Framework (Art. 33(2) CRPD). It was under this framework that the EUD attended and contributed to this dialogue to advance the positions of the European deaf community to officialising NSLs as official EU languages.

## National sign languages in the European Union

The European Union's approach to NSLs has evolved considerably since 1958. Following the establishment of the EUD in 1985, the discourse shifted towards recognising each NSL as "a language in its own right, [which] is the preferred or only language of most deaf people," as emphasised in the 1988 European Parliament Resolution on Sign Language for the Deaf (European Parliament, 1988). A decade later, in 1998, this resolution was updated to reinforce the rights of NSL users and to mark its 10th anniversary (European Parliament, 1998).

The 1998 revision highlighted the specific needs of deaf people regarding the use of their NSL. At the time, only 4 of the 15 EU Member States, which at the time of the adoption of the resolution constituted the entirety of EU Member States, had formally

recognised their NSLs as full languages (Recital C). The resolution also addressed the lack of awareness of the diversity of NSLs, countering the misconception that deaf people share a single universal sign language (Recital I).

A turning point came in 2010, when the EU ratified the CRPD. This ratification committed the EU to safeguarding the linguistic rights of deaf people. Article 2 of the CRPD explicitly recognises NSLs as full languages, while Article 21(b) guarantees deaf people the right to access official information and to communicate with their governments in their NSL. Additionally, Article 21(e) requires States Parties to recognise and promote the use of NSLs.

That same year, the European Commission adopted the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020, which stated that “The Commission will work to [...] explore ways of facilitating the use of sign language and Braille in dealing with the EU institutions.” (European Commission, 2010). However, the strategy did not clarify whether this referred specifically to NSLs or to International Sign.

Also in 2010, the Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the EU was adopted, calling on both the EU and its Member States to ensure deaf people’s rights to use their NSLs.<sup>2</sup> This call was strengthened in 2011 through MEP Ádám Kósá’s Report on the mobility and inclusion of people with disabilities (European Parliament, 2011), alongside the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020, urged the recognition of NSLs as full languages across Member States in line with the Brussels Declaration (European Parliament, 2010).

Leaving disability policies to join the realm of multilingualism, the European Parliament reaffirmed its commitment to linguistic diversity with its 2013 Resolution on Endangered European Languages. Although NSLs were not explicitly categorised as endangered, the resolution gave further impetus to the European deaf community’s advocacy for the legal recognition of NSLs (European Parliament, 2013).

A significant milestone followed in 2016, when the Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Helga Stevens spearheaded the adoption of a resolution on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters (European Parliament, 2016). While its primary focus was on the professionalisation of interpretation in both NSLs and International Sign, the resolution also called for the “official recognition of national and regional sign language(s) in Member States and within EU institutions” as a prerequisite for ensuring the availability of qualified professional interpreters (Art. 1(a)). This was unprecedented, as it was the first time EU institutions themselves were

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2 [Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union](#)

urged to grant official recognition to national and regional sign languages.

In 2018, the European Parliament adopted another resolution, this time on Language Equality in the Digital Age (European Parliament, 2018). It reaffirmed that NSLs form an integral part of the EU's linguistic diversity (Recital A). Furthermore, it acknowledged that “there are 24 official languages and (...) under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the various state-recognised sign languages” (Recital D).

Building on these developments within the EU, the discussion subsequently gained momentum at the international level. In 2022, Dr Gerard Quinn, then UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, stated in his report on his visit to the EU that there are “some obvious issues of law reform, like the granting of official European Union language status to sign language (which already has official status in all the Member States), ought to be contemplated and put on the agenda for change” (Quinn, 2022). He has also publicly called for the EU to grant NSLs official status at the Union level.

The historical evolution of policies concerning NSLs, coupled with the adoption of our position paper on the official recognition of NSLs in 2024 (EUD, 2024a), has shaped a more refined and well-established stance for EUD before the CRPD Committee, especially at the time of the second and third periodic reviews.

## **Position of the European Union of the Deaf during the second and third periodic review**

The position of EUD throughout the whole reviewing procedure was initially broad, covering several policy areas relevant to the European deaf community, such as sign language rights, employment rights, access to healthcare, gender equality, intersectionality, data collection, and access to emergency services, among other things.

Yet, the realities of the format of the dialogue with the members of the UN CRPD Committee in Geneva necessitated that the EUD operate with a selection of priorities to be presented before the UN CRPD Committee. Each of the DPOs present in Geneva were allocated a three-minutes speaking slot, during the closed meeting with the Committee, to expose their main concerns and priorities. In this context, EUD decided to reduce its broad list of issues to three main demands:

1. The legal recognition of the 29 EU national sign languages as EU official languages, in line with Article 21(e) CRPD;
2. The respect of the rights of deaf people to use the 112 emergency number services in their national sign languages through Total Conversation, in line with Articles 11 and 32 CRPD;
3. Holding the EU accountable for its obligation to collect data disaggregated by disability in the EU, in line with Article 31 CRPD.

These three priorities were chosen due to their direct and practical impact on the rights and day-to-day lives of the European deaf community. The first demand aimed to address a foundational gap existing in the current European legislative framework regarding the provisions of the Convention. This gap has critical adverse consequences for deaf people in their interactions with the European Union, including in submitting petitions at the European Parliament and to impart information from the EU in their NSL, which directly breaches the principles of the UN CRPD.

The second priority addressed increased concern of the European deaf community towards inaccessible emergency number services at a time when the deadline for Member States to implement the European Accessibility Act (EAA) was set for June 2025 and the implementation of the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC) since December 2020 by the Member States was not achieved in terms of accessible emergency communications for deaf sign language users. As a reminder, the EAA foresees a list of products and services that must be rendered accessible by June 2025, which includes the answering of emergency communications to the single European emergency number '112' by the most appropriate PSAP (Art. 4§8). However, the EAA provides, as part of its accessibility requirements, that it must be implemented through synchronised voice and Real-Time Text (RTT) or, if video is provided, through Total Conversation (TC). RTT is a communication method that transmits text character-by-character in real time, similar to an ongoing chat. While useful for some deaf people, it relies on written language, which may be a second language for many deaf people, leading to potential misunderstandings, especially in urgent situations. In contrast, TC integrates video, text, and voice simultaneously, allowing deaf people to use their NSL in real-time, with the option to supplement with text or voice.

The third priority is related to data collection and the responsibility of the EU to fulfil its obligation under Article 31 CRPD. According to this provision, the EU has a duty to collect data disaggregated by disability. However, EUD believes that the EU should go further than the mere disaggregation by disability to add other intersecting identities such as racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, language, and socio-economic status, in line with its Statement on

Intersectionality (EUD, 2024b). This more nuanced and intersectional approach to data collection will allow to distance from the misconception of the European deaf community as a monolithic group with the same realities, but rather it will enable a full overview of the realities faced by all deaf people in all their diversity. Furthermore, it will allow the EU to shed light on the challenges faced by the most marginalised groups within the European deaf community. In the long term, it has the potential to design tailored policies and legislation that will meaningfully guarantee effective equality to all deaf people in their societies by tackling barriers to full participation. These three demands were reflected in the Concluding Observations of the CRPD Committee as explained in the next section.

## **Impact of the Concluding Observations on the European deaf community**

### **Officialisation of EU National sign languages**

The most significant highlight of the Concluding Observations is the Committee's strong call for the recognition of the 29 EU NSLs as official EU languages. Further to this, the Committee also urged the EU to amend the Rules of Procedure of its institutions to allow deaf people to interact in their respective NSLs when participating in EU-level consultations, meetings, and democratic processes. These requests are the mirroring of the position of the EUD, expressed in its 2024-released position paper on the officialisation of EU NSLs (EUD, 2024a).

Further than limiting itself to the linguistic realms, the Committee also recommended deaf culture to be recognised as part of the European cultural and linguistic landscape to meaningfully implement Article 30.4 CRPD. This request comes in line with the EU's obligation to incorporate the 29 EU NSLs as integral to its multilingualism policies.

The Committee also referred to sign languages as accessibility measures by recommending the EU to implement comprehensive accessibility measures across all its platforms, including providing sign language interpretation for all its webstreams and audio-visual content, regardless of topic, in compliance with the accessibility standards it promotes among its Member States. This is a welcome recommendation as, on the day of writing these lines, only International Sign interpretation is provided on information and communication related to disability rights, the State of the

European Union and the weekly briefing of the European Commission.

### **Accessibility of 112 in EU National sign languages**

Besides the status of NSLs and deaf culture in the EU, the Committee also emphasised its concern on the delayed implementation of the European Accessibility Act (EAA), through the inaccessibility of the 112-emergency number to deaf people (point 26(b)). This serious concern was ignited by the fact that Member States have been allowed to postpone the application of accessibility obligations until 2027 for 112, while the deadline for implementation of the rest of the provisions was foreseen for June 2025. This gave the impression that the obligation of rendering the 112-emergency number service accessible under the EAA framework is of secondary importance. Thus, the Committee called on the EU to accelerate the development of the standards setting requirements for the accessibility of emergency communications (including the 112 number). These include ensuring accessible emergency communications in NSLs through Total Conversation and guaranteeing interoperability within Member States.

The current European legislative framework – through a reading of both the EAA and the EECC – gives the possibility to EU Member States to only use Real Time Text, except if video is provided, then they are obligated to use Total Conversation. The position of EUD is to foster the use and promotion of Total Conversation as it enables the use of NSLs for deaf people.

### **Intersectional disaggregated data collection**

When it comes to data collection, the Committee strongly emphasised the importance of collecting data disaggregated by disability by EU institutions. The data is to be disaggregated by disability type and intersecting identities, such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (point 21(d)). This is of particular importance for EUD since it aligns with its Statement on Intersectionality which recognises that the lived experiences of deaf people are not monolithic. Rather, they are a patchwork of identities and lived experiences comprising their racial or ethnic origin, religion, languages, gender identity, disabilities, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, age and any other layers of identities.

### **Freedom of movement and portability of rights**

Ultimately, the final recommendation that has significant importance for the

European deaf community pertains to freedom of movement and portability of rights. Given that deaf people constitute a minority in their communities,<sup>3</sup> opportunities to fulfil their cultural, economic and social rights are somehow limited, with work and educational opportunities available in sign language not always available at the national level. Thus, deaf people have exacerbated needs and requirements to exercise their right to freedom of movement to access their cultural, economic and social rights in sign language that might not be available in their country of origin.

The main limitation in their right to freedom of movement resides in the absence of portability of their acquired social rights in a Member State when moving to another Member State, either permanently or for a long term. When the deaf person is relocating in another Member State, the administrative procedure to be registered as a permanent resident of the country, which is the precondition to be granted social rights such as sign language interpretation services, can be lengthy, sometimes taking several months. Thus, deaf people have no access to any kind of support service when in the newly relocated Member State before being registered, while the Member State of origin stopped the provision of social rights due to leaving the country. This creates a legal gap, directly contravening the right of freedom of movement outlined in both EU legal framework and the UN CRPD.<sup>4</sup>

In that regard, the Committee urged the EU to extend the portability of social protection and disability-related benefits for them, including through an expanded EU Disability Card. It calls for mutual recognition of disability status among Member States, which would allow deaf people to retain their social protection rights when relocating for work, study or family reasons within the EU for a long term or permanently.

## Conclusion

This introductory chapter highlighted the evolution of the stance of the UN CRPD Committee towards safeguarding the linguistic rights of deaf people to their NSL in the European Union. Where the Committee adopted generic and weak recommendations in its concluding observations to the first reporting cycle of the European Union in 2015, it has adopted a stronger stance, directly aligning with the positions and demands of the EUD in the concluding observations for the combined

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<sup>3</sup> The European Union of the Deaf (2023) estimates the number of deaf people in the EU at approximatively 1 million, representing 0,2% of the total population of the EU.

<sup>4</sup> Respectively article 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, article 45 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and article 18 CRPD.

second and third reporting cycle.

This is explained by the fact that, during the decade separating the two concluding observations, the European Union saw the adoption of several policies and legislation directly and indirectly supporting the obligation of officialising NSLs as official EU languages and mainstreaming NSLs in all areas of the European Union. It started with the 2016 European Parliament Resolution on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters, which, for the first time, called for the officialisation of NSLs. This was echoed by the report of the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calling for the placement of the officialisation in the European agenda. The adoption of the European Electronic Communications Code and the European Accessibility Act, respectively in 2018 and 2019, contributed to supporting EUD's demand for sign language rights in emergency situations. The final nail in the coffin took place with the publication of the EUD position paper on the officialisation of EU NSLs, which presented an articulated legal perspective to what was, until then, a political demand.

The adoption of the Concluding Observations to the European Union by the CRPD Committee in 2025 comes at a time of increased advocacy work from the EUD, underpinned by legal, academic and political support towards this position. These concluding observations set the narrative of the present book, which has two purposes.

Firstly, it aims to bring further elements and nuances to the demand of the European deaf community to the European Union to proceed with the officialisation of EU NSLs. In that regard, the present narrative continues with Chapter 2, by **Alexandre Bloxs**, deciphering the dichotomy between full languages and official languages within the realm of the European Union, aiming to understand the tensions existing between these two notions, as well as the power and limitations the European Union has in regard to NSLs. Then, **Filipe Venade de Sousa** leads us in the exploration of the effective implementation of sign language rights in the European Union Law (Chapter 3). This chapter brings an interesting overview of the practical implications that the official recognition of EU NSLs will bring to deaf people willing to engage with the European Union. Chapter 4, a contribution by **Rob Wilks**, brings the perspective of the Deaf Legal Theory towards the central theme of this book. The Deaf Legal Theory is a newly constituted theoretical framework establishing that the current legal system is built by hearing people for hearing people with all the adjacent bias, which, in turn, directly and indirectly discriminates against deaf people (Wilks, 2025). Chapter 5, written by **Verena Krausneker**, is titled “Sign Languages within the multilingual European Union” feeds the discussion with a minority approach, distancing from the traditional disability-policy perspective. Then, Chapter 6, jointly

designed by **Cedric Tant** and **Nicolas Hanquet** highlights a sociological perspective on how the denial of officialisation NSLs is symptomatic of a crisis of legitimacy from the Union to its citizens, by voluntarily putting aside a part of its citizens when it comes to ensuring their fundamental rights. Ultimately, the final contribution of this first part of the book, co-authored by **Maya de Wit** and **Alexandre Bloxs**, focuses on analysing the importance and relevance of robust disaggregated data collection to underpin the advocacy work the officialisation of NSLs at both the national and EU levels (Chapter 7), before reaching to the conclusion of this first part (Chapter 8).

The second objective of the book is to have a snapshot of the current state of play of the legal framework surrounding NSLs at the national level. In 2012, the EUD released the second edition of its Sign Language Legislation in the European Union book (EUD, 2012). This book introduces the concept of linguistic human rights and explains the importance of having legal recognition of NSLs. However, the book presents itself as a compilation of existing legislation, without providing an analysis of the strength and relevance of this legislation. Since 2012, several EU countries have ratified the CRPD and adopted further NSL legislation, as well as subsequent regulations implementing the initial NSL recognition legislation. This is why we are referring to sign language legal frameworks, in this section, rather than legislation, since the right to NSL can be diluted in several legal instruments at the national level.

The second part of the book was led by **Delphine le Maire**, using resources and information gathered by **Martyna Albaret**, **Charlotte Olhausen**, **Toju Popo**, **Jorge Crespo**, **Fabio Calzati**, and **Alexandre Bloxs**. The second part of the book starts with Chapter 9, authored by **Delphine le Maire**, which explains the methodology of work, how the data was collected and assessed, the recommendations produced, as well as the limitations we met during our research. Chapter 10, written by **Alexandre Bloxs** focuses on developing each of the eight criteria that will serve to evaluate the strength of the legislation. These criteria are inspired by the guidelines of the World Federation of the Deaf. Chapter 11 presents the results of the data collected, in the form of fact sheets, the assessment of the strengths of each of the legislation with a score, before providing recommendations on how to improve the legislation. This consequent work was carried out by **Delphine le Maire**. Chapter 12 concludes Part II of the book by providing an overview of the current trends in Europe when it comes to NSL frameworks. A policy-related book would not be properly concluded without its Ways Forward, bringing an overview of the findings of this book and establishing some perspectives on the future of sign language rights in Europe, which is encapsulated in Chapter 13.

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## Chapter 2:

# Deciphering the implications of the dichotomy “Full languages vs. Official languages” within the work of the European Union

**Alexandre Bloxs, European Union of the Deaf  
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## Introduction

On 5th February 2025, the Committee of Petitions of the European Parliament addressed a written question to the European Commission inquiring on the status quo of the status of EU National Sign Languages (hereafter NSLs) as EU languages, and by which legal means the recognition of the 29 EU NSLs can be rendered effective (European Parliament, 2025a). The question was grounded in a series of legal dispositions from both the international and European legislative armada. This written question echoes the longstanding position and advocacy work of the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) towards recognising the 29 EU NSLs as official EU Languages represented in its Position Paper (EUD, 2024).

The European Commission, through the Cabinet of H.E. Ms Hadja Lahbib, EU Commissioner for Equality, Emergency Preparedness, and Humanitarian Actions, soberly responded that “the legal status of languages in each national legal order is a matter falling under national competence” (European Parliament, 2025b). The response, then, provided a rather unconvincing answer by highlighting that the responsibility of the Commission is to provide accessibility in International Sign. The Commission further clarified that the responsibility of providing accessibility to various EU events falls upon each of the respective EU institutions organising the said event.

As for the officialisation of EU NSLs through the revision of Regulation 1/1958 determining the working languages of the European Union and its institutions, the Commission noted that it is a competency of the Council, acting unanimously and without a Commission proposal, on the basis of Article 342 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (hereafter TFEU).

This follows a previous response from Former Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli to a similar question asked in 2020 (European Parliament, 2020). In her response,

Commissioner Dalli highlighted that the legal status of languages is a matter falling under national competence. Therefore, it is for Member States to ensure compliance with their constitutional order and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereafter CRPD). As for the responsibility of the European Commission, the Commission limits itself to providing interpretation at its events upon request of deaf participants (European Parliament, 2021).

## Position of the European Union

The European Union has repeatedly referred to the competences of Member States to legally recognise their NSLs as official languages as a justification for not undertaking any actions in that regard. Although the EUD does not contest that the determination of the legal status of a NSL falls within the competences of EU Member States, we deem it necessary to emphasise that it falls within the remit of the European Union to determine the official status of its official languages (EUD, 2024).

This is where the distinction between “full language” and “official language” takes its relevance. The former – “full language” – refers to the status of a NSL as a full language, with the same linguistic components as a spoken and written language. This brings a full linguistic component. While, on the other hand, the latter – “the official language” – refers to the legal and political aspects of the use of the NSLs. An official language is the authorised language, within a country, to be used in official proceedings of the public administration, such as court proceedings, interactions and communication with government bodies, submission of petitions and complaints to the ombudsman, interactions with the police, and so on (de Sousa 2022, 2024).

As it was highlighted and developed in the position paper of the EUD “National Sign Languages as Official EU Languages” (EUD, 2024), the EU has a lack of competency in recognising NSLs as full languages, as stated in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), in its Article 5(3) and its Protocol No. 2 establishing the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. The principle of subsidiarity authorises the intervention of the EU when the objective of an action cannot be sufficiently achieved at the national level, with better achievements at the EU level (Fabbrini, 2016; European Parliament, 2016). Furthermore, Article 6 TFEU disposes that the Union, in certain areas, has the competence to only carry out actions supporting, coordinating or supplementing the actions of Member States in these areas.

In the case of recognising NSLs, it falls to the competence of Culture, which is a competence where the Union can only carry out actions supporting, coordinating, or supplementing the actions of Member States, without substituting them, through a joint reading of Articles 6(c) and 167 TFEU. This means the EU cannot substitute Member States in their initiative towards legally recognising their NSLs.

At best, it can coordinate a common policy fostering the recognition of these

languages; however, the final decision falls upon Member States. Yet, these objectives have already been carried out without the intervention of the European Union (WFD, 2025). At the time we are writing these lines, all EU Member States have recognised their NSL through a legal instrument, with the exception of France, which is through the Education Code (Article L312-9-1), and not through a distinct sign language recognition legislation adopted by legislative assemblies.

According to the EUD, the next logical step, after having the EU NSL(s) legally recognised by their respective Member States, is to have the officialisation of these languages as official languages of both the EU and their Member States. This is an area where the EU has full competence (EUD, 2024). In the next section, we will observe the legal and political trajectory of the officialisation of EU NSLs as official EU languages.

## Legal background for the officialisation of national sign languages

The starting point of such an officialisation of EU NSLs lies in the multilingualism policy of the Union. Article 3 of the Treaty of the European Union (hereafter TEU) places multilingualism as one of its core missions to safeguard cultural heritage and linguistic diversity (Viezzi, 2015). Furthermore, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (the Charter), as the core human rights safeguard within the EU law (De Schutter, 2010), sees Article 22 complementing Article 3 TEU by placing an obligation to the Union to respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. Its lack of respect constitutes a discrimination on the grounds of language protected by Article 21 of the Charter. Those constitute instruments of hard law, which are legally binding rules and obligations in which their breaches can lead to enforcement or sanctions. Next to the corpus of hard laws, exist another corpus of soft laws. The latter are non-binding instruments that do not create legal obligations, but have a certain moral power influencing policies and legislation. They can take the form of recommendations, guidelines, or resolutions (Scaffer & Pollack, 2012).

In this framework, several instruments of soft laws call for the officialisation of EU NSLs. Although the European Parliament enacted several resolutions and other political documents recognising the right of deaf people to their NSL,<sup>5</sup> the actual initial call for officialisation of NSLs took place in 2016. The 2016 Resolution of the European Parliament on sign language and professional sign language interpreters

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<sup>5</sup> European Parliament Resolution on Sign Language for the Deaf of 17 June 1988 (Doc A2-302/87), Recital C ; European Parliament Resolution on sign languages, Official Journal C 379, 07/12/1998 P. 0066 ; [Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union](https://eud.eu/brussels-declaration-on-sign-languages-in-the-european-union) of 19 November 2010, available at <https://eud.eu/brussels-declaration/>, consulted on 15 October 2025; European Parliament Report 2010/2272(INI), available at "[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2011-0263\\_EN.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2011-0263_EN.html?redirect)", consulted on 7 October 2025 ; European Parliament resolution of 11 September 2013 on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union (2013/2007(INI))European Parliament resolution of 11 September 2013 on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union (2013/2007(INI))

called for the “official recognition of national and regional sign language(s) in Member States and within EU institutions” (European Parliament, 2016). The demand was echoed in 2022 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in his report on his visit to the European Union, who stated that there are “some obvious issues of law reform, like the granting of official European Union language status to sign language (which already has official status in all the Member States), ought to be contemplated and put on the agenda for change” (Quinn, 2022, 4). In 2025, the CRPD Committee placed the final nail in the coffin by stating, in its Concluding Observations to the EU, that the EU, if it wants to comply with the Convention, has to recognise the 29 EU NSLs as Official EU languages (CRPD, 2025, point 53(a)).

The positions advanced either by the European Union of the Deaf, the European Parliament through its 2016 resolution, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the CRPD Committee follow a common legal reasoning thread, combining both the CRPD and the European legal framework. As Article 21(e) CRPD establishes the obligation of States Parties to “promote and recognise sign language”, it places on its States Parties the impediment of recognising NSLs as full languages. However, when read in conjunction with Article 21(b) of the same Convention, which recognises an obligation to facilitate the use of NSLs in official interactions, the interpretation given to Article 21(e) is to be extended towards an obligation of legally recognising NSLs not only as full languages, but also as official languages.

Indeed, as it was advanced by de Sousa in his chapter to the present book, the officialisation of a language by the EU entitles its users the right to submit petitions and access parliamentary information in the official language; the right to access justice through procedural adaptation in the official language; the right to participate in public consultations; the right to participate to EU recruitment processes, as well as the right to appeal to the European Ombudsman. The listed rights are necessary to enable the full participation and contribution of deaf people to the European public and political life in their NSLs. This public and political participation in the NSL can only be rendered possible, in the sphere of EU activities, if the NSLs are recognised as official languages through the joint reading of Articles 2, 21(b), 21(e), and 29 of the Convention. The present reasoning applies *mutatis mutandis* to all States Parties of the CRPD, including EU Member States.

This specific interpretation of the CRPD allowing the officialisation of EU NSLs would materially translate into the Union’s legal framework through two bodies of regulation. Firstly, comes EEC Council Regulation No 1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community.<sup>6</sup> This regulation lists all the languages to be used by the European Economic Community and acting as the working languages of the European Union institutions. This regulation has been

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<sup>6</sup> EEC Council Regulation No 1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community Document 31958R0001

amended on several occasions to accommodate the expansion of the Union (van Els, 2001) and currently recognises 24 languages. It stipulates that all languages are equally authentic and are to be used in the institutions of the European Union, ensuring that all documents, legislation, and official communication are available in all these languages (Palici di Suni, 2023). The competence of modifying the official languages is conferred to the Council of the European Union, acting unanimously by means of regulations as outlined by Article 342 TFEU.

Secondly, come the Rules of Procedures of the respective EU institutions. The Rules of Procedure are internal legal instruments of the institutions governing how the institutions organise their work, adopt decisions and how the interinstitutional relationships take place. The vested power of each Rule of Procedure is granted by the EU Treaties. Article 6 of EEC Regulation 1/1958 disposes that each respective institution may stipulate in its Rules of Procedures which of the languages are to be used in specific cases. This disposition brings important consequences in the work of the EUD in safeguarding the rights of deaf people to use their NSLs when interacting with the EU institutions.

However, as of today, we do not have in our possession a clear overview of whether the EU NSLs enjoy official status as official languages at the national level. This is the result of the lack of information in some EU Member States. The second part of the book will focus on analysing existing NSLs' legal framework without specifically approaching the question of whether they have official status. This granting of official status at the national level could serve as an impetus for the EU to follow the trend of Member States in going beyond the mere recognition of NSLs as full languages to their officialisation.

The World Federation of the Deaf, as of May 2025, established that all 27 EU Member States, with the exception of France, have partially fulfilled their obligations as State Parties to the CRPD by legally recognising their NSLs, as full languages through a varied taxonomy of legislation (WFD, 2025, p. 92). Yet, there is currently no information on the number of EU Member States that have granted official status to their NSLs (De Meulder et al., 2019), which is proving to be problematic in the case of Petition 1056/2016 of the European Parliament, which is developed in the following section.

## **Consequences of the lack of officialisation of NSLs: the case of Petition 1056/2016**

Petition 1056/2016 was introduced by the European Union of the Deaf in 2016 (European Parliament, 2016) to enable the submission of petitions at the European Parliament by deaf people in one of the EU NSLs independently of a written version. To date, the only possibility offered to deaf people is to table petitions in one of the 24 EU official languages, without consideration given to the 29 EU NSLs that co-

exist within the European Union. This absence of opportunities contradicts not only Articles 9 and 21 of the CRPD, but also Articles 21, 22, and 26 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Furthermore, allowing deaf people to table petitions in their NSL would allow the EU to align itself with both the EU Disability Rights Strategy and its European and international legal obligations.

The petition would allow deaf people to table petitions before the European Parliament in their NSL. Practically speaking, any deaf petitioners would submit a recorded video in their NSL to the EP Petitions Portal, which is technically equipped to accept multiple file types, including audio/visual formats.

In cooperation with the European Union of the Deaf, the Secretariat of the PETI Committee established a list of freelance translators from the 29 EU NSLs. The translator will be contacted by the Secretariat to translate the video from the NSL to the national written language. Then, the Directorate-General for Interpretation and Translation of the European Parliament will translate the document into all official EU languages, following the ordinary procedure imparted by the PETI Committee.

From a legal standpoint, Rule 226 of the Rules of Procedures of the European Parliament governs the procedure to submit a petition before the PETI Committee. Furthermore, paragraph 6 recognises that the petition can only be made in one of the EU official written languages, meaning in one of the 24 EU written languages.

Yet, further in the same paragraph, it stipulates that: “The Bureau may decide that petitions and correspondence with petitioners may be drafted in other languages which, in accordance with the constitutional order of the Member States concerned, enjoy official status in all or part of their territory”. This is where a divergence of opinion on how to interpret this provision arises.

On one hand, the position shared by a part of the European Parliament – the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the Patriots for Europe Group (PfE), and the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) – is that all 29 EU NSLs have been recognised as full languages by all 27 EU Member States. Furthermore, Article 21 (b) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, gives the right to deaf people to have official interactions in their NSL. In that regard, Rule 226 should be interpreted as enabling the right to table petitions in all EU NSLs, aligning with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the Group of the European People’s Party (EPP) has a different stance on the interpretation to undertake. The group brings a strict interpretation of the Rules of Procedure, emphasising that the latter requires petitions to be submitted only in written form. Furthermore, the group calls on the Parliament’s administration to implement the necessary change in the Petition’s Portal to enable Petitioners to

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<sup>7</sup> European Parliament decision of 11 April 2024 on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2022, Section I – European Parliament (2023/2130(DEC)), point 108

support their written submission with a translation of the document in the NSL (European Parliament, 2024, point 147). If implemented, the suggestion made by the EPP group would bestow EU NSLs, within the work of the PETI Committee, a purely symbolic status, rather than a meaningful respect of the full linguistic status of NSLs as integral to the European linguistic landscape.

The EUD foresees two options to escape this deadlock. Firstly, it recommends amending Rule 226 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament to broaden the linguistic scope of Petitions, by enabling the submission of petitions in one of the 29 EU NSLs, with an emphasis on the equal authenticity of a petition submitted either in a NSL or a national written language. This requires the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) to establish a working group to review the Rules of Procedures. The requirement of political capital for such an undertaking is extremely high.

The second option is to use paragraph 6 of Rule 226 to our advantage by asserting the official status of NSLs at the national level. This is the reason for the existence of the present book. At the time we are writing these lines, the coordinator of the PfE Group of the PETI Committee is mandating the European Parliament to undertake a study with national parliaments. The purpose of this study is to assert the status of NSLs in regard to court proceedings, submission of petitions, contact with national administrations, obstacles to the use of NSLs, and the legal status of the NSL.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

The lack of consideration towards NSLs in the work of EU institutions stems from confusion between the status of NSLs as full languages and their status as official languages. Further to that, there is also a constant confusion among EU officials between NSLs as an accessibility feature to support the inclusion of deaf people in society, rather than full languages as part of the European linguistic landscapes and a key feature of multilingualism.

The last decade has seen increased awareness and growing consensus from a wide array of political agents: from the European Parliament to the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability Rights and the CRPD Committee on the necessity to steer towards the officialisation of EU NSLs as official EU languages. EU Member States retain the power to legislate on the full language status of their NSLs, while the officialisation of the 29 NSLs as EU official languages is a competency of the European Union. For as long as this confusion exists, the status quo in regard to the incorporation of the 29 European NSLs in the corpus of languages to be used by the European Union will persist.

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<sup>8</sup> The request for a survey is introduced by the Office of MEP Pal Szekeres, in cooperation with EUD, but no document has officially been made public at the time of writing.

Furthermore, another deadlock exists through Article 342 TFEU. This provision establishes that the rules governing the languages of the institutions of the Union shall be decided by the Council of the European Union, acting unanimously. The Council is composed of... EU Member States. This is a never-ending issue, circling back to EU Member States. However, a light at the end of the tunnel is appearing: the Rules of Procedure of EU institutions. Each respective institution can determine its communication, working procedures and have the remit to include NSLs as working languages. Rule 226 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament is a starting point that has the potential to be a catalyst for mainstreaming the use of NSLs within the European Parliament. The potential implications to serve as a good practice fostering amendments of the Rules of Procedures of other EU institutions are consequential.

The path towards the officialisation of EU NSLs as official languages is long and arduous. National Associations of the Deaf have an important power at the national level, by working towards ensuring their NSLs have an official status as national languages. There is an urgent need to operate a paradigm shift from the status of NSLs as full languages towards official languages. With this shift, the challenges towards the officialisation of EU NSLs will be attenuated, and the status of EU NSLs fostered.

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## Chapter 3:

# Sign language rights in European Union law: the effective implementation of language rights

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In varietate concordia

## Introduction

The diversity of languages within the European Union is a fundamental pillar that supports the (apparent) coexistence among the various cultures and languages that compose it. Multilingualism is a core principle of the EU's operations. However, only the languages officially recognised by the Member States hold the status of official languages of the EU. Multilingualism, which is widely valued, is an essential element of the EU's cultural and linguistic heritage, shaped over centuries by the diverse histories and traditions of its Member States. The main objectives of this approach include promoting language learning, fostering a multilingual economy, and ensuring that citizens of the EU have access to official documents from EU institutions in all languages recognised by the Member States.

However, many European minority languages, including national sign languages, lack legal and political weight at the EU level (European Commission, 1994). The history of sign languages in Europe is closely linked to its linguistic and cultural history. Understanding these languages, considered historical languages, is essential to a full understanding of European linguistic diversity.

The political and legal management of languages and cultures remains the competence of the Member States, with the EU playing a limited role in these areas. The EU supports and promotes the actions of Member States in the educational, linguistic, and cultural domains, as outlined in the applicable treaties (e.g., Faingold, 2004).

Nevertheless, beyond Member State initiatives, the EU took a significant step by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ("the Convention" or "the CRPD") on 23 December 2010. This CRPD recognises and promotes the right to use sign languages in various domains (e.g. Articles 3, 9, 21, 24 and 30). As a result, EU institutions are committed to adopting the necessary measures in

accordance with the CRPD, thereby fully binding the EU to these commitments. Therefore, a crucial question arises: does the EU have an adequate legal framework to address the legal status of national sign languages at the EU level? This is the question that this article aims to answer. We will examine this issue in detail below.

## Historical background

In 2015, the CRPD Committee<sup>9</sup> explicitly recommended that the EU take the necessary measures to comply with the parameters of Article 21 of the CRPD. Specifically, concerning sign language, the Committee stated that “(...) the European Union [should] take the necessary measures to enforce the implementation of its legislation on access to information and communication so as to facilitate access in accessible languages (...), including sign languages (...), and to promote the official recognition of sign language (...).”<sup>10</sup>

This recommendation became a central agenda for the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), which represents deaf people at the European level. From the outset, EUD introduced the concept of Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs), following the principles of Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), with a “combined rights approach” that intersects human rights and linguistic rights. In this sense, national sign languages “can be seen as the mother tongues of deaf people; they can also claim LHRs” (EUD, 2012, p. 26). In fact, “LHRs are only those rights that are necessary to satisfy people’s basic needs” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2010, p. 213).

The EUD<sup>11</sup> has expressed significant concerns regarding the lack of sufficient legislative and policy measures relating to the legal status of national sign languages at the EU level, advocating for the formal recognition of these languages.<sup>12</sup> The EUD argues that these languages should be viewed as “languages of a multilingual EU”

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9 The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) is the body of independent experts which monitors implementation of the CRPD by the States parties.

10 UN (2015). Concluding observations on the initial report of the European Union. Doc. CRPD/C/EU/CO/1: “Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information (art. 21) 54. The Committee is concerned that across the European Union, persons with disabilities do not always have access to information and communication in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities, including sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice, including easy-to-read formats. 55. The Committee recommends that the European Union take the necessary measures to enforce the implementation of its legislation on access to information and communication so as to facilitate access in accessible languages, formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities, including sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice, including easy-to-read formats, for all persons with all types of disabilities, and to promote official recognition of sign language and Braille.”

11 European Union of the Deaf (EUD) alternative report for the second review of the European Union (the EU) by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Committee (For List of Issues Prior to Reporting) [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCRPD%2FCSS%2FEUR%2F62181&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCRPD%2FCSS%2FEUR%2F62181&Lang=en)

12 For more up to date information, EUD published its latest alternative report, following the responses of the EU to the List of Issues of the CRPD Committee, submitted in September 2024. <https://www.eud.eu/eud-alternative-report-to-the-crpds-committee-advocating-for-the-rights-of-deaf-people-in-the-eu/>

rather than merely as “tools, formats, or means of communication” (2024, pp. 3-4). Consequently, the EUD demands that the EU fulfil its obligations under the CRPD to formally recognise national sign languages.

Official recognition of sign languages				
Recognising sign languages as fully-fledged languages of the EU	Granting sign language users their language rights – the right to use and receive information in a national sign language in official interactions at the EU level	Recognising the culture of deaf people and awareness of the aspirations of the deaf community	Ensuring with accessibility in national sign languages on request via professional and verified sign language interpreters	Celebrating national sign languages during the European Day of Languages

Figure 1: Own elaboration

In this context, the EUD (2024, p. 10) defines an official language as a *fully-fledged, independent language*, which should be recognised as such by the EU, and no longer considered as a communication tool for persons with disabilities. As a result, the EUD clearly argues that the legal status of national sign languages in the EU should be recognised on an equal footing with other official (spoken) languages, in particular through legislative amendments to EU Regulation 1/1958. The EUD explicitly considers that “The officialisation of EU NSLs as EU languages is an obligation of the EU stemming from an interpretation of Articles 2, 21(b) and 21(e) CRPD alongside the principle of multilingualism embedded in Article 3 TEU.” (2024, p. 6).

Furthermore, the EUD issued a position paper titled “*National Sign Languages as EU Official Languages*.<sup>13</sup> This document reinforces the arguments defending the legal status of national sign languages legally recognised by the Member States. Virtually all of them recognise their own sign languages. It is necessary for sign languages to be equally recognised at the EU level to promote and respect linguistic and cultural diversity and prevent discrimination based on the language used.

Recently, in 2025, the CRPD Committee issued concluding observations on the EU.<sup>14</sup> This Committee essentially shares the same understandings and concerns raised by EUD. For example, the Committee is concerned that “national sign languages (NSLs) are not considered part of the EU’s multilingualism.” (§ 52(a)). Consequently, the Committee explicitly identify the need for legal treatment of sign languages in the EU: “Amend the Rules of Procedure of EU institutions to reflect the rights of deaf persons; recognize the 29 NSLs of the EU as official EU languages and increase availability of information in Easy Read format” (§ 53(a)). Furthermore, regarding

13 Available at: <https://eud.eu/the-publication-of-our-latest-position-paper-titled-national-sign-languages-as-eu-official-languages/>

14 Available at: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD%2FC%2FEUR%2FCO%2F2-3&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD%2FC%2FEUR%2FCO%2F2-3&Lang=en)

For more information, see the activities carried out by EUD on the legal status of sign languages in the EU. <https://eud.eu/crpd-concluding-observations-eu-to-prioritise-the-rights-of-deaf-people-to-national-sign-languages/>

the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity, the Committee considers that “Recognition of the cultural and linguistic identity of deaf people is insufficient.” (§ 70(d)). Consequently, the Committee recommends to “Include and promote deaf culture as part of the cultural and linguistic landscape of the EU.” (§ 71(d)).

## The meaning and scope of language rights in European Union law

### EU legal-linguistic framework

The multilingual linguistic regime of the EU is a fundamental principle that guides its activities (Urrutia & Lasagabaster, 2007, 2008). The regulation of rights related to sign languages primarily falls within the reserved competencies of the Member States. However, the fundamental rights and freedoms established by the CRPD are recognised by all Member States that have ratified the CRPD, and indirectly influence the actions of EU institutions.

In this context, the minimum recognition of rights related to sign languages is based on the idea that these rights are an integral part of a multifaceted language rights (de Sousa, 2024). This includes the right to use, express, and communicate in a particular language, both in public and private contexts (de Sousa, 2023, 2024; de Witte, 2004, 2011). These rights are guaranteed by the national legislations of the Member States, which regulate and recognise the use of languages, ensuring freedom of expression and protection against discrimination and inequality based on the language used. Additionally, EU institutions adopt regulations and directives that ensure compliance with the provisions of the CRPD and implement political measures within the competencies of the EU.

Linguistic policies (e.g., Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011; Romaine, 2013) should reflect a dynamic interaction between the various sociolinguistic realities of national sign languages and the established legal frameworks. This implies that the implementation of policies related to sign languages must be coordinated between Member States and EU institutions and be proportional to the objectives of the CRPD and EU law. Moreover, these policies should ensure that recognised language rights are effective and applicable in all aspects of daily life.

Article 342 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes that “the rules governing the languages of the Union’s institutions shall be determined by the Council, acting unanimously by means of regulations.” Additionally, Article 55 of the TFEU defines the official languages of the EU. The use of the official languages of the Member States is essentially regulated by the first Regulation 1/58/EEC, which recognises the official languages of the Member States

used within the EU (e.g., Faingold, 2015).

## **CRPD legal-linguistic framework**

Article 21 of the CRPD applies directly to EU law, mandating that EU institutions define the legal framework for the use of national sign languages formally recognised by the Member States, enabling these languages to be recognised at the EU level as well. The CRPD requires EU institutions to adopt legislative measures, committing to the standards set by the CRPD. The mere recognition of national sign languages at the EU level cannot be an empty declaration of principles devoid of concrete rights. On the contrary, the CRPD requires EU institutions to guarantee and respect the use of these national sign languages in the context of the right to communication and information. Thus, an effective legal framework is necessary to ensure the exercise of the rights of those who use these languages, as part of European citizenship. The legal status of national sign languages cannot be theoretical or illusory; it must effectively guarantee the use of these languages.

In light of Article 21 of the CRPD, the EU's linguistic regime must be adjusted to elevate sign languages to the status of official EU languages, meeting two cumulative conditions: first, the national legislation of the Member States must formally recognise the sign language as a full-fledged language; second, the Member State must formally request that EU institutions incorporate the legal status of sign languages in relevant domains, in accordance with Article 21 of the CRPD.

## **Identification and establishment of regulatory principles for the legal status of national sign languages**

As nationally recognised sign languages can be determined by legal instruments adopted by EU institutions, these institutions should adopt a linguistic regime that does not exclude sign languages as full-fledged languages. As a result, these languages may be used in various communicative spheres within the EU, whenever possible, under conditions of equal treatment.

It is important to emphasise that EU law does not interfere with the broad competencies of Member States to legislate on the legal status of national sign languages. EU institutions, in accordance with their legal framework and respecting the full applicability of the CRPD, must adopt the necessary measures to ensure that national sign languages, declared by Member States, can be used at the EU level in domains inherent to the competencies of EU institutions.

Any restrictions on the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the CRPD in the context of EU law cannot undermine the binding standards of the CRPD and cannot be justified solely by political or economic reasons. The measures adopted by the EU must consider the objectives pursued by the CRPD.

EU law must be interpreted considering the CRPD. Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU) must be understood considering Article 21 of the CRPD, ensuring that users of national sign languages have freedom of expression within the EU, including the freedom to receive and impart information or ideas using their sign languages when addressing EU institutions. Article 21 of the CFREU must be interpreted considering Articles 2 and 5 of the CRPD, prohibiting discrimination based on language and disability.

Article 22 of the CFREU, which recognises cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, should be read considering Article 30 of the CRPD, which recognises the specific cultural and linguistic identities of deaf persons, as well as the diversity of national sign languages within the EU (e.g., Arzoz, 2008; de Witte, 2008).

Article 26 of the CFREU is seen as a fundamental norm of the EU legal order and should be interpreted in line with the purposes pursued by the CRPD.

Article 41 of the CFREU recognizes that individuals have the right to address EU institutions in one of the languages of the Treaties, i.e., the official languages of the Member States. This requires adaptation to the communicative and linguistic particularities of deaf persons, ensuring them equal access to EU institutions in one of the national sign languages formally recognized by Member States and incorporated at the EU level, in line with Article 21 of the CRPD, which requires the EU to recognise national sign languages.

## **The legal status of sign languages: national and European legal framework**

### **Legal recognition of sign language: legal complementarity between the Member States and the EU**

It is essential to clarify that the legal recognition of a national sign language extends beyond mere linguistic acknowledgement under Article 2 of the CRPD. National sign languages are recognised as independent languages, distinct from spoken languages, with their own scientifically validated linguistic properties. However, legal recognition entails much more. Generally, the official status of a sign language serves two fundamental purposes (de Sousa, 2024). Firstly, it formally establishes the legal framework necessary for the exercise of rights enshrined in law. Secondly, this status imposes legal obligations on governmental authorities to use these languages in official communications with users of national sign languages. It is important to emphasise that the legal status of a sign language encompasses a comprehensive set of legal norms that regulate how users can exercise their rights.

The formal legal recognition of national sign languages is, in essence, a requirement of Article 21 of the CRPD. For national sign languages, such recognition serves as a minimum standard of protection at the EU level, ensuring the safeguarding of rights both within the EU and, indirectly, within the Member States. Consequently, the legal recognition of national sign languages within the EU implies that these languages are recognised as official languages of the Union. The roles and functions of national sign languages are thereby defined by their legal status in accordance with EU law.

### The EU's obligations under the CRPD

According to the CRPD, it is critical to interpret and understand the significance of Article 21(b) (“accepting and facilitating the use of sign language”) and Article 21(e) (“recognizing and promoting the use of sign language”).

<p><b>Article 21(b)</b> Accepting and facilitating the use of sign language</p> <p><b>ACCEPTING:</b> The EU legitimises the presence of national sign languages in official interactions between deaf people and EU institutions.</p> <p><b>FACILITATING:</b> The EU does not impede or exclude national sign languages that may be used in the various official interactions with EU institutions.</p>	<p><b>Article 21(e)</b> Recognising and promoting the use of sign language</p> <p><b>RECOGNISING:</b> The EU incorporates national sign languages at EU level into its own legal framework.</p> <p><b>PROMOTING:</b> The EU shall adopt the necessary measures to support, promote and collaborate, at EU level, with the Member States, on educational, linguistic and cultural activities relating to national sign languages.</p>
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Figure 2: Own elaboration

These provisions establish a set of binding legal obligations for EU institutions, compelling them to adopt effective measures in alignment with the CRPD. Legal recognition is therefore understood as a multi-layered and flexible concept, shaped by the legal frameworks of both the EU and its Member States (de Sousa, 2024). It is also important to note that while Article 21 allows the EU and Member States to define the legal status of national sign languages through various means, this must always align with the objectives of the CRPD.

In conjunction with the provisions of Article 21, the EU institutions are required to implement all necessary and effective measures to ensure the exercise of these rights, adapted to the needs of deaf people within the EU.

Moreover, Article 21 of the CRPD is interlinked with Article 22 (and Article 26) of the CFREU and Article 3 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU). This interrelation implies that the formal recognition of national sign languages represents a commitment to respecting cultural and linguistic diversity, which includes protecting and promoting national sign languages as part of the EU's cultural and linguistic heritage. Respect for these languages necessitates proactive support and promotion by EU institutions within their respective competencies.

It is crucial to underline that formal recognition by the EU does not create new rights beyond those already established by Member States, which recognise the use of sign languages within their national legal frameworks. Instead, EU legal recognition obliges the EU to accept the national sign languages that have been formally recognised by Member States. This ensures that deaf people can use their national sign languages to communicate and interact with EU institutions across various contexts, enjoying equal treatment with the official languages recognised by the EU.

## **Practical implications of the legal recognition of national sign languages at the EU level**

The legal recognition of national sign languages at the EU level carries significant practical implications. EU actions play a crucial role in reinforcing and complementing the national measures adopted by Member States.

As these states formally recognise national sign languages through their respective legislations, such recognition strengthens the principle of multilingualism within the EU. This creates an imperative to ensure proportional equality between spoken and sign languages, as well as to guarantee linguistic and communicative accessibility for all EU citizens. Sign language users should be able to engage with EU institutions in their own sign languages, with institutions providing responses in the same languages, ensuring parity with other official EU languages. Thus, the EU legal framework must be equipped to facilitate the daily lives of sign language users, ensuring their rights are recognised and respected across all official languages and legal systems within the EU.

To support this, EU institutions must adopt various legal instruments — such as regulations, directives, and decisions — to establish a robust legal framework for national sign languages, in line with the objectives of the CRPD. The following are key practical implications of the legal recognition of sign languages:

### **The right to submit requests in national sign languages**

According to Article 20(2)(d) of the TFEU, EU citizens have the right to petition the European Parliament, apply to the European Ombudsman, and address EU institutions in any of the Treaty languages and receive responses in the same language. Additionally, Article 24 of the TFEU provides that EU citizens may write to any EU institution or body in one of the Treaty languages and receive a reply in that language.

Considering Article 21 of the CRPD, and specific regulations established by EU institutions, these institutions — including the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, and the Court of Justice of the European Union — must ensure that national sign languages

are used in communications with users of these languages.

The obligation for EU institutions to use national sign languages in communication is grounded in Article 21 of the CRPD. This means that sign language users must be able to interact with EU institutions in their national sign languages, and institutions must accommodate these languages equivalently to the official languages of the EU. This right to use national sign languages is a fundamental entitlement and a requirement of the CRPD. Any infringement of this right must have legal consequences that can be challenged through appropriate judicial and administrative channels.

### **The right to access justice through procedural adaptations in national sign languages**

Article 13 of the CRPD guarantees the right to present cases to the Court of Justice with procedural adaptations, allowing submissions, responses, and comprehension in national sign languages. Combined with Article 21, this ensures that sign language users have access to justice with necessary procedural adjustments, such as receiving and providing information in accessible formats, including national sign languages. Consequently, the procedural rules of the Court of Justice must include provisions for these adaptations, as mandated by Article 13 of the CRPD.

Taking into account Article 263 of the TFEU, for example, individuals who have an interest in taking action and, in addition, this has an impact on the individual's personal situation or directly and individually affects the individual's situation, may consequently bring an action before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) to annul certain legal acts within the scope of European Union law.

The CJEU's language regime is established in Articles 36 to 42 of the Rules of Procedure and is mentioned in Council Regulation No. 1/58 (EEC), which determines the languages to be used by the EU. In the case of national sign languages, it is important that judicial proceedings apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the linguistic and communicative specificities of users of national sign languages, who can understand and express themselves in these languages translated into the languages of the CJEU proceedings, for example.

### **The right to petition the European Parliament and access parliamentary information**

The CRPD recognises the right to participate in political processes of relevance to sign language users. This requires adapting communication procedures to include national sign languages on an equal footing with spoken languages, respecting the linguistic diversity of the EU. Sign language users must have the right to access information about EU activities, as failure to do so would result in their exclusion from important informational and communicative processes, denying them full

access to comprehensible information and communication.

According to Articles 20, 24, and 227 of the TFEU and Rule 226 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure, any European citizen has the right to submit petitions to the European Parliament in any of the official languages of the EU and to receive a reply in the same language. In this sense, the legal status of national sign languages in the EU implies that legal recognition must have the necessary effects to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of national sign languages as equally recognised official languages of the EU, in order to facilitate and ensure that users of national sign languages can submit their petitions in one of the sign languages legally recognised by the Member States and the EU.

In summary, the legal recognition of national sign languages at the EU level necessitates comprehensive actions to ensure that sign language users can fully participate in EU governance and access justice, in alignment with the Convention's objectives.

### **The right to access information about EU activities**

Institutional websites are crucial for ensuring the right to access information about the EU's activities. To this end, these websites must provide information in accessible formats, including national sign languages. This ensures that all EU citizens, including those who use sign languages, can fully access and understand the information available.

Taking into account Article 11 of the CFREU and Article 21(a)(b) of the CRPD, the EU must provide information intended for the general public in accessible and appropriate formats, using legally recognised national sign languages. Following the recommendations of the European Ombudsman,<sup>15</sup> the EU should establish policies on the use of these languages, determining the appropriate conditions for the use of and access to information through sign languages. In any case, according to conventional standards, restrictions on the use of national sign languages should not be imposed disproportionately for reasons of cost or time; on the contrary, they should ensure, through objectively proportionate and legitimate measures, that the objectives of the CRPD are achieved.

### **The right to participate in public consultations**

EU institutions seeking to engage public opinion must ensure that users can participate in public consultations using accessible linguistic formats, including national sign languages. To facilitate this, consultation documents should be available in recorded videos in national sign languages. This approach guarantees that sign language users

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. The use of official EU languages when communicating with the public - Practical recommendations for the EU administration. <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/doc/correspondence/en/129519>

have equal opportunities to contribute their views.

It is important to emphasize that it is essential to guarantee citizens' right to participate in European Union affairs (Articles 10 and 11 of the TEU).<sup>16</sup> Therefore, in the case of legally recognised national sign languages, in order to ensure the coherence and transparency of EU actions, the European Commission conducts, *mutatis mutandis*, consultations with interested parties, for example, deaf people and sign language users, on issues that affect their daily lives. The European Commission's obligation to ensure that users of national sign languages are informed about the topics of its public consultations therefore stems from the democratic principles on which the Union is founded and, above all, from the correct application of the CRPD. The European Commission must ensure that all users of national sign languages, as European citizens, can understand its public consultations, which, as a matter of principle, must be published in all official languages, for example, legally recognized national sign languages.

### **The right to participate in EU recruitment processes**

EU institutions have specific linguistic requirements for candidates applying for various positions.<sup>17</sup> It is essential that candidates using national sign languages are given equal consideration compared to other applicants. This ensures fair treatment and respects the diversity of the workforce within the EU.

### **The right to appeal to the European Ombudsman in national sign languages**

In accordance with Articles 20(d), 24 and 228 of the TFEU and Regulation 2021/1163 of the European Parliament of 24 June 2021, with the EU's legal recognition of national sign languages, users have the right to appeal to the European Ombudsman using accessible formats, including national sign languages. The Ombudsman's role is to protect the fundamental rights of all EU citizens, and it is crucial that they uphold the language rights of sign language users in line with the CRPD and EU law.<sup>18</sup>

### **Other relevant activities in education, language and culture**

Under Article 165(1) of the TFEU and Articles 24 and 30 of the CRPD, EU

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16 Cf. Decision of the European Ombudsman closing his inquiry into complaint 640/2011/AN against the European Commission. <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/decision/en/12009>

17 Cf. EPSO selection procedures now in all 24 official EU languages. <https://euemployment.eu/epso-selection-procedures-now-in-all-official-eu-languages/>

18 The European Ombudsman's language and translation policy. <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/language-policy/en>

institutions must foster the “*European dimension in education*”, which includes the teaching and promotion of Member States’ languages. This also extends to supporting and enhancing national sign languages.

EU institutions should encourage the learning of national sign languages by supporting educational activities funded by various EU programs. Such support should aim to improve the linguistic skills of sign language users within national education systems. Furthermore, institutions can work with Member States to develop policies that promote and preserve national sign languages as part of the broader linguistic heritage of the EU.

The European Day of Languages serves as an important example of promoting national sign languages within the EU’s political agenda. It complements the International Day of Sign Languages, established by the United Nations on September 23 each year, following a resolution of the UN General Assembly. These events help raise awareness about national sign languages and advocate for cultural and linguistic diversity.

The formal recognition of national sign languages at the EU level necessitates that EU institutions collaborate with Member States to protect and promote these languages, thereby supporting the preservation and enrichment of the Union’s linguistic and cultural diversity. The CRPD and EU law advocate for this diversity by mandating necessary measures to implement its standards, which include: (i) developing periodic policies and strategies for national sign languages; (ii) providing EU informational websites in national sign languages; and (iii) supporting EU-funded programs in educational, linguistic, and cultural fields.

## Conclusion

Articles 21 of the CRPD and 22 of the CFREU establish a crucial legal framework for the promotion and protection of national sign languages within the EU. These articles impose a responsibility on EU institutions to ensure that citizens can express and communicate in their respective national sign languages, as well as to uphold the diversity of national sign languages.

The application of these articles within the EU is not merely symbolic but has substantial practical implications. The competencies of EU institutions, although defined by the treaties, entail a commitment to effectively protect and promote the linguistic rights of citizens as stipulated by the CRPD. Therefore, the integration of sign languages into the EU framework should be viewed as an extension of the principles of equality and non-discrimination, reflecting the full recognition of sign languages as an integral part of the Union’s cultural and linguistic diversity.

The legal status conferred upon sign languages by the CRPD is a fundamental pillar for ensuring the effectiveness of the rights of their users. This status does not merely

recognise the formal existence of sign languages but also establishes a robust legal system that must ensure their full practice. The official recognition of national sign languages entails a legal obligation for public authorities, requiring the implementation of various measures — the examples given throughout this article — that ensure the integration of sign languages into citizens' daily lives.

In terms of practical implications, the formal recognition of national sign languages at the EU level has several important consequences:

- a. EU institutions must ensure that citizens can use their national sign languages in all interactions with EU administration, promoting an accessible and equitable communication environment;
- b. While Member States may adopt measures to promote their national sign languages, these measures must be proportionate and non-discriminatory. Policy implementation should respect the principles of the CRPD and align with EU policies, avoiding discrimination and promoting an inclusive approach;
- c. The legal foundation of the CRPD demands developments in various areas of daily life, including education, access to justice, and civic participation. EU institutions have the responsibility to create and adjust regulations that facilitate the practice and use of national sign languages;
- d. Recognition of sign languages should be reflected in concrete practices that ensure the inclusion of sign language users in all spheres of public and private life. This includes adapting services and providing information in accessible formats. The EU must work closely with Member States to protect and promote linguistic and cultural diversity, including national sign languages. Protecting and promoting these languages is an essential part of the Union's cultural and linguistic heritage.

In summary, the effective implementation of the CRPD requires a continuous commitment from EU institutions to ensure that the rights of sign language users are fully respected and promoted. The responsibility extends beyond legal provisions to creating an inclusive and accessible environment for all EU citizens.

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## Chapter 4:

# Recognising the EU's National sign languages: A Deaf Legal Theory perspective

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## Introduction

In legal studies, many are familiar with the concept of jurisprudence, which essentially refers to the philosophy or theory of law. Jurisprudence provides a theoretical framework for understanding what the law means and why certain laws exist. It acts as the intellectual foundation on which legal systems are built. Over the years, scholars have debated the purpose and nature of laws, exploring various models that explain their rationale and effects. Deaf Legal Theory (DLT), a jurisprudential concept initially developed by Bryan and Emery (2014) and expanded by Wilks (2025) aims to expose how the law seeks to frame deaf people and can assist investigators worldwide who wish to undertake a critical examination of how the law and legal systems deal with deaf people.

On the issue of the recognition of National Sign Languages (NSL), an issue that many legal systems struggle to deal with is the conflicting perspective of seeing being deaf as both a disability and a language minority, giving rise to what is termed 'dual category status' (De Meulder and Murray, 2017, p. 139), the 'Deaf disabled and language minority dichotomy' (Wilks, 2022) and the Deaf Duality Paradox (Blox, in preparation). Most legal systems have yet to fully reconcile these two perspectives, and the European Union (EU) is no exception (European Union of the Deaf, 2024). At present, equality laws at national and European level tend to offer deaf individuals a stark choice between identity and access to rights, referred to as the Deaf Legal Dilemma (Wilks, forthcoming, 2019), without acknowledging the possibility that both approaches could coexist. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006) is a notable exception, which is why Article 21 is relevant in the present context.

The challenge for the EU is to adopt a more comprehensive legal approach, one that sees both disability and language rights as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Recognising the 29 NSLs of the EU would allow for a more inclusive framework that accommodates the diverse experiences of European deaf communities. This would not only enhance the legal protections available to deaf individuals but also promote

a fuller recognition of sign languages within the EU legal framework, with Article 21 of the CRPD providing a clear path forward.

The aim of this chapter is to expose both the EU and the UN's approaches to the recognition of NSLs. This will assist the EU to gain a fuller understanding of the importance of, and the potential impact of, officially recognising the 29 NSLs within the EU on an equal footing with its 24 spoken official languages. This would ensure equal access for deaf people to information, services, and communication within the EU institutions.

## The DLT model

In any legal research or analysis, it is important to move beyond the text of the law and take a more critical approach that considers the social and cultural realities of those impacted by the law. Theoretical models offer different lenses or perspectives through which the law can be examined. Think of these models as different pairs of glasses, with each one providing a unique way of seeing the world and analysing legal issues. Just as an optometrist prescribes glasses to help people see more clearly, different legal theories offer various lenses through which to interpret the law. One pair of glasses may represent Feminist Legal Theory, another Critical Race Theory or Critical Disability Theory, while yet another may represent DLT. By looking through these 'lenses', we can analyse data and social structures in a way that highlights particular experiences and issues. DLT as such a lens allows us to critically examine the legal landscape from the perspective of deaf individuals and communities, focusing on how laws affect deaf people and how legal systems are structured around hearing norms.

The original DLT model developed by Wilks (2025, 2022) built upon the foundational work of Bryan and Emery (2014) to critically examine how the law frames deaf individuals and perpetuates systemic inequalities. While this initial model offered valuable insights into the 'hearing-subjective' nature of legal systems, it was largely theoretical and shaped without significant input from deaf communities over the world. Recognising this limitation, the co-production project was conceived as a means to centre the voices and experiences of deaf individuals in the evolution of the model (Wilks, 2024). This approach was essential to ensure the DLT framework was not only academically rigorous but also deeply reflective of lived realities and diverse perspectives. Through the inclusive processes of the BIG Survey, collaborative workshops, and ongoing stakeholder engagement, the co-production project transformed the DLT model into a hybrid framework that balances theoretical foundations with practical applicability. This process was necessary to move beyond a top-down approach, creating a model from the bottom-up that truly embodies the principles of equality, intersectionality, and community empowerment. The DLT model can be found at Figure 1:

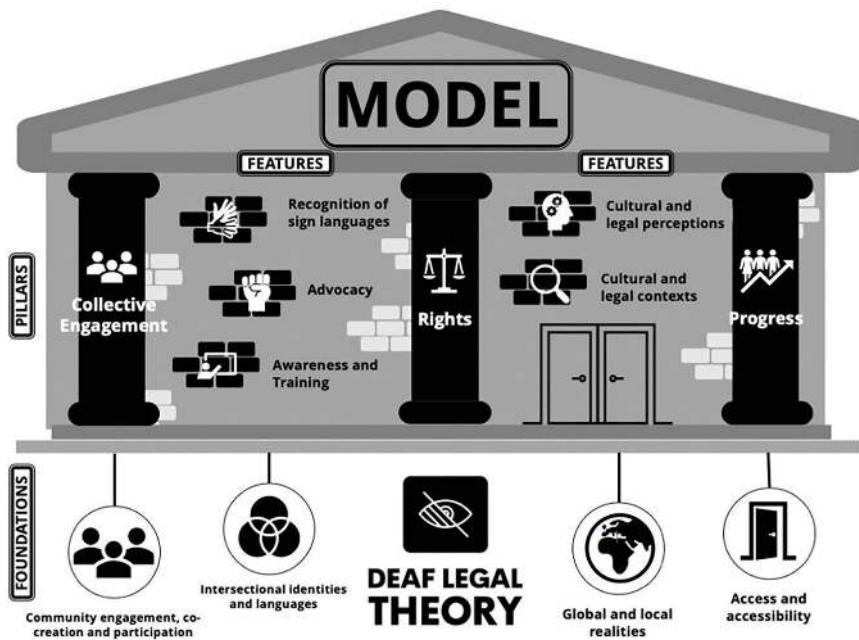


Figure 1: The DLT Model

The model highlights the pillars as the central structural components of the model: Collective Engagement, Rights, and Progress, all of which underpin the DLT framework. Collective Engagement entails involving deaf voices at every step by building partnerships to ensure deaf communities are included, engaged and actively participating in lawmaking processes. Rights focus on creating, upholding and advancing the legal protections and entitlements of deaf communities. Progress is about monitoring and measuring the impact that Collective Engagement and Rights have had on deaf communities.

The four foundations are universally applicable across all pillars, ensuring that the DLT model retains coherence and relevance across various legal contexts while authentically representing the diverse experiences of the deaf community. The first, Community Engagement, Co-Creation and Participation, emphasising the significance of involving deaf individuals in every facet of legal development and application. Second, Access and Accessibility mandates that any application of the DLT framework by governmental agencies, policymakers, researchers, or practitioners must prioritise accessibility as a fundamental principle. This foundation requires legal processes, research, and tools to be accessible to all deaf individuals, irrespective of their unique circumstances or locations.

Third, Intersectional Identities and Languages, recognises the intricacies of deaf

identities and emphasises the importance of considering the intersections of deaf+, disability, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+, and other marginalised identities while ensuring the model accommodates the diverse linguistic requirements of the community, including both signed and spoken languages. Finally, the Global and Local Realities foundation underscores the need for the model to be flexible, taking into account the diverse legal systems and cultural contexts globally in which deaf communities find themselves.

The model's features provide the essential practical tools and mechanisms required for effective implementation, functioning as tangible actions that animate the pillars and foundations. First, Cultural and Legal Perceptions requires a consideration of how society and its legal system perceives and recognises deaf individuals within that particular cultural and legal context. This perspective further acknowledges that the experiences of deaf individuals are influenced by a myriad of intersectional identities. Second, Recognition of Sign Languages champions the formal acknowledgment of signed languages within legal frameworks. Beyond legal contexts, recognising sign languages is vital for the social, cognitive, and educational advancement of deaf individuals. Acquiring a signed language transcends mere communication; it also enhances access to education, employment avenues, and social inclusion. Their formal recognition is therefore vital within legal systems, although their success vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Third, Advocacy emphasises the importance of sustained efforts to effect legal and policy transformations, empowering the deaf community to actively engage in advocating for their rights. Fourth, Awareness and Training highlights the necessity for legal practitioners, policymakers, and the general public to be informed and cognisant of deaf perspectives. Finally, Cultural and Legal Contexts ensures that the model remains adaptable and can be tailored to the specific needs of deaf people within each legal system or community.

The model serves not only as a theoretical framework but also as a practical tool for implementation. It is intended to be universal, inclusive, actionable, and adaptable, making it suitable for a wide range of legal systems, cultures, and communities. In short, the core principles are established by the pillars, the foundations provide universal elements for consistency and flexibility, and the features outline the actionable components that ensure the model is functional.

## Exposing the EU's approach to NSL

The EU prides itself on its commitment to linguistic diversity, enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union, 2012a) and various treaties that safeguard cultural and linguistic inclusivity. However, the reality of the EU's multilingualism policy reveals a significant gap: while the EU recognises 24 spoken languages as official (EEC Council, 1958), the 29 NSLs of its Member States are

conspicuously excluded. The EU's multilingualism policy, as outlined in Regulation 1/1958 (EEC Council, 1958), establishes the list of official languages for all institutional communication, legislative processes, and public engagement. However, NSLs, despite being recognised as languages by Member States, are absent from this list. This omission creates a dual system where spoken languages are fully integrated into the EU's governance, while NSLs remain on the periphery, limiting deaf individuals' ability to access EU institutions, engage in policymaking, and benefit from the protections afforded to speakers of official languages.

The European Parliament has recognised the need to address this disparity, and indeed, in 2018 commented that the multilingualism of the EU is one of the most 'significant challenges for the creation of a truly integrated EU' (European Parliament, 2018a, recital D). Since 1988, it has passed multiple resolutions calling for the recognition and promotion of NSLs. These include the Resolution on Sign Languages for the Deaf (European Parliament, 1988), which called on the Commission to make a proposal to the Council concerning official recognition of the sign language used by deaf people in each Member State. A subsequent resolution in 1998 (European Parliament, 1998), again called for the Council to make a proposal concerning official recognition of NSLs. A 2016 resolution focusing on sign language interpreters (European Parliament, 2016) stressed the need for the official recognition of NSLs in Member States and within EU institutions (art. 1(a)), and one in 2018 posited that NSLs should be awarded official status (European Parliament, 2018b, recital U). A report on the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 (European Parliament, 2011) called on the Member States and the Commission to recognise sign language as an official language in the Member States in accordance with the Brussels Declaration (European Union of the Deaf, 2010). Despite these repeated calls, the practical implementation of these resolutions remains slow.

The gap in the EU's approach to NSLs is further evidenced by its failure to provide avenues for deaf individuals to interact with institutions in their NSLs. Deaf citizens cannot access EU documentation, petitions, or debates in NSLs, effectively excluding them from meaningful participation in the EU's democratic processes (European Union of the Deaf, 2024). This exclusion violates the EU's own commitments to equality and non-discrimination, as well as its obligations under international law. The absence of NSLs from the EU's multilingualism policy is not a question of competence but of priority; while the EU cannot independently recognise NSLs as 'full' languages (a prerogative of Member States), it has the authority to grant them official status within its institutional framework, a step it has yet to take. Addressing this oversight would not only align the EU with its stated values but also fulfil its legal and moral obligations to uphold the language rights of all citizens.

## The role of Article 21

The CRPD represents a landmark in international human rights law, explicitly

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recognising the unique rights of persons with disabilities, including their linguistic and cultural identities. Central to this recognition is Article 21, which enshrines the right to freedom of expression and access to information through signed languages. For the EU, which ratified the CRPD in 2010 (European Council, 2009), Article 21 provides a clear legal and ethical mandate to promote and recognise NSLs within its institutional framework.

Article 21 stipulates those persons with disabilities, including deaf individuals, can ‘seek, receive, and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication.’ Furthermore, Article 21(b) obligates State Parties to ‘accept and facilitate the use of sign languages ... in official interactions,’ while Article 21(e) mandates ‘recognising and promoting the use of sign languages.’ For the EU, these obligations are particularly significant. As the first regional organisation to ratify the CRPD, the EU committed to implementing its provisions in areas where it holds competence. However, its exclusion of NSLs from official EU languages directly violates Article 21(b), which requires their use in institutional communication. Similarly, Article 21(e)’s call to promote sign languages as equal to spoken languages remains unfulfilled.

The European Parliament has repeatedly highlighted the importance of Article 21 in its resolutions. The 2018 resolution on language equality in the digital age (European Parliament, 2018a), reinforced the need to integrate NSLs into broader linguistic frameworks, acknowledging their importance for achieving equality and accessibility. This aligns with the CRPD’s vision but has yet to translate into substantive policy changes at EU level.

The lack of official recognition for NSLs is therefore undermining the EU’s ability to meet its CRPD obligations. Without official language status, NSLs cannot be used in EU communications, excluding deaf individuals from meaningful participation in governance and policymaking. This exclusion perpetuates the marginalisation of sign languages, reinforcing the perception that they are secondary to spoken languages.

Recognising NSLs as official EU languages would not only fulfil the EU’s CRPD commitments but also align its policies with the broader goals of equality and inclusion. By operationalising Article 21, the EU can ensure that deaf individuals have equal access to information, services, and participation, thereby bridging the systemic gaps that currently deny them full citizenship within the Union.

## Applying DLT

By applying the principles of the DLT model to the campaign for the recognition of the EU’s 29 NSLs as official EU languages, we can expose the limitations of existing policies while demonstrating pathways for reform. This section integrates the three pillars – Collective Engagement, Rights, and Progress – with the universal foundations

and context-specific features of the model to critically assess the EU's multilingualism policy and propose transformative solutions.

## Collective engagement

The principle of collective engagement emphasises the importance of inclusion, collaboration, and participation in shaping law and policy. The exclusion of NSLs from official EU multilingualism policy reflects a persistent disconnect between EU institutions and deaf communities, particularly as the aim of openness in EU decision-making enables citizens to actively participate in the political process (Curtin, 2000).

While the EU professes linguistic diversity, evident in its comprehensive language tools and information portals, deaf communities are excluded in practice. The EU's translation services (European Commission, 2025) and access to information mechanisms (European Union, 2025) do not support NSLs. By way of example, the European Parliament's (2025b) petitions portal only allows petitions to be submitted in an official language of the EU (European Parliament, 2025a). The 2016 Resolution calls for the EU to allow petitions to be submitted in NSLs (European Parliament, 2016, recital L).

To change this, deaf signers should be involved in the design of these platforms: from including NSL video translations on websites and other media to involving deaf representatives in the governance of communication technologies. Establishing formal mechanisms, such as advisory committees led by deaf individuals, can ensure that their lived experiences and insights inform every stage of policy development.

## Rights

The rights pillar focuses on achieving equality and justice through the recognition of the unique identities and needs of deaf individuals. The current exclusion of NSLs from official EU language status contravenes the principles of non-discrimination enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union, 2012a) and the obligations under Article 21 of the CRPD. This omission diminishes the legal protections afforded to deaf individuals and restricts their ability to fully participate in EU governance.

Recognising NSLs as official EU languages is a necessary step toward rectifying these inequalities. Such recognition must go beyond tokenistic acknowledgment and must be accompanied by substantive legal reform. By amending Regulation 1/1958 (EEC Council, 1958, p. 1), the EU can ensure that NSLs are treated on an equal footing with spoken languages, enabling deaf individuals to access EU documents, services, and debates in their native sign language. This would reflect the dual category status of

deaf individuals as both members of a language minority and part of the disability collective.

## Progress

Progress is about monitoring and measuring the impact that Collective Engagement and Rights has had on deaf communities. It is clear that despite a series of resolutions by the European Parliament, the Brussels Declaration (European Union of the Deaf, 2010), and the EUD's Position Paper (2024), the Commission has not taken the necessary steps to recognise the 29 NSLs of the EU as official languages.

This persistent inaction, despite repeated calls from the European Parliament, exposes a critical disconnect between symbolic recognition and institutional follow-through. Parliamentary resolutions have consistently urged EU institutions to formally recognise NSLs, yet the Commission has failed to act. This inertia is a recognised issue in EU lawmaking processes, and implementation is often fragmented and inconsistent, particularly where accountability is weak and political incentives are low (Zhelyazkova and Thoman, 2021). Schoenefeld et al. (2019) and Zwaan and Schoenefeld (2024) further highlight how policy monitoring in the EU tends to serve political signalling rather than enforcement or reform, and low-cost or low-priority issues are easily sidelined (König and Mäder, 2014). The case of NSL recognition reflects this pattern.

## Foundations

Beneath the pillars lie the universal foundations that anchor the DLT model and apply across the board. Community Engagement and Co-Creation are essential to ensuring that deaf individuals actively participate in shaping the policies that affect them, particularly as historically, they have been marginalised in institutional decision-making. Addressing this requires not only consultation but also the empowerment of deaf-led organisations to co-create policies alongside EU institutions.

However, while the EU increasingly adopts the rhetoric of co-creation in its policy discourse and project design (Ruess, Müller and Pfotenhauer, 2023), this is rarely matched by meaningful engagement. As several studies note, co-creation in EU-funded projects is often instrumentalised for performance metrics (Meister Broekema, Horlings and Bulder, 2022; Meister Broekema, Bulder and Horlings, 2023) or for economic benefit (Ruess, Müller and Pfotenhauer, 2023). With this in mind, deaf-led governance, NSL-inclusive design, and tailored evaluation frameworks, is key to avoid deaf participation becoming merely symbolic.

Access and Accessibility are similarly foundational. The current exclusion of NSLs from official EU language status denies deaf individuals the ability to engage with

EU institutions. This is likely to manifest in the present context in the form of availability of interpreters and investing in digital tools for sign language translation. However, even the idea of 'access' is problematic, as society has not really grasped the concept of 'access' for deaf people. The usual type of 'access' is the provision of sign language interpreting services, and it is argued that such provision has become a 'quick fix to solve complex language issues,' produces an 'illusion of inclusion' (De Meulder and Haualand, 2019a) and has become an 'institutionally normative' solution (De Meulder and Haualand, 2019b), giving the impression that deaf people are participating on equal terms. The EU has and does demonstrate a commitment to accessibility, notably through the European Accessibility Act (European Union, 2019) (EAA) which aims to ensure that certain products and services are accessible across the EU (European Union of the Deaf, 2025), but it fails to explicitly include NSLs and prioritise economic harmonisation instead (Ferri, 2020).

The foundation of Intersectional Identities and Languages ensures that the diverse experiences of deaf individuals are recognised. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) concept of intersectionality helps us understand how multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage can intersect and create unique obstacles that are often overlooked by conventional approaches. Intersectional analyses, such as those by Moges (2020) and Friedner (2017), further argue that framing deaf communities as a singular ethnic group risks neglecting the impact of race, class, and colonial histories on deaf experiences. Yet EU policy has long struggled to reflect this complexity, with the EU treating grounds of inequality as interchangeable (Verloo, 2006), or siloing equality categories (Kantola and Nousiainen, 2009), and while intersectionality is occasionally referenced, it is rarely embedded into the design or implementation of EU policy (Lombardo and Verloo, 2009). It is this attitude towards intersectionality that ensures the EU's language policy remains centred on spoken national languages, rather than NSLs.

Finally, Cultural and Contextual Relevance ensures that policy design and implementation align with the lived realities of deaf individuals across different Member States. Language is never neutral: it is bound to cultural histories, place, and identity. NSLs reflect the specific experiences and cultural knowledge of deaf communities in each national context. Yet EU cultural governance has often operated through symbolic gestures and bureaucratic frameworks that overlook such grassroots realities (Shore, 2006) and focuses on shared identity-building (Sassatelli, 2002), ignoring the role of languages. Cornish and Edwards (2005) argue that the EU's priority is pragmatism to achieve political cohesion, rather than cultural pluralism. This is why the EU has yet to recognise the NSLs of its Member States.

## Features

The features of the DLT model allow for flexibility in addressing specific challenges. The Recognition of Sign Languages is an obvious critical feature. For NSLs to be meaningfully protected and promoted, legal and political recognition is essential. This

feature foregrounds recognition as a status-based right, not a service-based provision. Despite repeated calls from the European Parliament, the EU has refused to amend Regulation 1/1958 (EEC Council, 1958) or afford NSLs the same official status as spoken languages. This omission reinforces a two-tier language system, where deaf people's language rights remain conditional and symbolic. Recognising NSLs as official languages would affirm their equal status within EU multilingualism, create enforceable obligations on institutions, and embed signers into the legal and cultural architecture of the EU. Without such recognition, deaf communities will remain peripheral to EU governance and democracy.

The Cultural and Legal Perceptions feature highlights that the EU's underlying attitude toward the campaign for NSLs to be recognised as official languages of the EU. It is argued that the EU continues to frame deaf signers through a disability lens, rather than as a language minority. This framing is most clear in the resolutions from 1988 to 2018 which describe deaf people as having 'speech difficulties' (European Parliament, 1998) and people with 'hearing disabilities' needing sign language as a tool for 'integration into hearing society' (European Parliament, 1988) or in the form of 'accessibility' (European Parliament, 2016). Even where sign language is mentioned, it is positioned as a support mechanism rather than a language in its own right. The 2016 resolution, for instance, ties sign language access to disability rights, while the 2018 resolution places faith in technology to 'ease communication' for deaf people, rather than recognising the linguistic legitimacy of NSLs. These framings reflect deep-rooted cultural and legal assumptions that reduce deaf people to a deficit frame, rather than affirming them as signers with cultural and linguistic rights.

The Advocacy feature recognises the ongoing efforts by National Associations of the Deaf to secure legal recognition for NSLs. This very book forms part of the EUD's broader campaign to push for the recognition of all 29 NSLs across the EU. Despite sustained advocacy over decades through resolutions in the European Parliament, the EU's inertia demonstrates how legal change rarely emerges without coordinated pressure. Advocacy is therefore not ancillary to recognition: it is the mechanism that forces institutions to confront their exclusions, challenge entrenched ableist assumptions, and begin reshaping the EU's multilingualism to include deaf people on their own terms.

The Awareness and Training feature highlights the persistent knowledge gap within EU institutions about deaf people's linguistic and cultural identities. Even where there is policy momentum on accessibility or disability rights, there is limited understanding of NSLs as languages, or of the deaf community as a language minority. This lack of institutional awareness affects everything from how legislation is drafted to how services are delivered. Recognising NSLs at the EU level must therefore be accompanied by training for policymakers, civil servants, and service providers. Without this, recognition risks becoming hollow. Training and awareness-raising are vital tools for shifting institutional cultures and ensuring that legal change translates into meaningful change in practice.

The Cultural and Legal Contexts feature emphasises that recognising NSLs at the EU level must take account of the legal and cultural diversity across Member States. NSLs are not generic tools for communication but embedded within national histories, shaped by differing experiences of exclusion, education policy, and language suppression. Any move toward EU-wide recognition must therefore be context-sensitive, supporting legal harmonisation without erasing local realities. The EU positions itself as a union founded on the principles of openness, respect for cultural diversity, and participatory democracy (European Union, 2012b, arts. 1 and 2, 2012a). Yet these values are undermined when NSLs, and by extension, deaf communities, are excluded from its multilingualism framework.

## Conclusion

This chapter calls for the EU to formally amend Regulation 1/1958 (EEC Council, 1958) to include 29 NSLs as official EU languages alongside the 24 spoken ones. Applying the DLT framework, it demonstrates that the EU's current exclusion of NSLs violates its commitments to equality, linguistic diversity, and democratic participation. The Rights pillar revealed breaches of the Charter and CRPD. Collective Engagement exposed the absence of deaf voices in EU policy. Progress showed that multiple parliamentary resolutions have been ignored.

The four foundations add depth: the EU's digital and communication systems still fail on access; policy design lacks intersectional insight; community engagement is symbolic at best; and contextual relevance is sacrificed for top-down technocratic control. The five features from cultural perceptions to the recognition of sign languages highlight the underlying assumptions that continue to frame deaf signers as a disability problem, not a linguistic minority. Recognition of NSLs is not a radical ask. It is a necessary correction. And the EU, if it is serious about inclusion, democracy, and multilingualism, must act.

Applying a DLT lens has reframed this analysis from a question of technical interpretation to a broader examination of how legal frameworks continue to exclude NSLs. Rather than merely asking whether NSLs can be included within the existing provisions, this chapter has challenged the normative assumptions that underpin their exclusion. DLT exposes the hearing bias embedded in the EU, revealing that the omission of sign languages is not simply a matter of oversight but reflects deeper epistemological inequalities in how law recognises language, identity, and rights. By foregrounding deaf ideologies in applying the model, the case for urgent reform is strengthened and reinforces the call for the official recognition of NSLs as part of Europe's linguistic and legal landscape.

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## Chapter 5:

# Sign Languages within the multilingual European Union

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In this chapter we shall look at the possibilities of incorporating sign language rights within EU institutions. We will first look at relevant legal foundations within the European Union, then discuss the long history of framing sign language rights as either disability rights or language rights and then conclude with a look at how sign language rights could be realised within the EU.

## Legal framework: What matters for signed languages

The general EU language policy is well documented and transparent, so it will only be summarized here. Multilingualism is one of the founding principles of the European Union, a union that seeks to unify on many levels and in many domains but never strived to unify its languages. Citizens of EU member states have the right to communicate with EU institutions in one of (currently) 24 official languages. All legal acts and summaries are available in those official languages and they are used in meetings of the European Parliament as well as the Council of the European Union. This is widely and easily available information and we therefore don't need to set forth with it. While the EU prides itself in being multilingual, its institutions restrict themselves to these 24 languages and pretty much leave aside the well over 60 regional and minority languages used by approximately 10% of the population of its member states. On the one hand, this is in accordance with the legal framework of the EU that clearly places policies and measure regarding languages within each individual members states' responsibility. On the other hand, there are numerous statements by the EU on its understanding and appreciation of the linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe, especially the contribution of minority language groups. And there are several extensive legal documents available to EU member states that aim at and or serve the protection of linguistic minorities (the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages as well as various reports and resolutions of the EU Parliament: Report on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union 2013, Resolution on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union 2013, Resolution on protection and non-discrimination with regard to minorities in the EU Member States 2018). They contain comprehensive recommendations and provisions to preserve Europe's linguistic diversity. While it is obvious that sign languages are part of the cherished linguistic diversity, interestingly none of these documents mentions signed languages. How come?

## A holistic, intersectional understanding

Not a single national sign language of Europe has been put under the protection of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Mostly, this is due to a refusal of adopting a wider, inclusive understanding of “minority language”. In addition, in several countries we encounter - yet again - arguments that either doubt the full language status and function of signed languages *per se* and stress that signed languages are not regional languages, but just different, or that the Charter was simply not designed with them in mind (for an overview see EUD 2024a).

Although all EU member states have either legally recognized their national sign language(s) and/or have awarded their users specific rights, it seems that there is still confusion about the linguistic nature of these visual-gestural languages.

Whether deaf people should be understood as people with a disability or as members of a linguistic minority has been a topic of heated discussions for decades - and not only among hearing people. Nearly 30 years ago, EUD contracted a Study of Deaf People and Sign Language in the European Union that was conducted and published in 1997 by the Centre of Deaf Studies at University of Bristol. The title mentions both the ‘sensory handicap’ and languages. That same year at the EUD annual conference, the delegates and board members discussed whether it would be beneficial to “establish contacts with the minority languages group [within the European Parliament] and if it would be wiser from a financial view to stay within the disability movement” (EUD 1997b:5). A guest to the general assembly, Sophie Beaumont of the Disability Intergroup Secretariat of the European Parliament, answered that “regarding access to funding, more possibilities for EUD were indeed available within disability budget lines” (EUD 1997b:5). Beaumont stated that she would be happy to assist EUD in establishing contact with the minority languages group. But the minutes reveal that this was understood as not as trouble-free as it might look: “Diane Sutton in the past already had tried to access funding through the minority languages budget line, but this had caused hostility among this group” (EUD 1997b:5). Finally, EUD vice president Markku Jokinen commented that “The discussion should be focusing on minority languages and not on disability issues. The General Assembly should not continue the old way of thinking” (EUD 1997b:5).

That same year, EUD held a conference on Full Citizenship through Sign Languages where the same topic was also discussed. EUD concluded that “(...) Deaf people view themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority” (1997a:10ff). This was a turning point in (European) deaf self-definition, as well as in positioning deaf issues. For the next years, it defined political activism and lobbyism. That same general assembly ended with the discussion and adoption of a resolution that called upon all EU member states “to legally accept each country’s Sign Language within the framework of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.” (EUD 1997b:10). As we know, no such thing has happened since.

EUD has just recently taken up the issue again and in a preliminary report

dated 04/2024 argues for a “modality-inclusive” interpretation of the Charters’ understanding of “languages” (EUD 2024a: no page numbers).

Since the late 1990s, the mutually exclusive categorisation of deaf sign language users as either disabled or members of a linguistic minority has been widely analysed, discussed and dismissed as not doing justice to the reality and to the understanding of deaf peoples (see, among others, Krausneker 2015, De Meulder 2016). The seeming necessity of an either-or, the highly artificial duality has not served deaf sign language users well. It is really a “dual category membership”, as De Meulder has called it in her PhD work (De Meulder 2016), or an intersectional understanding that does justice to the realities, needs and identities of the diverse group of deaf sign language users. Furthermore, deaf people/s will only ever be done right by states and their institutions when this understanding will lead to both linguistic rights and appropriate measures regarding accessibility. A group of people with a disability that is unified as a community not by their hearing status but by their bimodal bilingual everyday life, and especially by their use of signed languages – this challenges habits and orders. It challenges, for example, the department logic of ministries: State departments where accessibility and accommodation laws/experts/departments/civil servants/measures/services are located rarely ever overlap with minority language laws/experts/departments/civil servants/measures/services. Thus, their policies and measures usually do not cover the totality of experiences of deaf sign language users.

After this brief discussion of the problematic and highly relevant matter of “definition”, let’s look at the options of recognising signed languages as official languages within the EU.

## Recognising sign languages as official languages of the EU

Today, the landscape of sign language recognitions and rights is highly diverse (see De Meulder et al. 2019), but it is unfortunately in most countries still defined by the either-or pigeonholing dynamics; either the national sign language and their users are granted rights within a disability law, or there is sign language recognition within language laws or in the context of language paragraphs of other laws.

To make matters even more complicated, one of the globally most potent documents in the 21st century that aims at safeguarding the rights of deaf sign language users is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006). Per title and definition, the measures, rights and demands of this human rights document are created with people with disabilities in mind – but it contains several articles on sign languages and sign language users (see the book series by EUD on the topic and the entry on the Convention by Pabsch (2016) in the Deaf Studies Encyclopedia). The EU itself as a political entity signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) in 2007, and it entered into force

in 2011. Krausneker then stated: “It complements the already existing European Disability Strategy 2010–2020. The European Disability Strategy mentions as a goal the investigation of strategies for facilitating sign language and Braille use in EU institutions; it does not discuss sign language rights in nearly as much detail as does the UNCRPD” (Krausneker 2016:593).

The current EU Disability Strategy mentions sign languages only a few times. It briefly sketches obstacles and barriers in chapter 3.1. on “Moving and residing freely” and in chapter 3.2. on “Fostering participation in the democratic process”. And the European Commission promises in chapter 8.2. that it shall “improve by 2023 accessibility across its audiovisual communications and graphic design services as well as of its publications and events, including where relevant sign language interpretation and documents in ‘easy-to-read’ format” (European Union 2021:30). Still, the UN- CRPD is much more explicit, precise and promising when it comes to the rights of deaf sign language users. It seems that the current EU Disability Strategy shall be updated some time in 2025, but we have no detailed information on this yet. It is fairly clear, though, that much needed linguistic rights will neither be rooted in the EU Disability Strategy nor be in any significant way driven forward by it.

In 2023, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes published a “Proposal for a Draft Global Convention on the Rights of Minorities” as an attachment to his annual thematic report. This text actually explicitly mentions and thus includes signed languages:

“A linguistic minority includes persons who share any natural language, including sign languages, who are not a majority in a state, including languages categorized domestically as dialects, patois or creoles, or who share a common writing system but are mutually unintelligible. The existence of a linguistic minority in a State is not dependent on official status or legal recognition.” (Part 1, Art.1.4)

But it seems that in contrast to protecting sign language rights within UN-CRPD, this is not going to succeed anytime soon: “(...) there had been little or no significant development institutionally at the United Nations to advance the protection of minorities when compared with other marginalised groups”. Whatever the case might be and how this might go, in the meantime the European Union nevertheless has an obligation to implement article 21 of UN-CRPD and grant deaf sign language users access to information.

In the course of writing this chapter, we consulted Gabriel N. Toggenburg, legal expert on human and minority rights and author of several books and many papers on minority protection in Europe. Toggenburg, while not an expert on sign languages, offered his perspective. He was very interested in thinking through the question at hand and he was clear in his assessment that at present in the EU, disability issues have a “stronger legal basis” and are “much less controversial” than minority languages. Toggenburg also commented that Catalan, Basque and Galician have tried several times to achieve recognition as official languages in the EU, but were not

successful. This is the case even though Spain had promised to cover all costs related to translation and interpretation. Toggenburg deems it “highly improbable” that signed languages will be able to achieve the status as official languages and commented that “strategically” it would be better to focus on disability policies and what they offer.

So here we are, nearly 30 years after then EUD vice president Markku Jokinen stated that “The discussion should be focusing on minority languages and not on disability issues.” (EUD 1997b:5), seemingly stuck in the same process of balancing strategic pragmatics and self-definition/identity. While the impression might be that we are going in circles, this is definitely not the case. Let’s see how it could all go forward.

## Conclusion

For deaf people, access to information and freedom of expression and opinion primarily means use of their national sign language, hence sign language rights within the EU institutions are necessary.

One way to achieve this is the recognition of national sign languages by the EU, as EUD has put forward in its recent position paper (2024b). While this seems an unusual approach and would set sign languages apart from all other minority languages, it could be agreed that the recognition of national sign languages by the EU could potentially foster visibility for other linguistic minorities in the union. But let’s look at EU obligations: If the Union takes its obligation to implement article 21 seriously, it should pay respect to the fact that this group is different from each and every one of the other linguistic minorities, due to one special characteristic: While members of spoken language minorities can fully access the other spoken/written language(s) of their country, they are usually fully bi-/multilingual... Deaf sign language users, though, are different and spoken languages do not grant them meaningful access. Additionally, in many cases, literacy in the dominant written language is either hard-earned, only partly acquired or not much developed at all. Deaf sign language users are a minority with a disability and in order to pay respect to that, measures by the EU need to be more diverse and flexibly implemented and take into account deaf peoples’ intersectional dual category membership. So, in a nutshell: I think that new paths need to be forged.

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## Chapter 6:

# Toward recognition: Sign languages and European institutional legitimacy<sup>19</sup>

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## Introduction

The European Union often presents itself as a defender of linguistic equality, yet it continues to exclude national sign languages from this principle. This gap has real consequences: without official recognition, there is no systematic provision of interpretation in national sign languages during institutional debates or in EU communications, and when an interpretation is provided, it's only in International Sign. International Sign is not used by many deaf people across Europe, therefore, its use doesn't provide a large accessibility scope for deaf citizens. Every member state has at least one national sign language – Belgium alone has three (LSFB, VGT, and DGS) – and across the Union there are 29 in total. Around one million Europeans use these languages every day, but their access to EU information and decision-making remains limited. The European Union of the Deaf (EUD) and other associations regularly call out this contradiction, stressing that the lack of recognition prevents a large community of citizens from fully participating in European democracy (De Meulder, 2015). Although the right to access information in sign languages is affirmed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it is still far from being implemented at the European level.

The EUD has been particularly vocal in critiquing this situation. Through public campaigns, statements, and, especially, digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), the EUD frames its critique not as a simple complaint but as a metadiscursive reflection on institutional legitimacy. This critique highlights a paradox: while EU institutions claim to uphold principles of equality and inclusion, the lived experiences of deaf citizens reveal persistent gaps and exclusions. The EUD's discourse underscores that the failure to provide comprehensive access in national sign languages undermines the credibility of European institutions and weakens their democratic authority.

This chapter examines the legitimacy of European institutions as reflected in the EUD's

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<sup>19</sup> This chapter was written following a study published in issue 13 of *Les Cahiers Protagoras* and represents a reworked version that draws heavily on the original article : <https://www.editions-harmattan.fr/catalogue/livre/du-multilinguisme-en-europe-hegemonies-linguistiques-et-discursives/79754>.

public discourse, focusing on five dimensions: accessibility, inclusion, involvement, identity recognition, and democratic participation. Each of these dimensions highlights a distinct aspect of how institutions can either fail or succeed in fulfilling their democratic promises. Additionally, the chapter questions the reliance on digital tools as a means to foster institutional change and promote visibility and advocacy for minority communities. By studying these critiques, we can better understand how legitimacy is constructed, contested, and potentially restored in the context of minority rights and linguistic justice within the European Union.

The analysis draws on both theoretical frameworks from discourse studies and empirical observations of the EUD's communications on X, combining insights from sociopragmatic approaches, critical discourse analysis, and theories of democratic legitimacy. It argues that criticisms from the European deaf community are not merely reactive but proactive: they provide a blueprint for what inclusive, accessible, and legitimate governance should look like, highlighting both gaps in current practice and potential paths forward.

## Critique and the process of legitimisation

To understand the EUD's critiques, it is crucial to clarify what is meant by both critique and legitimacy. Institutions often communicate as though their authority is natural and self-evident, relying on the perception that their actors possess expertise, experience, and social recognition (Monte & Oger, 2015; Amossy, 2022). This "discursive authority" presents institutional statements as indisputable truths, often supported by normative frameworks or established procedures (Guilbert, 2015). For European institutions, legitimacy is thus embedded in the status of being a recognised democratic authority. However, this legitimacy is inherently fragile and requires continuous reinforcement, especially when citizens or groups highlight gaps between declared principles and actual practices (Rosanvallon, 2008).

Critique, in this context, functions not merely as an expression of discontent but as a metadiscursive mechanism capable of revealing and reshaping these legitimacy claims. Following Tant (2024a, 2024b), critique can be understood as a form of metadiscourse: a reflective commentary on existing institutional narratives, practices, and social norms. By articulating what should be done or how institutions could act more justly, critique intervenes in the very construction of legitimacy. Barthe et al. (2013) emphasise that critique has the capacity to alter social and political relations, while Blommaert (2005) highlights that metadiscourse guides the interpretation of statements according to prevailing social contexts.

In practice, the EUD uses critique to frame its arguments about institutional responsibilities and citizen rights. For instance, when it denounces the lack of sign language interpretation in EU communications, it is not only expressing a grievance; it is asserting a normative principle that accessibility is a prerequisite for democratic

participation. In this sense, the critique is both reflexive and performative: it draws attention to institutional shortcomings while proposing the basis for legitimate practice.

The concept of articulation, rooted in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory and applied to minority and activist discourses by Zienkowski (2017, 2018, 2019), helps us understand how abstract ideas like democracy, inclusion, or representation are made meaningful in specific contexts. Critique serves to articulate these values with concrete institutional practices. For example, "democracy" articulated in relation to accessibility implies that without linguistic access for deaf citizens, democratic processes remain incomplete. Similarly, inclusion articulated with identity recognition suggests that multicultural principles are not fully realised unless linguistic diversity is acknowledged and supported, including the promotion and respect of national sign languages.

In short, the EUD's public critique represents a deliberate effort to contest and redefine legitimacy. By highlighting gaps in access, representation, and inclusion, the organisation challenges the assumption that institutional authority is self-evident, insisting that legitimacy must be continuously earned and maintained through concrete practices that respect every citizen, including deaf citizens.

## Accessibility

Accessibility is a central pillar of democratic legitimacy. For the European Union, the ability of citizens to access information produced by its institutions is not merely a matter of convenience; it is a fundamental requirement for participating meaningfully in public life. For deaf citizens, this means having access to information in their national sign language, whether through live interpretation during debates, translated documents, or accessible multimedia content. Yet accessibility should not be seen only as a way to ensure that deaf people can receive information. It is equally an enabler for them to interact, contribute, and take part in shaping EU policies and debates. In sum, accessibility empowers deaf citizens to be active contributors to European democracy, and not just passive recipients of information.

The EUD has repeatedly emphasised that full access to information is a basic human right. As the organisation states, deaf people "should have FULL access to interpreting with no restrictions" (EUD, 2022, September 10). This statement reflects a broader principle: access to information is essential for informed citizenship. Without it, the very foundations of democracy are weakened. De Terwagne (2004) similarly stresses that "the knowledge by citizens of the activities of [European] administration is a guarantee of its proper functioning." In other words, when the EU fails to provide information in national sign languages, it undermines its own legitimacy and excludes a significant portion of its population from participation in civic life.

Accessibility is not only about providing information but also about ensuring that the information is usable and meaningful. This includes the quality of sign language interpretation, the clarity of translations, and the timely dissemination of materials. A poorly interpreted speech or a delayed translation can render the information effectively inaccessible. The EUD highlights these concerns by advocating for professional, high-quality interpretation across all EU events: “Full access [to information from the European institutions] is a basic precondition of our most fundamental rights. Yet, deaf people face barriers in this regard” (EUD, 2022, September 21).

Moreover, accessibility is closely linked to the recognition of national sign languages themselves. Across Europe, every country has recognized, to varying legislative levels (apart from France (WFD, 2025), their national sign languages. For example, Belgium recognises three languages: the French-speaking Belgian Sign Language (LSFB), the Flemish Sign Language (VGT), and the German Sign Language (DGS). Other countries, such as Spain and Denmark, have also taken legislative steps to recognise their national sign languages officially. These recognitions are not merely symbolic; they allow deaf citizens to access public services, education, and cultural participation in their native sign language.

Yet, at the EU level, national sign languages are still largely excluded from official communication channels, and SLs are not recognised yet. The EUD criticises this inconsistency, pointing out that “EU institutions should prioritise making [public] events accessible in all EU national sign languages, which are now officially recognised in all EU Member States” (EUD, 2022, September 14). By refusing to implement comprehensive accessibility measures, the EU risks sending a message that deaf citizens are less entitled to participate in European public life, thus weakening the perceived legitimacy of its institutions.

Accessibility also includes digital platforms, which have become increasingly important for political engagement. The EUD uses social media, particularly X, to share accessible content in International Signs, videos, and textual summaries, ensuring that their advocacy reaches a wider audience. However, digital accessibility is not a perfect solution. Technical issues, lack of standardisation across platforms, and limitations in reach can prevent these tools from fully replacing traditional forms of access. While digital tools offer a crucial space for visibility and advocacy, they cannot entirely compensate for the lack of official recognition and institutional support for national sign languages.

In this sense, accessibility is not an isolated principle. It is intertwined with inclusion, participation, and identity recognition. Without accessible communication, deaf citizens cannot engage fully with EU processes, cannot participate in consultations, and remain on the margins of policy debates. For the EUD, accessibility is therefore both a demand for equity and a test of legitimacy: if the EU fails to ensure access, it fails in its democratic responsibilities.

## Inclusion

Inclusion is more than a principle; it is a condition for meaningful participation in society. For the EUD, inclusion means that every citizen – regardless of their hearing ability – should be able to participate fully in cultural, social, and political life. This includes being able to understand and engage with EU decisions, debates, and documents in a language they can use: their national sign language.

The EUD has repeatedly emphasised that the lack of accessible information directly excludes deaf people from public life. As the organisation stresses, “The EU will not be multilingual if it ignores its national sign languages!” (EUD, 2022, September 23). This statement underlines a clear point: inclusion is not merely about having the right to attend an event or access a service; it is about ensuring the ability to understand, communicate, and participate on equal terms. When national sign languages are not included in EU communications, the multicultural rhetoric of the Union becomes superficial, and part of its citizenry is effectively marginalised.

Inclusion is closely linked to accessibility. Without accessible information, inclusion is nearly impossible. A citizen cannot participate if they cannot access the relevant information in a comprehensible format and act accordingly, in full possession of information, like anyone else concerned. For deaf citizens, this often means having live sign language interpretation for lectures and networking at official events allowing them to fully participate, translated documents, and videos in their national sign language. The EUD emphasises the ethical and political importance of this principle: “not leaving anyone behind & building an inclusive EU” (EUD, 2022, November 16). By advocating for inclusion, the EUD highlights the gap between EU principles and reality: while the Union promotes diversity and multiculturalism, it does not always provide the practical tools to make that diversity meaningful for all its citizens.

Inclusion also intersects with the recognition of national sign languages as legitimate languages. Recognising the 29 EU National Sign Languages as European official languages is not just symbolic; it validates the culture, identity, and languages of the community that uses them. For deaf communities, inclusion is inseparable from language recognition. Without recognition, deaf citizens cannot fully participate in society on equal terms with their hearing counterparts. The EUD makes this connection explicit: all 29 national sign languages should not only be recognised at the national level, but should also be officialised as EU languages, thereby ensuring that deaf people are fully included in the European project (EUD, 2024).

The digital environment plays a dual role in inclusion. Social media platforms like X provide a space for deaf communities to share information, express opinions, and participate in discussions that would otherwise be inaccessible. These tools allow the EUD to reach a wider audience, raise awareness of issues, and apply pressure on institutions. However, digital inclusion has its limits. Not everyone has equal access to digital platforms, and online engagement does not always translate into real influence over decision-making. As Proulx (2020) and Carpenter (2016) emphasise, online

participation does not automatically amount to having a real say in decision-making; access to information or the ability to post and comment remains only a preliminary step. True inclusion requires not only digital visibility but also institutional recognition and concrete opportunities to exert influence.

Moreover, inclusion extends beyond immediate access to information. It also concerns cultural and social recognition. Deaf communities often face social marginalisation, and the EU's failure to include national sign languages reinforces this marginalisation. By promoting policies that include these languages, the EU can foster a sense of ownership among deaf citizens and ensure that diversity is not only celebrated in words but implemented in practice. Inclusion, therefore, is both a right and a measure of institutional legitimacy: institutions that fail to include significant segments of their population undermine their credibility and weaken democratic governance.

In summary, inclusion is a multi-layered concept that encompasses access, language officialisation, participation, and social legitimacy. For the EUD, inclusion is not optional – it is a fundamental principle that determines whether deaf citizens can truly engage with the European Union as equal participants. Without inclusion, the EU risks marginalising millions of citizens and compromising the democratic ideals it claims to uphold.

## Involve ment

Involve ment refers to the active engagement of citizens in the processes that shape their society. For the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), involve ment is a key criterion of legitimacy: decisions made by institutions are legitimate only if the people they affect can meaningfully take part in discussions, debates, and decision-making processes. Without the possibility of involve ment, participation is reduced to a formal gesture, leaving affected communities excluded from shaping policies that concern them directly.

The EUD stresses that the effective involve ment of deaf citizens requires more than symbolic consultation. It involves giving them access to information, tools, and platforms to engage, as well as acknowledging their expertise and lived experiences. As the organisation notes, “of involving persons with disabilities to successfully implement accessibility policies” (EUD, 2022, June 15). This statement highlights the connection between inclusion, accessibility, and involve ment: citizens cannot engage if they are uninformed or excluded from relevant communication channels.

Involve ment also relates to the broader principle of participatory democracy. For the EUD, deaf citizens are experts in their own experiences and therefore should be consulted in shaping policies that affect their daily lives. This perspective reflects a growing recognition in democratic theory that legitimacy is not only granted by procedural correctness but also by the capacity of institutions to incorporate the

voices of those affected by decisions (Rosanvallon, 2008). When EU institutions fail to provide sign language interpretation, translated documents, or accessible online platforms, they restrict the opportunity for deaf citizens to contribute, reducing the legitimacy of their actions.

The EUD further emphasises that involvement must occur at all levels of decision-making. From legislative discussions to public consultations and cultural initiatives, deaf citizens should be able to participate actively rather than merely observing. For example, when a draft regulation on disability rights is debated, providing it in all officialised national sign languages allows deaf citizens to review, comment, and even propose amendments. Without these provisions, the process remains incomplete and biased toward hearing citizens.

Digital platforms, especially X, offer a double-edged opportunity. They enable the EUD and other associations to mobilise communities, share information rapidly, and coordinate collective actions. However, online involvement is not equivalent to formal participation in policy-making. Posting comments, sharing content, or tagging institutions can raise awareness, but they rarely result in tangible policy influence. As Carpentier (2016) points out, participation requires the capacity to act, meaning citizens must have channels that allow them to influence outcomes, not just to express opinions. In practice, this often means institutional reforms that formally integrate deaf people through their representative organisations into consultation processes and decision-making bodies.

Involvement is also linked to civic education and empowerment. Deaf citizens, like any citizen, have the right to understand the functioning of EU institutions, the legislative process, and the potential impact of their engagement. Providing accessible explanations, workshops, and resources in national sign languages ensures that citizens are not only able to participate but are empowered to do so effectively. The EUD's advocacy emphasises that the lack of such initiatives leaves citizens ill-equipped to influence policies, which undermines the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

Finally, implication interacts closely with accessibility, inclusion, and the cultural and linguistic identity of deaf people. Without accessible information, inclusion, and acknowledgment of linguistic identity, meaningful implication is impossible. Deaf citizens cannot be expected to contribute to a process that systematically excludes their language and perspectives. For the EUD, therefore, ensuring proper implication is not a secondary goal but a fundamental condition for democratic governance in the European Union.

In summary, implication highlights the need for active, informed, and empowered engagement of all citizens, particularly deaf communities. The EUD's critique underscores that without mechanisms allowing deaf citizens to participate meaningfully, EU institutions risk creating policies that lack legitimacy, perpetuate exclusion, and weaken democratic foundations. Implication is not just a procedural formality, it is a principle that ensures the voices of all citizens are heard, respected,

and considered in shaping the future of the European Union.

## Identities recognition

Identity recognition<sup>20</sup> is a central criterion of legitimacy for the EUD. For deaf communities, linguistic identity is inseparable from cultural identity: national sign languages are not simply communication tools, they are living expressions of community, history, and heritage. Recognising these languages at the EU level validates the unique identities of millions of deaf citizens across Europe.

The European Union often promotes diversity and multiculturalism as core values, yet this recognition is inconsistent when it comes to European deaf communities. While each EU member state may officially recognise its national sign language, the European institutions themselves do not grant the same recognition. According to the EUD, “as all national sign languages are officially recognised in all EU Member States, the EU must legally recognise them at EU level [...] to promote the linguistic identity of deaf communities” (EUD, 2022, September 23). This statement underscores that legitimacy is contingent on consistent recognition: institutions cannot claim to support diversity while ignoring a distinct form of linguistic and cultural expression.

Recognising national sign languages as European languages is more than symbolic. It has practical consequences for education, employment, public services, and political participation. When institutions fail to acknowledge these languages, they implicitly deny deaf citizens the ability to engage fully in society. For example, without official recognition, legal documents, parliamentary debates, and policy communications remain largely inaccessible to deaf people. The EUD highlights that this exclusion is not just an inconvenience but a violation of fundamental rights, as it impedes access to information and participation in public life.

Identity recognition also strengthens community cohesion. Deaf communities often face societal marginalisation, and official acknowledgment of their languages reinforces pride, visibility, and social inclusion. The EUD emphasises that national sign languages are natural languages with full linguistic structures and should be recognised as “fully-fledged” languages, equivalent to spoken ones (EUD, 2024, July 2). Recognising these languages affirms that deaf people are equal participants in European society and that their cultural heritage is valued.

This focus on identity ties directly to legitimacy. When institutions ignore linguistic and cultural identities, they risk creating alienation and disengagement among citizens. Legitimacy is not simply a matter of procedural correctness or legal compliance; it

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20 Identity, in the sense discussed by Paddy Ladd (2003), refers to the way individuals and communities construct a sense of self through shared language, culture, and experience. For deaf people, identity is not limited to audiological status but is deeply connected to collective belonging, cultural values, resistance to dominant norms and of course, sign languages.

depends on institutions being perceived as inclusive, respectful, and attentive to the realities of the populations they serve (Rosanvallon, 2008). For the EUD, failing to recognise sign language identities signals a gap between the principles of diversity and their practical implementation.

Moreover, identity recognition interacts with other dimensions of legitimacy, such as accessibility and inclusion. Without acknowledging national sign languages, efforts to provide accessible information or foster participation are inherently incomplete. Recognition establishes a foundation: it enables access, validates cultural belonging, and supports full civic engagement. In this sense, identity is not just a symbolic concern but a practical prerequisite for democratic legitimacy within the EU.

Importantly, identity recognition also addresses historical inequalities. Deaf communities have long been marginalised and often excluded from mainstream educational, social, and political systems. By recognising their languages, European institutions can contribute to correcting these historical injustices, acknowledging the legitimacy of deaf citizens' experiences and the value of their contributions to European society.

Finally, the EUD stresses that identity recognition at the EU level is essential for building a truly European identity that is pluralistic rather than homogenised. EU's strength lies in its diversity, and deaf communities' languages and cultures are part of this diversity. Ignoring them weakens the EU's claim to represent all its citizens equally. Recognition, therefore, is both a moral and political imperative, ensuring that EU institutions remain credible, inclusive, and representative.

## Participation in democracy

Participation in democracy is the central criterion of legitimacy highlighted by the EUD. For the organisation, this entails more than voting: it requires full involvement in debates, policy-making, and public decision processes. Barriers such as lack of access to information in national sign languages effectively prevent deaf citizens from exercising their rights as European citizens.

The EUD emphasises that participation depends on several interrelated conditions: accessibility, inclusion, involvement, and recognition of identity. In other words, a deaf individual cannot meaningfully participate if they cannot understand institutional communications, if they are not included in discussions, if they are not allowed to contribute to debates, or if their linguistic and cultural identity is ignored. In the words of the EUD: "Deaf people are often denied political participation due to lack of information in their national sign languages. EU must recognise all 31 national sign languages as official languages to ensure equal rights" (EUD, 2023, June 27). This statement underlines the link between linguistic rights and democratic rights. Without recognition of sign languages, democratic participation is inherently

incomplete.

Access to information is particularly critical. European institutions produce a vast number of documents, reports, and deliberations that shape policies affecting millions of citizens. If deaf citizens cannot access these materials in their languages, they are unable to form opinions, respond to debates, or hold institutions accountable. This limitation extends beyond symbolic exclusion; it has tangible consequences for policy outcomes, representation, and the overall functioning of democracy. The EUD frames this as a legitimacy issue: institutions that fail to provide information in accessible formats risk eroding their own credibility and the trust of the public (Rosanvallon, 2008).

The organisation also stresses the importance of active involvement in policy processes. Participation is not passive; it requires that citizens have opportunities to influence decisions. The EUD argues that: “of involving persons with disabilities to successfully implement accessibility policies” (EUD, 2022, June 15). Here, the point is clear: when deaf people are not involved, policies may fail to address their needs effectively. Excluding citizens from these processes undermines not only the quality of decisions but also the perceived legitimacy of the institutions themselves.

Identity recognition is again crucial for democratic participation. A person’s sense of belonging and acknowledgment as a full member of society affects their willingness and ability to engage. If institutions ignore national sign languages, deaf citizens may feel that the EU is not “their” institution, reducing motivation and opportunities to participate. In contrast, official recognition of these languages fosters a sense of inclusion, legitimacy, and empowerment, allowing deaf citizens to engage as equals in the democratic process.

The EUD’s critique also addresses the structural dimension of participation. Democratic legitimacy requires that all voices have equal opportunity to influence policy, yet institutional practices often favour hearing populations. For instance, meetings, consultations, and public hearings frequently lack sign language interpretation, effectively silencing deaf participants. By highlighting these deficiencies, the EUD positions itself as a guardian of democratic principles, insisting that genuine participation is impossible without systematic changes to accessibility, inclusion, and recognition.

## Conclusion

Digital tools, including social media platforms like X, provide alternative spaces for participation, allowing the EUD to make its voice heard and mobilise communities. However, as noted in broader research on digital participation (Carpentier, 2016; Proulx, 2020), online spaces cannot replace formal mechanisms. They can facilitate awareness and discussion, but they do not automatically grant influence over

institutional decision-making. This limitation is particularly relevant for deaf citizens, as social media engagement may not translate into meaningful policy impact. The EUD's persistent online advocacy demonstrates both the potential and the boundaries of digital participation, showing that offline institutional change remains essential.

Finally, democratic participation is closely tied to accountability. When deaf citizens are systematically excluded, institutions may fail to recognise grievances or address inequities in policy design. By demanding recognition of national sign languages as European official languages, the EUD not only seeks access and inclusion but also reinforces institutional responsibility. A democracy that excludes a segment of its citizens is inherently less legitimate; the EUD's critique thus serves as a corrective mechanism, reminding European institutions that accessibility, identity, and inclusion are prerequisites for meaningful participation.

In summary, the EUD frames democratic participation as a multidimensional issue, linking it directly to accessibility, inclusion, involvement, and identity recognition. For the organisation, legitimacy is inseparable from the ability of citizens to engage fully in European democracy. Without measures to ensure equal access and recognition for deaf communities, European institutions risk undermining both the principles of inclusion and the broader legitimacy of their democratic processes. Participation, in this sense, is not only a right but a measure of the health and credibility of the EU as a representative institution.

Digital social networks and online platforms, such as X, provide representative organisations of deaf people with spaces to express themselves, share demands, and mobilise communities at a European scale. For the EUD, X has become a preferred channel to raise awareness about the recognition of national sign languages by the EU to safeguard access to its institutions.

However, these tools have important limitations. Access is unequal: not everyone has the skills, equipment, or connectivity needed to participate fully. Even among sign language users, technical difficulties can hinder engagement, reproducing exclusions already present in traditional institutional channels. Influence on decision-making is also limited. Posting messages or sharing videos may raise public awareness and exert symbolic pressure, but it does not guarantee that institutional policies or decisions will change. Furthermore, multimodal content – combining text, video, and sign language – can be difficult to interpret, and the fragmentation of audiences across platforms can dilute collective impact. The speed and ephemerality of online content further restrict the ability to maintain coherent advocacy, requiring repeated interventions and sustained investment. Finally, social media remain external to European institutions: they provide visibility but not formal legitimacy, and institutions may ignore, moderate, or redirect online messages without addressing substantive demands.

Despite these constraints, digital tools are essential for creating public spaces of discussion, visibility, and advocacy. Yet the EUD's experience demonstrates that online

participation alone cannot replace formal mechanisms of consultation, decision-making, or institutional recognition.

In conclusion, the EUD's public critiques highlight both the potential and the limitations of digital participation while emphasising the broader challenges of inclusion in European democracy. Accessibility, inclusion, meaningful involvement, identity recognition, and democratic participation are all necessary for institutional legitimacy. Social media can support these goals but cannot replace them: true legitimacy requires integrating national sign languages into official structures, ensuring deaf communities can fully participate and exercise their rights as European citizens. The lessons from the EUD's advocacy underscore a broader principle: democratic legitimacy depends not only on formal rights but also on practical, meaningful access and recognition for all citizens.

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## Chapter 7:

# Mapping Sign Language Peoples: The urgent need for comprehensive data collection in the European Union

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## Introduction

Quality, reliable data is a critical step towards the officialisation of national sign languages (NSLs) as official languages of the European Union (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012). Without accurate figures on the number of deaf people their access to education, employment, and public services, as well as their barriers to full societal participation (Manning, Murray & Bloxs, 2022), EU institutions and Member States lack the necessary evidence to enact meaningful change, including acting for the officialisation of EU national sign languages (NSLs). This call had been echoed by the 2025 CRPD Committee in its Concluding Observations to the EU (CRPD, 2025, point 73c).

At present, deaf people remain largely invisible in official datasets at both EU and national levels. When they are counted, it is often through a narrow medical model of disability that reduces them to categories of hearing loss, overlooking their linguistic identity and cultural participation. This absence of accurate data hinders the design of policies that could foster the protection, promotion, and official recognition of national sign languages (NSLs) in the EU (EUD, 2023a). Recognition without evidence risks being symbolic rather than transformative. Throughout this article we use the term Sign Language Peoples (SLPs)<sup>21</sup> to refer to deaf signers. We use the term “deaf people” when referencing existing publications or legislation, or when the context does not specifically focus on SLPs.

The requirement for disaggregated data is explicitly recognised in international human rights frameworks. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of

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21 Following the discussions in the field of Deaf studies, in this chapter, we use the term ‘Sign Language Peoples’, coined by Batterbury, Ladd & Gulliver (2007) to refer to the concept representing the notion that sign language-using deaf people as collectivities that need to be recognised as culturo-linguistic minorities requiring legal protection. We chose this term instead of ‘sign language user’ because the latter could give the incorrect impression that deaf people merely use a language as a tool, rather than naturally expressing themselves in their language.

Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) obliges States Parties, including the European Union, to collect appropriate, disaggregated data to identify and address barriers to the exercise of rights. Yet disaggregation cannot be limited to disability alone. Deaf people are not a homogeneous group: they live at the intersections of gender, age, ethnicity, disability, migration, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and other identities. The EUD Statement on Intersectionality (EUD, 2024) highlights that only by capturing these multiple dimensions can policies respond to the full diversity of deaf communities in Europe.

The present chapter aims to provide a comprehensive approach to a data collection that meaningfully benefits both deaf communities and their governments. To achieve this, the chapter highlights the necessity of robust data collection that extends beyond the disability lens to encompass the cultural and linguistic dimension of deaf communities. This part is highlighted in the “Conceptual and legal framework for data collection” part. Subsequently, we present the current state of data collection in the EU for SLPs, providing a European data collection snapshot. The chapter then presents a case study on data collection of professional NSLs interpreters in Europe, demonstrating how this collection led to improved recognition and protection of the interpreters’ work. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for advancing the rights of SLPs.

## Conceptual and legal framework for data collection

The collection of quality and disaggregated data on deaf people and their national sign languages is not simply a technical or statistical exercise but an international human rights obligation. Quality and reliable data disaggregated by disability and their intersectional identities are crucial to formulate and implement policies giving effect to these international legal obligations.

Data disaggregation by disability means that statistical information must not treat persons with disabilities as a single, undifferentiated category but instead break down data according to the specific barriers experienced by different groups of persons with disabilities (Abualghaib et al., 2019). For SLPs, this implies collecting information not only on the presence of hearing loss but also on their national sign languages, access to professional sign language interpreters, availability of education in their national sign language, and participation in public life.

At the European level, this duty has been reaffirmed in the Disability Rights Strategy 2021–2030, which highlights data collection as a cornerstone for monitoring progress, designing evidence-based policies, and ensuring accountability of Member States in fulfilling their CRPD commitments (European Commission, 2021).

The importance of data collection extends beyond the disability framework and is equally rooted in minority and language rights frameworks. The following provisions

do not specifically refer to data collection but are crucial to encapsulate the cultural and linguistic rights of SLPs. It starts with Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which safeguards the rights of persons belonging to linguistic, cultural, and religious minorities to enjoy their culture and use their language. For SLPs, this translates into the right to use their national sign language (De Meulder & Murray, 2017). Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in its Article 30, guarantees children belonging to linguistic minorities the right not to be denied the use of their own language. This provision directly applies to deaf children, who should not be deprived of the right to access education in and through their national sign language. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities further strengthens these obligations, highlighting the duty of States Parties to create conditions enabling persons belonging to minorities to express and develop their culture and language. These frameworks, when read together, create a robust normative basis for recognising the role of data in safeguarding minority linguistic rights. Without reliable data on the use, transmission, and accessibility of national sign languages, States Parties cannot meaningfully implement these provisions.

At the level of the European Union, the obligation to ensure equality and linguistic diversity is grounded in its foundational legal instruments. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union explicitly prohibits discrimination (Article 21), safeguards the rights of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures ensuring their independence and social and occupational integration (Article 26), and reaffirms the protection of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity (Article 22). Furthermore, Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) enshrines the EU's objective to respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity while promoting equality. Eurostat, as the statistical office of the EU, plays a central role in operationalising these legal obligations. Although it has recently taken steps forward with the creation of a thematic page on disability, deaf people, including SLPs remain invisible in its datasets (Eurostat, n.a.). This oversight highlights the gap between the EU's legal commitments and the current state of data collection. A future framework must therefore ensure that Eurostat and national statistical offices develop methodologies capturing the realities of SLPs, with a particular focus on the use of national sign languages.

The necessity of such disaggregated data is heightened when considering the specific situation of deaf people within the Deaf Duality Paradox (Bloxs, in preparation). Introduced earlier in the chapter of Rob Wilks (Wilks, 2025), the paradox arises from the external perception of deaf people as either persons with disabilities or members of a linguistic and cultural minority, but rarely both. This disaggregation of identities has significant consequences in law and policy. Disability-focused data, when unaccompanied by linguistic and cultural dimensions, risks reducing SLPs to a homogeneous group within disability statistics, overlooking the unique linguistic human rights attached to NSLs. Conversely, data limited to linguistic minorities fails to account for the accessibility barriers and disability-related discrimination that SLPs face in their daily lives. Comprehensive data collection addressing both perspectives

is therefore indispensable. It ensures that policies do not perpetuate the Deaf Duality Paradox, but instead embrace the holistic dual identity of SLPs as both persons with disabilities and members of cultural and linguistic minorities.

Finally, data collection must also integrate an intersectional approach. SLPs are not a monolithic group but individuals situated at the intersection of multiple identities, including gender, age, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic background, religion, socio-economic status, and other characteristics (Emery & Iyer, 2022). The EUD Statement on Intersectionality (2024) stresses the necessity of recognising and addressing these intersecting identities to ensure equality and non-discrimination in practice. Disaggregated data that fails to capture these layers risks obscuring the compounded forms of exclusion faced by SLPs who belong to multiple marginalised groups. Incorporating intersectional data is thus crucial to provide an accurate picture of the realities of SLPs in Europe and to ensure that advocacy for sign language officialisation does not benefit only some within the community but truly reflects its diversity.

## **The current data gap on SLPs: State of play in the EU**

The importance of accurate and reliable data on deaf signers has long been recognised within the European deaf community (EUD, 2023a). Yet, the state of play across the European Union reveals a fragmented and insufficient landscape, where data collection remains inconsistent, definitions are unclear, and SLPs are systematically underrepresented and misrepresented in both disability statistics and language rights monitoring. This section highlights the current challenges, recent developments, and the limitations that still prevent data from becoming a robust foundation for advocacy towards the officialisation of national sign languages (NSLs) at the EU level.

In 2023, the EUD released a landmark report on data collection on deaf people in the EU (EUD, 2023a). The report underlined the acute lack of reliable and disaggregated data both at national and EU levels. It stressed that many EU Member States do not collect data specifically on deaf people, let alone on their access to sign language, education, or employment. Where data exists, it is often incomplete, outdated, or embedded within broader disability categories that erase the distinct realities of deaf communities.

The report further highlighted that this lack of robust data directly undermines evidence-based policymaking. Without reliable figures, both EU institutions and Member States struggle to design or evaluate targeted measures ensuring the inclusion of SLPs. For example, employment strategies are hindered by the absence of reliable statistics on deaf workers in the open labour market (EUD, 2023b), while education policies are affected by the lack of information on the number of deaf children accessing bilingual education in their national sign language (EUD, 2023b). Without corrective measures, the absence of data will perpetuate structural inequalities and hinder progress towards the human rights of SLPs.

What the 2023 EUD report on data collection failed to encapsulate, which was revealed in the 2024 EUD meeting on developing an European-wide census, was the existing divergence in national definition of “deaf people” and “SLPs.” In several Member States, data collection continues to be driven by a medical model of disability, whereby individuals are categorised according to their audiological status, such as the percentage of hearing loss. This approach not only fails to reflect the cultural and linguistic identity of SLPs but also excludes many who may not be medically classified as “deaf” as their hearing loss is not severe enough, but who nonetheless identify as part of the deaf community and have a national sign language as their primary means of communication (De Meulder, 2014).

By contrast, other states, such as Finland, adopt a linguistic or cultural approach, framing data around “sign language signers”,<sup>22</sup> in which they also include hearing signers. While this recognises the linguistic identity of SLPs, it introduces another limitation: some SLPs acquire their NSL later in life due to the fact that 95% of deaf children have hearing parents (Hall et al., 2019). Consequently, it is problematic to measure the number of SLPs exclusively through a “native language” lens. This is reinforced by the many cases of linguistic deprivation (WFD, 2022) and the lack of adequate policies fostering the learning of sign languages by families of deaf children (WFD, 2025). Moreover, the inclusion of hearing signers, such as children of deaf adults (CODAs), educators, or interpreters, complicates the distinction between linguistic community membership and the disability-related lived experience of SLPs. The disparity between medical and linguistic framing prevents the collection and comparison of reliable data of SLPs across the EU.

Despite these challenges, recent years have seen some positive developments at both EU and national levels. At the EU level, Eurostat has launched a thematic page on disability (Eurostat, n.a.), providing consolidated statistical information on persons with disabilities across the European Union, which was critically missing. While this step has improved visibility for disability-related issues, it remains limited in scope as it does not yet provide disaggregated data on deaf signers. Nevertheless, this development demonstrates that the EU recognises the importance of targeted disability data collection and may provide an entry point for further inclusion of indicators specifically focusing on deaf people, as called by the EUD in its 2023 policy recommendations on the establishment of targets for the employment of deaf people (EUD, 2023b). Although the latter policy recommendation focuses on the area of employment, the position of the EUD is to extend these targets to all spheres of society.

At the national level, censuses conducted in some Member States have begun to include references to sign language. The United Kingdom’s decennial census has included questions on British Sign Language (BSL), although concerns remain regarding the accuracy of these figures, particularly in capturing late learners or people who sign but did not self-identify to have BSL as their primary language. In addition, how the

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22 Translated from the Finnish word ‘Viittomakieliset’

question on BSL was posed, BSL in the home or their preferred main language, can be understood differently by a BSL signer. Because this question was posed differently in 2011 than in 2021, it is assumed that this affected the final figures. There were also concerns expressed about undercounting such as of deaf children or deaf elderly who may not complete the census forms themselves (Turner, 2020; BDA, 2022).

Similarly, Ireland has attempted to introduce data on Irish Sign Language (ISL), yet the figures produced were contested by the Irish Deaf Society (IDS), Ireland's National Association of the Deaf, due to perceived undercounting (IDS, 2023). According to the IDS, similarly to the BDA findings, the undercounting is caused by the confusing formulation of the questions in the census. For example, the question if Irish Sign Language is used in the home might create a wrong representation, as deaf people might not sign at home but do favour Irish Sign Language in their communication.

In Finland the authorities use a register-based census system and not a questionnaire format as in the UK or Ireland (Statistics Finland, n.a.). The advantages are that Finland uses administrative registries and therefore has real time updates and does not have to wait as is the case with the traditional census format. However, there are disadvantages such as that the system does not allow self-identification as SLPs. SLPs might also be reluctant to register in a disability database, and the definition across registers of what deaf signers might be different. Sweden also uses a similar disability related register system as in Finland. In Sweden deaf people are registered as 'patients' (Holstrom, 2021), and no specific information is collected in the registries on Swedish Sign Language.

In the Netherlands the advisory committee on *Nederlandse Gebarentaal* (NGT, Dutch Sign Language) has discussed the need to include a question on NGT in the national census. However, no progress has been made so far and further research is needed (personal correspondence with Joni Oyserman, chair of the NGT Advisory committee).

In summary, to date the majority of the countries do not include any information about sign language and SLPs in their national census. The countries that do, e.g. Ireland and the UK, need to further adjust the current formulation to ensure those who have a signed language as their means of communication, are included in the census results.

## Case study

An example of data collection as a tool to lobby for rights, is the longitudinal study on sign language interpreting in Europe (de Wit, 2020, forthcoming). According to article 9 of the UNCRPD, professional sign language interpreting services are an integral part of the rights of SLPs (Bloxs and Stone, 2025). To participate in and access societal events, SLPs frequently use the services of signed language interpreters.

Signed language interpreters provide interpreting services in all aspects of life, such as education, employment, healthcare, and justice (Napier & Leeson, 2016). However, the development of signed language interpreting as a profession differs greatly across European countries and regions.

Documenting the evolution of interpreting as a profession is essential for both presenting interpreting as a legitimate profession to society at large and informing the education of future practitioners (Pöchhacker 2004, 32). In 2000, there was no data available on sign language interpreting in Europe. While the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) collected annual reports from national members, no systematic comparative data collection had been undertaken.

Therefore, to map the status of the signed language interpreting profession, De Wit (2001) conducted the first study in 2000 across nineteen European countries. The study reached out across EU member states as well as member states of the Council of Europe (CoE). The study examined how the profession was organized through professional organizations representing signed language interpreters, education and training to become a sign language interpreter, and the employment and work opportunities of interpreters. The survey was sent to the national associations of sign language interpreters, or when unavailable, to national deaf associations.

In 2000-2001, respondents in the nineteen countries reported 3,150 working interpreters, with an average of 149 signers per interpreter. The study also identified forty educational programs and 18 representative organizations. Notably, the respondents reported that the interpreting services were usually funded by the government but were often restricted and caused significant barriers for deaf persons to participate in society.

Following the first study, a second study was conducted in 2004, with subsequent editions every four years. The sixth edition was published in 2020 (de Wit, 2020). Each edition saw an increase in respondents from European countries and regions, reaching 45 responding countries in 2020, including the 27 EU member states. That year, respondents reported 6,703 working interpreters in EU member states and nearly 11,000 for all 45 European countries and regions.

To raise awareness on the development of the sign language interpreter profession, the EUD incorporated the data on sign language interpreter ratios (the number of sign language interpreters compared to the number of deaf people) in their 2012 publication 'Sign language legislation in the EU, Edition II' (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012, p. 21). This publication remains freely available on the EUD website.

A significant milestone in this longitudinal study was the presentation of the 2016 data by De Wit at the high-level event in the European Parliament hosted by MEP Helga Stevens 'Multilingualism and equal rights in the EU: the role of sign languages.' The presentation outlined the profession's status, and the barriers interpreters and deaf people face due to the lack of recognition of signed languages and the signed

language interpreting profession. The conference led to a new European Parliament resolution ‘Sign Language and professional sign language interpreters (2016/2952),’ in which member states and EU institutions were urged to recognize NSLs and that sign language interpretation constitutes a professional service requiring appropriate remuneration (de Wit, 2024).

In celebration of the fortieth anniversary of EUD, the 7th edition of Sign Language Interpreting in Europe will be published at the end of 2025. EUD and De Wit have bundled their efforts to strengthen the data collection on sign language interpreting in Europe, promote the rights of deaf people, and ensure professional recognition of sign language interpreters. The 2025 edition expands on the profession carried out by deaf interpreters, the impact of new technological developments such as remote interpreting and AI, and the outlook of the profession overall.

Preliminary results of the 2025 survey on the development of the sign language interpreting profession in Europe, show a continuing trend from 2020: countries report a significant lack of professional interpreters to meet the demand. While the right to a sign language interpreter or interpreting services is recognized by nearly all national or regional laws, there is an enormous diversity in what this right entails. In most countries, it is still the national deaf organization acting as the main actor to push for the legal right to an interpreter.

In general, the working conditions for interpreters are reported to have mostly remained the same or improved. Countries report that this is, for example, due to the improvement of collective agreements, more reasonable procurement conditions, as well as an increase in remuneration allowing interpreters to work as an interpreter as their primary job. Overall, the profession has witnessed a major change due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a high increase in remote interpreting assignments. The working conditions are reported to have significantly improved, specifically for remote interpreting assignments, which respondents report provides more flexibility for the interpreter and the clients. There is also an increased visibility of sign language interpreters on TV and media, resulting in greater awareness in general.

The situation for deaf interpreters tends to be less positive. In 2020 the greatest obstacle for deaf interpreters was the unavailability of adequate training. Now, in 2025, the development of the profession of deaf interpreters is reported to have improved during the last five years. For example, national accessibility legislation increasingly requires the provision of signed language translations, which are carried out by deaf translators. In addition, some countries are providing some form of training for deaf interpreters. However, deaf interpreter’s professional recognition and opportunities continue to trail far behind those of hearing interpreters.

The 2025 survey also asked respondents about AI’s current impact on the sign language interpreter profession. Unlike interpreters of spoken languages, all respondents report that the use of AI is largely absent and has had no impact so far. However, some mention the use of AI as a tool for preparing interpreting assignments.

The full results of the 2025 survey will be published in the upcoming *Sign Language Interpreting in Europe* (de Wit, forthcoming). Since the first publication in 2000 national associations of the deaf and national sign language interpreter associations have used the publication *Sign Language Interpreting in Europe* to move the sign language profession forward, and consequently the implementation of rights of deaf signers. The comprehensive comparative data has supported organisations to lobby their regional and national governments to establish and strengthen educational programs and quality mechanisms, to provide appropriate remuneration for interpreters, and ensure interpreter service provisions. The cumulative effect of this research has been to strengthen sign language interpreting as a recognised profession with clear standards, ethical frameworks, and educational pathways across Europe.

## Conclusion and path forwards

The ratification of the CRPD by both the EU and its Member States created a legal obligation to proceed with comprehensive data collection. Whereas progress has been made in the last decade with the launch of the Eurostat disability database several limitations persist.

The first limitation pertains to underrepresentation. Many SLPs remain invisible in official statistics because they are categorised under generic disability labels or because survey methodologies are inaccessible and fail to capture the full spectrum of the intersectional identities of deaf communities. Existing data rarely distinguishes between SLPs on the basis of intersecting identities such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, or migration background. The absence of such disaggregated data obscures the specific barriers faced by marginalised communities within deaf communities. For example, deaf women may face compounded discrimination in employment, while deaf migrants may struggle with both linguistic and legal barriers to accessing services. The EUD Statement on Intersectionality (2024) emphasised precisely this point: only by recognising, respecting and applying the multiple intersecting identities of SLPs can policies fully address their requirements. This is the case of Eurostat, which disaggregates their disability database by functional limitations, which are, in turn, disaggregated by sex, age, educational attainment level, degree of urbanisation, and activity limitation (Eurostat, n.a.). The current data set collected at the EU level fails to capture the lived realities of the European deaf community in all its diversity.

A second limitation lies in the lack of national surveys offered in national sign languages, which reinforces this exclusion, as many SLPs cannot participate effectively in data collection exercises. Furthermore, during the EUD Census meeting, participants reported that in several countries, national censuses are exclusively conducted through phone calls without any existing accessible alternatives. This practice places the realities of deaf communities at the margins of national statistics.

A third limitation concerns inaccuracy. Definitions based on medical criteria often erase the linguistic and cultural dimensions of deaf communities, while definitions based on language use risk excluding late learners or overcounting by including hearing signers. These methodological shortcomings produce distorted figures that do not reflect the lived realities of SLPs in Europe. This is one consequence of the Deaf Duality Paradox explained earlier in the chapter.

Finally, there are risks linked to privacy and compliance with data protection frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which are often used as a safeguard by national statistical authorities to refuse to disclose the number of SLPs in an existing country. However, we believe this position should be nuanced. Article 9(1) GDPR explicitly forbids the processing of data concerning health to determine a specific category of population. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Article 9(2)(g) foresees an exception to the rule for reasons of substantial public interest to provide suitable and specific measures to safeguard the fundamental rights and the interests of the data subject. When it comes to SLPs and NSLs, the latter legal provision is to be interpreted as allowing the disclosure of data on the number of SLPs to cater policies and legislation tackling the causes of their marginalisation. Thus, Article 9(1) GDPR should not be used as a justification by EU Member States as a reason not to disclose the collected data, which has the adverse consequence of maintaining the status quo in marginalising deaf communities in their societies.

At the national level, the examples of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Finland, and Sweden illustrate how varying methodologies and approaches continue to shape the quality and reliability of data collection on NSLs signers. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, despite positive steps to include questions on BSL and ISL respectively, concerns persist regarding the clarity of the questions and the accuracy of the resulting figures. The formulation of census questions, whether sign language is used at home or is considered the main language, has led to significant variations and undercounting, particularly of deaf children, elderly people, or those who did not complete census forms independently. Similarly, in Finland and Sweden, the use of register-based systems excludes self-identification as a deaf signer and fails to account for linguistic identity. While these systems allow for more frequent updates, they risk reinforcing medicalised understandings of deafness. The case of the longitudinal study Sign Language Interpreting in Europe further demonstrates the transformative potential of systematic data collection. The study has become a key instrument in documenting the evolution of professional NSLs interpretation. Its comparative data has enabled both national associations of the deaf and national associations of sign language interpreters to advocate for the better recognition and status of NSLs interpreters.

Moving forwards, deaf communities, both at the regional and national levels, have a lot to gain in coordinating their efforts towards establishing robust data collection strategies encompassing both their disability, and linguistic and cultural identities. Furthermore, these data should be disaggregated according to the intersectional identities of SLPs. The lessons learnt for the EUD Census focus group meeting include the necessity of establishing a clear standardised methodology and scope of

research, as well as standardised research questions. This would allow the collection of data, initially at the national level, that will become transnational and European. This bottom-up approach will counterbalance the existing top-down approach on data collection that is currently put in place by Eurostat. The ultimate goal of this exercise is to ease the advocacy work towards proceeding the officialisation of NSLs at both the national level and at the European Union's level.

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## Chapter 8:

# Conclusion of Part I – towards the officialisation of EU national sign languages

**Alexandre Bloxs, European Union of the Deaf and UCLouvain - Saint Louis Bruxelles**

The first part of this volume has traced the evolution, rationale, and implications of the call for the officialisation of the 29 National Sign Languages (NSLs) within the European Union. Together, the seven chapters reveal a coherent narrative of interdisciplinary maturation, political momentum, and conceptual clarification. The position of the European Union of the Deaf toward the officialisation of the European NSLs has been discussed through various perspectives: legal, sociological, communicational, statistical, and political. The convergence of these academic fields and perspectives presented herein demonstrates that the recognition of NSLs is no longer a matter of symbolic demand but a structural necessity for ensuring the meaningful participation of deaf people and fostering democratic legitimacy within the European Union.

Across the last decade, a shift has occurred at both the international and European levels. Chapter 1 highlighted how the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its 2025 Concluding Observations on the EU, explicitly endorsed the demand long advanced by the EUD: officialising NSLs as official EU languages. This development marks a significant distancing from the Committee's earlier, more general recommendations in 2015. It reflects not only the sustained advocacy of EUD, but also the gradual embedding of sign language rights within the political consciousness of the European Union. The abundant legislative and political milestones adopted during the last decade, such as the 2016 European Parliament Resolution on Sign Language and professional interpreters, the European Accessibility Act, the European Electronic Communications Code, and the Directive establishing a European Disability Card and European Parking Card, to name but a few, have indirectly strengthened this trajectory by affirming the linguistic and cultural dimension of the rights of deaf people. The evolution from political claim to legal argumentation, articulated more clearly in the 2024 EUD's position paper on NSLs as official languages, has laid the groundwork for a mature debate on the role of NSLs in the EU's multilingual landscape.

Chapter 2 identified persistent conceptual ambiguities that have hindered this progress. The EU continues to conflate the status of NSLs as full languages with their potential official status within the Union. Moreover, institutional discourse often frames sign languages as accessibility tools rather than linguistic and cultural

systems integral to the Union's multilingualism. This confusion not only sustains the *status quo* but also obscures the distribution of competences between the EU and its Member States. Article 342 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) situates the power to determine the Union's language regime within the Council of the EU, acting unanimously, effectively granting the final power of consent to its Member States. Yet, as this Chapter also underlined, there remains scope for incremental progress through institutional reform. The Rules of Procedure of EU institutions, notably Rule 226 of the European Parliament, provide potential avenues for recognising and operationalising NSLs as working languages, setting precedents for broader adoption in remaining EU Institutions.

From a legal standpoint, Chapter 3 demonstrated that the foundations for the recognition of NSLs are already enshrined within existing EU and international instruments. Articles 21 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union establish clear obligations for the promotion of linguistic diversity and the protection of the rights of deaf people. These provisions impose positive duties upon EU institutions to ensure that citizens can communicate and participate in their own NSLs. Recognition of NSLs, therefore, is not a discretionary political act but an expression of legal coherence with the Union's equality framework. This chapter illustrates how this recognition could translate into concrete rights: the right to submit requests, petitions, and appeals in NSLs; the right to access justice and information; and the right to participate fully in EU recruitment and consultation processes. Such measures would render the sign language rights operational rather than declaratory.

Chapter 4 expanded this argument by applying the Deaf Legal Theory (DLT) framework, exposing the epistemological and structural biases that underpin the continued exclusion of NSLs. It showed that the EU's existing language regime reflects a hearing-centric worldview that equates linguistic legitimacy with spoken and written forms. This perspective marginalises deaf citizens not merely through omission but through the systemic privileging of auditory modalities. The DLT framework invites the EU to re-examine its foundational principles of multilingualism, democracy, and participation through a lens that recognises deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority, rather than solely as a disability group. This approach repositions the recognition of NSLs as an act of legal correction and epistemic justice.

Building on this, Chapter 5 addressed the intersectional realities of deaf citizens as members of both linguistic and disability minorities. It stressed that while many spoken-language minorities are multilingual and can access dominant languages, deaf people face unique barriers. Their inclusion, therefore, requires flexible, diverse, and targeted policy measures. Officialisation must go hand in hand with substantive equality, ensuring that the recognition of NSLs does not remain symbolic but leads to genuine access to information, freedom of expression, and participation in democratic processes.

Chapter 6 examined how deaf citizens through their representative organisations at

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the EU level have leveraged digital tools to make their voices heard and mobilise communities. Platforms such as X have expanded visibility and transnational dialogue, but they remain external to institutional decision-making. The chapter argued that democratic legitimacy cannot rest solely on symbolic participation: inclusion must be institutionalised through formal recognition and accessible mechanisms for consultation and representation. The advocacy of the European Union of the Deaf exemplifies the tension between visibility and influence, a reminder that digital participation must be accompanied by legal and procedural reform if democracy is to be truly inclusive.

Finally, Chapter 7 brought the perspective of data collection. Often overlooked, yet critical for policy making, disaggregated data on disability and intersecting identities of deaf communities are an essential prerequisite for the officialisation of NSLs. The chapter reveals that deaf people – referred here as Sign Language Peoples (SLPs) – are invisible in official statistics, which leads to their underrepresentation in policies, including the ones related to NSLs. The longitudinal research into sign language interpreting in Europe served as a case study to demonstrate how systematic data collection can directly influence policy and strengthen recognition of both NSLs and sign language interpreters. Robust data disaggregated by the intersectional identities of SLPs will provide meaningful empirical foundations for the officialisation of NSLs within the European Union.

Taken together, these seven contributions reveal that the officialisation of NSLs is both a matter of principle and a matter of practice. It is a question of linguistic justice, democratic legitimacy, and compliance with existing legal obligations. The findings across Part I point towards five interrelated directions for policy and institutional reform:

Firstly, it starts with the EU recognition of NSLs as official EU languages. While the competence to amend Regulation 1/1958 ultimately lies with the Council of the EU under Article 342 TFEU, the Union must acknowledge this goal as a legitimate and necessary evolution of its multilingual policy.

Secondly, the accompanying measures are the revision of the Rules of Procedures of the respective EU institutions. EU institutions should amend their internal rules to guarantee that deaf citizens may, upon request, communicate, interact, and impart information in their national sign language. This measure would operationalise effective mainstreaming of national sign language without waiting for the unanimity of the 27 members of the Council of the European Union.

Thirdly, national frameworks on sign language rights should be strengthened. Member States must consolidate the legal status of their national sign languages by granting them official status at the national level within national law. This would be pivotal in reinforcing the pillars towards the officialisation of NSLs at the EU level.

Fourthly, ensuring meaningful implementation of sign language rights in the EU.

Recognition must translate into practice through rights such as the ability to submit requests, access justice, petition the European Parliament, obtain information on EU activities, participate in consultations and recruitment, and appeal to the European Ombudsman in one's national sign language.

Finally, applying the Deaf Legal Theory framework when proceeding with these reforms. EU and national policymakers must scrutinise new and existing legislation to eliminate hearing bias and use the co-creation principle to design policies benefitting deaf communities through their representative organisations.

The path forward, therefore, requires both top-down and bottom-up action. On the one hand, the European Union should proceed with institutional reforms that will positively influence the rights of deaf people to interact with its institutions in their NSLs. This constitutes the top-down approach. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach finds its source in the legal strengthening of existing NSLs frameworks at the national level, which will push the Council of the EU to proceed with the recognition of NSLs as official languages. This latter point will be developed in the second part of this volume. The meeting point between these two approaches will lead to the officialisation of NSLs, which will revitalise the EU multilingualism policy.

Part I has thus demonstrated that linguistic equality for deaf people is not a peripheral issue: it lies at the heart of the European project. The next part of this book will analyse the current national frameworks on NSLs to assess their compliance with the framework of both CRPD and the Charter. The scope of this work encompasses EU Member States, Members of the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) – namely Iceland, Norway and Switzerland –, and the UK. This assessment will be followed by tailored recommendations to support both the National Associations of the Deaf, and their governments. The long-term objective of this action is to bring sustained reforms of legal frameworks at the national level that could pave the way to the officialisation of NSLs at the national level.

## Chapter 9:

# Beyond symbolic recognition: Methodology of research

***Delphine le Maire, European Union of the Deaf***

***Alexandre Bloxs, European Union of the Deaf  
and UCLouvain - Saint Louis Bruxelles***

The second part of the present volume aims to examine the national legal frameworks on sign language rights to lead the reader from the foundations of the research to the final comparative findings. Chapter 9 sets out the methodology underpinning the study, including the research design, sources, and analytical approach. Chapter 10, then, presents each of the minimum criteria used in the evaluation, clarifying their scope and relevance. Chapter 11 applies these criteria to the national legal frameworks, providing a detailed assessment of how each country performs. Finally, Chapter 12 brings these strands together, presenting the overall findings and highlighting the key trends that emerge from the analysis.

In the upcoming chapters of this publication, we will review and assess the strength of existing national legal frameworks pertaining to sign language rights. The term “legal framework” is preferred over “national sign language legislation”, as it may consist of a set of legislative and regulatory provisions at national and/or subnational level or, in some cases, a single piece of legislation at the national level granting deaf people and other national sign language users their linguistic rights.

The purpose of this exercise is to determine whether the current legal frameworks on sign language rights comply with the minimum requirements to establish robust legislation that paves the way for the officialisation of national sign languages at the national level. These requirements, provided in the form of guiding concepts, were developed by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in its Guidelines for Achieving Sign Language Rights (WFD, 2023). The Guidelines were designed to support both National Associations of the Deaf and governments in drafting meaningful legislation on national sign language recognition, ensuring compliance not only with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) but also with instruments and frameworks relating to the rights of cultural and linguistic minorities. Accordingly, the European Union, its Member States, as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom—as States Parties to the CRPD—are naturally expected to follow these Guidelines.

The WFD Guidelines established eight guiding concepts, namely (1) language policy and liberty; (2) equality and non-discrimination provisions; (3) language use and promotion of identity; (4) educational provisions; (5) sign language interpreters; (6)

access to information (including emergency situations); (7) legal capacity; and (8) deaf community participation in decision-making processes (WFD, 2023).

After carefully reviewing these guiding concepts to ensure their effective application in the European context and realities, we concluded that only seven should be retained, with the guiding concept on legal capacity being removed. At the same time, we decided to divide “(4) educational provisions” into two separate categories: “(4) Education in the National Sign Language” and “(5) National Sign Language as an Educational Subject”. We have therefore established a list of eight criteria to use in our analysis of the national frameworks. The content and meaning of each of these eight criteria, as well as the rationale for the removal of the legal capacity criterion, will be explained in detail in the “minimum criteria” chapter of this book.

## Evaluation chart

On this basis, we have developed an evaluation chart that will be used to assess the extent to which national legislation complies with the standards set by both the CRPD and the international and regional frameworks relating to the rights of cultural and linguistic minorities. The chart is presented as follows:

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
			
			
			
			
			
			
			
			
Final score	/		

Icon	Meaning
	Status of the national sign language as full language
	Equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of the National sign language
	Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as part of the national culture heritage
	Education in the National sign language
	National sign language as an educational subject
	Access to the profession of professional sign language interpreter
	Access to information including in situations of emergencies
	Involvement of deaf people in decision-making processes

## Research and analysis work

In 2021, we collected data from our 31 Full Members, the National Associations of the Deaf in the 27 EU Member States, as well as in Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, regarding their national legal frameworks on sign language rights. The information gathered focused not only on legislative updates recognising national sign language(s), but also on the impact of such legislation, remaining shortcomings, and areas still requiring progress. We also collected unofficial English translations of the legislative instruments recognising national sign languages, when available on official government websites, and used DeepL to translate other texts into English to identify key provisions and information relevant to our analysis.

In 2025, we continued this work by updating country-specific information in consultation with our 31 Full Members. Each organisation was invited to review and update the country factsheets we shared with them. These factsheets were not developed from scratch but built upon the country chapters published in EUD's 2012 book *Sign Language Legislation in the European Union* (EUD, 2012). The 2012 country chapters contained detailed descriptions of each country's legislative process, frameworks related to national sign languages and sign language rights, and the pathways towards the legal recognition of their national sign language(s), where applicable.

Based on the input from the National Associations of the Deaf, we reviewed the legislative and regulatory instruments they referred us to and that were relevant to our research, identifying the provisions corresponding to each criterion of the evaluation chart. We decided to include provisions on the recognition of other languages and communication systems when this recognition appeared in the same instrument that recognises the national sign language(s). These included tactile sign language,

signed systems based on spoken languages, and minority languages. The purpose of this inclusion was to illustrate the broader framework within which sign language recognition takes place. However, we did not report on interpretation services intended for groups other than deaf sign language users, such as deafblind persons or hard-of-hearing individuals who do not use sign language, in order to maintain a specific focus on sign language rights. The same applies when addressing the rights of deaf sign language users in access to education, employment, information from public authorities, and audiovisual media.

When developing the new country factsheets, we decided to use another structure than the 2012 country chapters in order to facilitate the identification of relevant information for our policy analysis. Each factsheet includes:

1. the current legislative and regulatory instruments recognising national sign language(s) and the historical context of their adoption (when shared by the NADs);
2. legislation and regulations encompassing sign language rights in other areas of deaf people's lives (e.g. education, interpretation, audiovisual media); and
3. information on the impact and shortcomings of the national sign language recognition framework, when provided.

We also followed up with our Full Members to verify the accuracy of the updated factsheets and requested additional information when clarification was needed.

Based on the updated factsheets and input received from our Members, we analysed the national frameworks on sign language rights across all countries using our eight-criteria chart. For each country, we identified relevant legal provisions, cited their references, and added clarifying comments where appropriate. Finally, each country was assigned a score out of eight (8), corresponding to the eight criteria. When assigning scores, we observed that in several countries, certain criteria were only partially fulfilled. For instance, a country may offer its National Sign Language as an optional foreign language subject in secondary education, yet fail to provide it as a first language subject for deaf pupils in primary education. Similarly, some countries deliver education in sign language exclusively within special education settings, but not within mainstream education through immersive or bilingual education programmes. Since we wished to recognise the progress made by countries in terms of achieving each criterion, we decided to award supportive scores where partial implementation was evident. However, we also noted in the comments whenever a criterion was not fully met, in order to encourage further legislative and regulatory developments in this area.

## Limitations

It is important to note that our research faced certain limitations, and therefore the results of our analysis should not be considered fully comprehensive. The scope of our analysis was constrained by several factors, including reliance on unofficial and/ or DeepL translations of legislative and regulatory instruments, the level of input received from our Full Members resulting in diverse lengths in the description of each country's NSL legislative framework, and limited time to explore certain aspects of national legal frameworks in depth.

In addition, this study does not constitute an academic in-depth legal or comparative constitutional analysis. Our approach was primarily policy-oriented, focusing on identifying trends, practices, and opportunities for advocacy rather than conducting a systematic legal comparison or interpretation of national laws.

Nevertheless, through this policy-focused research, we identified a number of key questions and areas that could be explored in greater depth through future qualitative and legal research. First, assessing what actions have National Associations of the Deaf undertaken in revising or developing new sign language legislation following the initial legal recognition of sign language, and how effective have these subsequent measures been compared to the original legislative framework. Second, exploring how the sign language rights of deaf people are addressed within the legal and policy instruments that recognise the national sign languages. Third, analysing the role and influence of Advisory Boards on Sign Language in shaping new legislative and policy developments. Fourth, assessing what governments have undertaken in terms of language planning and national plans and how do these initiatives strengthen their official standing, linguistic development, and transmission through education.

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## Chapter 10:

# Beyond symbolic recognition: Evaluating national sign language frameworks in Europe

**Alexandre Bloxs**, European Union of the Deaf  
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The first part of this book highlighted the fact that, within the European Union, there are 29 national sign languages (NSLs) that coexist with the 24 official spoken languages. Yet, the membership of the European Union (EU) of the Deaf (EUD) goes beyond the limit of the EU to include Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, bringing the total number of NSLs represented to 33. Almost all the aforementioned countries have recognised their NSLs through a legal instrument, with varying degree of effectiveness, with the exception of France and Switzerland.

Some of these recognitions remain largely symbolic, while others provide tangible rights to users. Moreover, the instruments through which recognition has been achieved differ considerably. The work of De Meulder initially identified five distinct categories of legislation (2015) before expanding to six (De Meulder et al., 2019): (ii) recognition through specific sign language legislation; (iii) recognition through broader legislation on sign language and other means of communication; (iv) recognition through disability-related legislation; (v) recognition through linguistic legislation; and (vi) recognition through an act establishing a language council.

After carefully reviewing these criteria for application in the European context and explained in the previous chapter on the methodology of analysis, we concluded that the framework should still be composed of eight criteria. However, the criterion on legal capacity was excluded because, in most European countries, deaf people do not face deprivation of their legal capacity solely on the basis of being deaf. Legal capacity refers to the ability to undertake legally binding acts such as entering into contracts, marrying or divorcing, or obtaining a mortgage. The only notable exception within the EU is the restriction on access to driving licences for driving a car<sup>23</sup> for deaf people in Romania. In this regard, the WFD (2016) issued a statement reaffirming the right of deaf people to hold a driving licence.

To maintain the comprehensiveness of the framework while ensuring its relevance to the European context, EUD decided to replace the legal capacity criterion with a new

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23 It is worth noting that, although several EU Member States grant the rights to deaf people the right to hold a driving license and drive a car, as per the Directive 2006/126/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on driving licenses, accessing license to drive buses, trucks, or becoming a taxi driver is often accompanied by the requirement of a medical and auditory test, as it is the case in Sweden and Spain, among others.

one focused on national sign language as a school subject. This recognises the crucial importance of ensuring that national sign languages are taught within mainstream and inclusive bilingual education settings, both for deaf children as a mother tongue or first language and for hearing peers as a second or foreign language.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the analysis goes beyond the concept of “recognition legislation” in the narrow sense. Instead, we use the broader concept of the national legal framework on sign language rights, which may consist of multiple legal provisions across different areas of law, or in some cases, a single comprehensive act. What matters is whether this framework grants deaf people and other national sign language users their full linguistic rights.

## ❧ Status of the national sign language as a full language

The first criterion concerns the recognition of the national sign language as a full language in the country or a region of the country, placed on an equal footing with the national spoken language(s). We will not expand on this criteria since the meaning of the linguistic status of national sign languages have been extensively developed in the first part of the present book.<sup>24</sup> This condition is particularly important, as considerable confusion often arises regarding whether national sign languages should be regarded as full languages or merely as means of communication. Owing to the dual belonging of deaf communities within both the cultural-linguistic and disability movements, and the predominance of the disability perspective, it is not uncommon for governments and policymakers to treat national sign languages as accessibility tools for spoken language, comparable to Braille or easy-to-read formats (De Meulder & Murray, 2017).

This misconception must be dispelled. National sign languages are full languages with the same linguistic properties as spoken languages, including grammar, morphology, syntax, and phonology (Stokoe, 1960; Kilma & Bellugi, 1979). Legal recognition of national sign languages as full languages automatically locates their users within the category of linguistic minorities.

## ⌚ Equality and non-discrimination

The principle of equality and non-discrimination is a fundamental human rights standard enshrined in international, regional, and national legislation. Its origins can be traced back to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed in subsequent international treaties, including Article 5 of the UN Convention on the

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 2 “Deciphering the implications of the dichotomy “Full languages vs. Official languages” within the work of the European Union” in the present book

### Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Within the legal framework of the European Union, the principle of equality and non-discrimination was first established in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community (EEC), later renamed the European Union (EU). Since then, the EU has developed a series of legal instruments to combat discrimination. Among the most relevant are the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC), the Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC), which specifically prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability in employment and occupation, and the Equal Treatment Directive (2006/54/EC), which ensures gender equality in labour law. Finally, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, that became a legally binding with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, explicitly protects the rights of persons with disabilities: Article 26 guarantees their inclusion in society, while Article 21 prohibits any discrimination on the grounds of language and of disability, among others.

Taken together, these provisions form the legal foundation ensuring that the use of national sign languages is safeguarded under equality and non-discrimination principles. This protection can be achieved in two ways: (i) by including a specific equality and non-discrimination clause in the legislation recognising the national sign language; (ii) by amending existing equality and non-discrimination laws to explicitly cover discrimination based on the use of NSLs. The latter could also be addressed under provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of language.

Deaf people and members of the deaf community must not be denied the right to use their NSL across all areas of life. Accordingly, the denial of the use of a national sign language in any area of life must be regarded either as a form of discrimination on the grounds of both language and disability, or to both grounds following the potential multiple discrimination and/or intersectional discrimination framework existing at the national level.

The reason for this distinction resides in the fact that disability legislation typically approaches the use of sign language as a disability-related right aimed at ensuring inclusion and accessibility, often treating it as a measure of reasonable accommodation. In contrast, protecting sign languages through language grounds would recognise national sign languages as autonomous languages, with an emphasis as a factor of cultural identity for deaf communities, rather than a tool for inclusion.

## ☒ Promotion of the identity of deaf people

Deaf people and national sign language users constitute a specific cultural minority group by virtue of their shared culture, commonly referred to as “deaf culture.” Deaf culture is recognised and protected under Article 30.4 of the CRPD, which implicitly grants the deaf community cultural and linguistic minority status. This cultural

component must be incorporated into national sign language legislation and must be respected, protected, and promoted by national governments, policymakers, and the European Union as part of their broader human rights obligations, multilingualism policies, and commitments to cultural pluralism. At EU level, this duty is reinforced by Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which obliges the Union to respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and by Article 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which requires the Union to contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States while respecting their national and regional diversity. In addition, Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union highlights that the Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. Yet, despite these legal commitments, the specific recognition and promotion of deaf culture within EU policy frameworks remain largely absent.

Accordingly, national sign language legislation should safeguard national sign languages and recognise deaf culture as part of national cultural heritage. Public agencies and ministries responsible for culture and languages must ensure that national sign languages and deaf culture are included in their mandates. Deaf people and national sign language users must not be denied the right to enjoy their language and culture in all areas of life.

## **The right to be educated in the national sign language**

The right of deaf learners to receive quality and inclusive education in their national sign language is a human right guaranteed by Article 24 of the CRPD. Additional international instruments also reinforce this principle. Article 4(3) of the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities requires States to provide opportunities for minorities to learn and receive instruction in their mother tongue. For deaf people, this translates into the right to receive education in their national sign language.

Similarly, Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes that children belonging to an ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority must not be denied the right to enjoy their culture or use their own language. Applied to deaf children, this provision affirms their right to access deaf culture and to receive education in their national sign language.

In this regard, the World Federation of the Deaf (2018) - a position also endorsed by EUD (Reuter, 2017) - stressed in its position paper on inclusive education that quality and inclusive education for deaf children can only be achieved if four minimum criteria are met:

- a. Education must be bilingual in the national sign language and the national written language, with equal emphasis placed on the acquisition of both;

- b. Teachers must possess a native-level fluency in the national sign language;
- c. The educational curriculum must follow the official national education programme, ensuring that the learning potential of each deaf child is fully maximised;
- d. Deaf learners must be surrounded by signing peers and have access to deaf adult role models.

At the European level, it must be noted that competences in education remain primarily with the Member States. Article 165 of the TFEU explicitly confirms that the EU has a supporting role, while the responsibility for education systems and their language policies rests with national governments. Consequently, while the EU can encourage cooperation and promote good practices, the concrete implementation of the right to be educated in national sign languages depends on national legislation.

## National sign language as a school subject

National sign languages should be taught as school subjects for deaf children using a mother-tongue approach, or, at least, the same way that minority languages are taught to children belonging to these minorities. In addition, NSLs should also be offered as foreign language subjects for any student within any level of education, thereby ensuring wider societal awareness, competence, and recognition of their value.

Accordingly, national sign language legislation should not only establish the NSL as a subject of instruction for both deaf children and their hearing peers, but also the promotion of deaf culture through, among other things, history and expressive art as an additional subject.

At the EU level, this approach aligns with the EU obligation to foster multilingualism and cultural diversity. Article 3 TEU requires the Union to respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, while Article 165 of the TFEU emphasises its supporting role to the educational system of Member States, as opposed to harmonising policies on topics where it has exclusive competencies to legislate, and promoting the linguistic diversity within its Member States. Within this framework, the inclusion of NSLs as school subjects would not only strengthen the rights of deaf learners but would also be in alignment with the EU's policy objectives of multilingualism and cultural pluralism.

## Professional national sign language interpreters

As deaf people form a cultural and linguistic minority within societies where the

majority use spoken languages and belong to distinct cultural contexts, a gap exists between the two communities. One essential means of bridging this gap is through professional and accredited national sign language interpreters, while solely relying on them is viewed as a quick fix (EUD, 2023; De Meulder & Haualand 2021). More than simply providing accessibility, professional interpreters function as cultural and linguistic mediators, enabling communication and mutual understanding between two languages and two cultures.

The right of deaf people to professional national sign language interpretation is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 9(2) CRPD, which obliges States Parties to ensure accessibility across all areas of society, including by providing professional sign language interpreters. In addition, Article 5 CRPD makes clear that denial of reasonable accommodation constitutes a form of discrimination, a principle echoed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which prohibits discrimination on various grounds including disability (Article 21) and guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures ensuring their independence, social and economic inclusion in their communities (Article 26). In this framework, failure to provide professional interpretation services must be regarded as discrimination on the grounds of disability.

Yet, the meaning of “professional” in this context has been the subject of ongoing debate between deaf communities and their governments. EUD refers to professional interpreters as encompassing both national sign language interpreters in national contexts and International Sign interpreters in international contexts. However, no universally binding definition of “professional” exists, which is the reflection of the diversity of realities within EU Member States. To provide clarity, EUD promotes the following general definition:

Professional national sign language interpreters are interpreters who are trained with the involvement of the deaf community through their representative organisations, regularly evaluated and assessed by panels including deaf people, and remunerated in accordance with their certification and experience (Bloxs & Stone, 2025).

Secondly, public and private entities delivering services intended for the general public may employ professional national sign language interpreters, whether physically present or available remotely through Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). This ensures smooth and effective communication between public authorities and deaf people in their NSL. In that regard, governments must foresee a specific dedicated budget to cover the cost of professional sign language interpreters in various areas such as access to healthcare, including mental health, access to justice, education, access and participation to culture, employment, participation to civil and political life, among others.

NSL legislation should recognise the right of deaf people to access government-funded professional national sign language interpreters, either physically present or available remotely through Video Remote Interpreting (VRI), to ensure their full participation

and contribution to society.

In that regard, governments must foresee a specific dedicated budget to cover the cost of professional sign language interpreters in various areas such as access to healthcare, including mental health, access to justice, education, access and participation to culture, employment, participation to civil and political life, among others.

In addition, such legislation must provide a clear reference to professional national sign language interpreters, to avoid confusion with the provision of communication assistance.

## **Access to information, including in situations of emergencies**

Deaf people have the right to access all public information in their national sign language. This legal obligation is enshrined in Article 21(b) CRPD, which requires States Parties to make information available in national sign languages. Read together with Article 11 CRPD, it obliges States to take all necessary measures to protect persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies, and natural disasters. In practice, this means that public information disseminated through the news must be interpreted, and that public service websites and other official communications must be accessible in the national sign language. Additionally, deaf people have the right to interact with public administrations directly in their national sign language.

Such interaction can be facilitated in two ways. Firstly, public administrations may recruit deaf staff members. This not only promotes inclusion and diversity in the workplace, but also reinforces the perception of deaf people as contributors to the economy and society rather than as recipients of support.

Secondly, administrations could appoint focal points who have acquired proficiency in the national sign language. These focal persons could be contacted whenever a deaf person requires communication support in times of emergencies and crisis.

The obligation to ensure accessible communication is particularly acute in emergency situations. In times of crisis, deaf people are often disproportionately affected due to barriers in accessing timely information and emergency response services. It is therefore essential that all emergency-related information with potential impact on the lives of deaf people be made available in national sign languages without delay. In the EU context, this duty is reinforced by Action 33 of the Annex to the Union Preparedness Strategy, which calls for the development of guidelines on how to act in emergencies adapted to all types of disabilities, including deaf people. This approach should be reflected at the national level through relevant emergency preparedness policies.

Accordingly, legislation recognising the national sign language must explicitly guarantee the rights of sign language users to interact with public administrations in their own language, as well as imparting accessible information in times of emergencies from broadcasting news. It should also impose a duty on public administrations to ensure their information is made accessible in national sign languages, and to adopt all necessary measures to enable full interaction and participation of deaf people, including in times of crisis.

## Involvement of deaf people in decision-making processes

The motto of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Nothing About Us Without Us,” strongly reaffirms that persons with disabilities must be placed at the forefront of any decision-making process concerning them. This principle is embodied in Article 4.3 CRPD and further developed in CRPD General Comment No. 7. For deaf people, this principle requires meaningful consultation through their representative organisations, namely the National Associations of the Deaf (NADs), in all matters concerning them and the use of their national sign language. Such involvement must be genuine and extend across every stage of the decision-making process, from the design of an initiative to its implementation and evaluation. Meaningful involvement requires that the perspectives of deaf people are not only heard but also considered and integrated in shaping the outcomes.

Once the national sign language has been legally recognised, governments bear the responsibility of implementing the legislation. To ensure this, a monitoring body should be established with a dual mandate. Firstly, the body should monitor the government’s implementation of the legislation, ensuring compliance both with the legislation itself and with the CRPD. Secondly, it should serve as an advisory mechanism, providing governments with expert recommendations on appropriate policies, identifying pressing issues faced by deaf communities, and proposing concrete measures to address them. Such a body could establish priorities and advise on effective means of addressing them, thereby ensuring that the legislation remains a living instrument responding to evolving needs.

The question of who should constitute this monitoring body is crucial. Given that its mandate spans multiple areas, from linguistic policy to inclusive education and full participation in their communities, it must reflect the diverse expertise and representation of deaf communities. Thus, the EUD recommends that the body include representatives of the National Association of the Deaf, who can articulate the political dimensions and lived realities of deaf people at local and national levels; linguistic experts on the national sign language to provide guidance on language policy; and representatives from the education sector, to ensure the perspective of bilingual inclusive education is integrated. To fully realise the motto “Nothing About Us Without Us” and comply with Article 4.3 CRPD, a majority of members

of the monitoring body should be deaf and national sign languages. For the sake of effectiveness, we also recommend to have the participation/or close relation with representatives of government's cabinets/various State administrations.

Moreover, its meetings must be conducted in the NSL to ensure consistency with the purpose of the legislation, as well as ownership of the deaf community.

A specific provision in the NSL recognition legislation should regulate the composition, mandate and functioning of this monitoring body. This provision must also codify the government's legal obligation to consult and cooperate closely with the body in all initiatives relating to the implementation of sign language recognition. Only under such conditions can implementation be said to fully comply with the CRPD.

Yet, EUD goes beyond the notion of "meaningful involvement" as set out in CRPD General Comment No. 7 by advancing the concept of co-creation. Co-creation can be defined as a process in which deaf people, through their representative organisations, are not only consulted but are equal partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and legislation affecting them (De Meulder et al., 2024). Unlike consultation, which risks remaining symbolic if the perspectives of deaf people are not acted upon, co-creation ensures shared ownership and joint responsibility. It shifts the role of deaf people from passive consultees to active co-authors of the legislative and policy process.

By embedding co-creation into national sign language legislation, governments would not only meet their obligations under Article 4.3 CRPD but would also move towards a rights-based model of governance where deaf people are recognised as equal partners in shaping the conditions of their own inclusion.

## Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, the diversity of existing national sign language legislation, as categorised by De Meulder (2015; 2019) into six forms of recognition, makes it particularly challenging to measure their actual impact on deaf communities or to determine their full compliance with the CRPD.

The WFD (2023) has established eight guiding concepts intended as guidance for both National Associations of the Deaf and States Parties to the CRPD in adopting meaningful recognition of national sign languages. Yet, in the European context, where all EUD members already have some form of recognition, albeit at varying levels and with uneven impact, these guiding concepts serve a different purpose. Rather than providing guidance for adoption, EUD has chosen to apply them as an evaluative tool to assess the degree of compliance of existing legislation with the CRPD. To reflect the socio-economic and legal realities of the European deaf community, EUD has adapted the WFD's guiding concepts with a modification: it removed the criteria on

legal capacity, and added national sign language as a school subject.

In the next chapter, each national sign language legislation will be reviewed individually to identify its strengths and shortcomings. The eight criteria will be used to assign a score out of eight, offering a comparative indication of legal robustness. For each country, strengths and weaknesses of the legislation will be listed, followed by tailored recommendations. These recommendations aim to provide practical guidance for both the National Associations of the Deaf and their governments on the reforms required to ensure their NSL legislation is fully compliant with the CRPD, and pave the way to reach official status at the national level.

It must, however, be stressed that the scores presented in the following analysis should not be interpreted as value judgements, but rather as an objective overview of the current legal situation. Importantly, this assessment does not cover the effectiveness of implementation. Strong legislation fully aligned with the CRPD does not automatically translate into meaningful implementation or guaranteed linguistic human rights. Conversely, legislation that may appear legally limited can, in practice, generate significant progress in realising the rights of deaf people to use their national sign language.

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## Chapter 11:

# Analysis of National sign language frameworks

***Delphine le Maire, European Union of the Deaf***

## Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the national frameworks recognising and regulating National Sign Languages (NSLs) across 31 European countries. It brings together the detailed country factsheets, evaluation charts, and tailored recommendations developed over the past weeks to provide a comparative and evidence-based picture of the current state of NSL recognition, implementation and protection across Europe.

Each country section begins with a description of the national legal framework on NSL recognition and the specific instruments or provisions covering the eight criteria assessed in this study. These sections outline the main legislative or regulatory acts, their content, and the obligations they impose on public authorities, as well as the rights they confer on deaf people. Where relevant, they also include background information on the advocacy processes that led to the adoption of the recognition instrument, the scope of its implementation, and its impact to date. Key policy areas addressed include the right to education in and of the national sign language, access to sign language interpretation, access to public information and interactions with public services, obligations of audiovisual media and emergency related information, and the existence and role of any national sign language council or board. When applicable, the analysis also highlights the shortcomings and challenges identified in each framework and points to potential ways forward. Each factsheet concludes with legislative references in their original language, enabling readers to locate and cross-check the specific legal sources cited. The factsheets use EUD's preferred and emancipatory terminology (such as "deaf people"). However, when quoting or explaining legal provisions, we retain the original terms used in the law (such as "persons with hearing impairments" or "persons with hearing disabilities"). This is done deliberately to highlight how national legal frameworks refers to and conceptualises deaf people.

Each country entry then provides an evaluation chart, setting out the score assigned for each of the eight criteria, alongside precise legal references and explanatory comments clarifying the scope or identifying notable gaps in implementation. Each icon in the evaluation chart corresponds to one of the eight criteria. Legal reference numbers indicate the relevant legislation. A "Yes" answer scores one point, while a "No" answer

scores zero. Even if a country has not yet met the full scope of a given criterion (for instance, offering the national sign language as a subject in special schools but not yet in regular education) we have chosen to award the score. This reflects meaningful progress towards the broader goal of fully implementing the official status of the national sign language in the country. Comments in the evaluation chart specify what is missing and/or clarify the scope of application, whenever relevant.

Finally, each country section concludes with a set of country-specific recommendations outlining concrete steps that could strengthen the national NSL framework. These recommendations are tailored to the national context and aligned with the CRPD and the broader EU commitments to equality, accessibility and linguistic rights.

As national legal frameworks on sign language recognition continue to evolve, the information and evaluations presented in this chapter may become outdated over time. While this book provides a robust snapshot of the current state of NSL rights across Europe, legal and policy developments are ongoing. To ensure continued access to the most up-to-date ratings and visualisations (including interactive maps and criteria-based comparisons), we have created a dedicated online resource. By scanning the QR code included in this chapter, readers will be directed to EUD's regularly updated webpage where new legislation, implementation changes, and revised country scores will be published in real time:



# Austria

Sign Language	Österreichische Gebärdensprache
Abbreviation Sign Language	ÖGS
Date of Recognition	1 September 2005
Type of Recognition	Constitution
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	8,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 26 September 2008
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 26 September 2008

Austria is one of the five countries in the EU to have mentioned the national sign language in its constitution. Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) was recognised as a language in its own right on 1 September 2005 in the Federal Constitution of the Republic of Austria (1). This was achieved in the course of passing the Federal Disability Equality Act (2). Due to pressure from the Austrian Deaf Association (Österreichischer Gehörlosenbund, ÖGLB) and the wider disability movement, the Equality Act was only passed under the condition that Austrian Sign Language received official recognition. The National Council, therefore, accepted both the law and the amendment in the Federal Constitution of the Republic of Austria, which now states in its General Provisions: "Austrian Sign Language is recognised as an independent language. More shall be regulated by further laws." (Article 8(3)). At the same time, although not achieving formal recognition, the second petition managed to amend two procedural codes in 1998. The Code of Criminal Procedure (3) grants a deaf or mute person the right to a sign language interpreter if he or she is able to communicate in sign language (Section 56(7)). Otherwise, written or another suitable means of communication is to be chosen. The Civil Process Order (4) gives deaf, hearing impaired and speech impaired parties the right to a sign language interpreter and charges the federal authorities with the cost of the interpretation not only during judicial procedures but also for necessary communication with a legal representative (Section 73a). The access to the profession of sign language interpreters is regulated by the Administrative Order 7/2023 of the Social Ministry Service on Support Services for Hard-of-Hearing and Deaf People: Sign Language Interpretation (5). The Austrian Deaf Association (ÖGLB) is still advocating to get interpreters funded to accompany students at the university.

At the State level, several federal states (Länder) have adopted legislation concerning Austrian Sign Language. Salzburg and Oberösterreich (Upper Austria) for example have recognised ÖGS and the State pays for sign language interpreters for private life purposes. In Vienna, sittings of the Parliament and the Council are interpreted into sign language and can be viewed on Public Broadcast TV and online. Other seven states (such as Tyrol, Lower Austria, etc.) have no mention of ÖGS in their state legislation.

The impact of the constitutional amendment in 2005 was limited, especially for deaf persons. There has been increased awareness of the Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) being legally recognised as an official language in Austria. However, there have been no other legal developments since the constitutional amendment in 2005 that explicitly mentioned sign language or ensuring access to it. While Article 8(3) of the Constitution mentions further regulations, no law regarding sign language has been enacted at the federal level since the amendment in 2005.

Following the ratification of the UNCRPD, Austria has published its National Action Plan for the implementation of the Convention, dedicating a full chapter to sign language. The Austrian Deaf Association, while welcoming the increased visibility of sign language, pointed out that the first National Action Plan primarily focused on public administration and funding, without addressing the full scope of necessary measures. Since the second National Action Plan on Disability, however, a significantly higher number of its demands have been incorporated compared to the first plan. Moreover, during the review of the second and third State Reports on the implementation of the UNCRPD submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the number of the issues reflected in the Concluding Observations has considerably increased compared to the Concluding Observations on the review of the first State Report. Although progress is visible, the Austrian Deaf Association emphasises that securing communication solely through interpretation is not sufficient, and the full practical implementation of the UNCRPD and the National Action Plan regarding sign language remains to be fully achieved.

The National Action Plan Disability 2012-2020 has introduced a new chapter under 2. Equality and non-discrimination: 2.7 Sign Language, listing all sign language related claims referring to interpretation, education, job market, health, etc., for negotiation.

The new National Action Plan Disability 2022-2030<sup>25</sup> has some chapters referring to Austrian Sign Language as follows:

#### Chapter 1: Disability policy

1.6 Migrants and Asylum Seekers with Disabilities: Measures for providing interpreters.

1.7 People with Disabilities and Crisis Situations: Objective regarding emergency call accessibility including sign language.

#### Chapter 3: Accessibility

3.2 Services and Offerings from the Federation, Regions and Municipalities: Measures for translation videos in Austrian Sign Language.

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<sup>25</sup> [https://broschuerenservice.sozialministerium.gv.at/Home/Download?publicationId=675&attachmentName=Nationaler\\_Aktionsplan\\_Behinderung\\_2022\\_2030\\_englisch.pdf](https://broschuerenservice.sozialministerium.gv.at/Home/Download?publicationId=675&attachmentName=Nationaler_Aktionsplan_Behinderung_2022_2030_englisch.pdf)

3.4 Communication in sign language: Claims concerning the right to interpretation services.

3.6. Culture: Claims regarding museums, communication formats and accessible websites featuring Austrian Sign Language.

3.8 Media: Emphasizes the obligation for ORF and other media providers to increase accessible content, especially through sign language and subtitling.

Chapter 4: Education: Highlights the importance of considering Austrian Sign Language in inclusive education.

4.3 School: Measure on competence-oriented curricula.

4.4 Universities, Colleges, Science and Research: Measure on training for sign language interpreters.

Chapter 6: Independent Living

6.2 Participation in Public and Political Life: References to sign language videos for elections and interpretation services.

Chapter 8: Raising Awareness and Information

8.2 Statistics: Commitment to providing sign language videos with subtitles.

8.3 Reports: Obligation for the federal government to produce reports accessible via subtitles and Austrian sign language.

8.4 Service for the General Public and Information Offers: Emphasis on web content available in Austrian sign language. (National Action Plan Disability 2022-2030)

There have been no unexpected challenges during the implementation of the laws that ensure access to national sign language.

The method of legally recognising ÖGS did effectively safeguard the rights of deaf persons in their daily lives. Legal recognition of ÖGS has led to better enforcement of deaf rights than without legal recognition, and telecommunication/media would not have otherwise increased the number of TV programmes and shows with subtitles and interpretation. The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), Austria's national public service broadcaster, along with other broadcasters, is required to ensure the accessibility of its programming in Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS). Lately, and mainly triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic when crisis information was made accessible in ÖGS, politicians' communication is standardly interpreted into ÖGS. The official recognition of ÖGS might have supported the advocacy work of the Austrian Deaf Association regarding special regulation for signing people in times when mouth-nose protection masks were obligatory.

An increasing number of deaf schools are now offering bilingual education and adopting a bilingual approach. These initiatives are implemented at the regional level and supported by private or non-profit organisations, existing thanks to the local efforts of parents and teachers. They receive no state funding, as there is currently no national legislation or formal framework mandating or financing such schools.

The Austrian Parliament unanimously called for the new Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) curricula for academic secondary schools (AHS) and vocational secondary schools (BHS). AHS provide a general academic education, while BHS combine academic learning with vocational training. Following this, the Ministry of Education officially issued the curricula in 2024 under Regulation amending the School Regulations (6). The new ÖGS curricula are now binding and will be implemented across the relevant school levels. They are accessible to all learners, regardless of their hearing status. In same year, the Ministry of Education issued an additional curriculum regulation introducing ÖGS as a compulsory subject for deaf children in the compulsory school sector, covering both primary and lower secondary education levels. This curriculum addition is based on the hearing status, meaning it is accessible to deaf children, but unfortunately does not include CODA children as originally demanded.

Even though there is no legislative or regulatory provision establishing an Austrian Sign Language Board or Council, the ÖGLB serves as an advisory body to the Austrian government on all matters related to ÖGS.

In 2013, the Austrian Commission for UNESCO inscribed the ÖGS as intangible cultural heritage.<sup>26</sup>

## Legislation

- (1) Federal Constitution of the Republic of Austria (*Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz, B-VG*)
- (2) Federal Disability Equality Act (*Bundesbehindertengleichstellungsgesetz, BGStG*)
- (3) Code of Criminal Procedure (*Strafprozessordnung, StPO*)
- (4) Civil Process Order (*Zivilprozessordnung, ZPO*)
- (5) Administrative Order 7/2023 of the Social Ministry Service on Support Services for Hard-of-Hearing and Deaf People: Sign Language Interpretation (*Amtsverfügung Nr. 7/2023 des Sozialministeriumservice über Unterstützungsangebote für schwerhörige und gehörlose Menschen: Gebärdensprachdolmetschung*)

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26 <https://www.unesco.at/en/culture/intangible-cultural-heritage/national-inventory/news-1/article/austrian-sign-language>

(6) Regulation of the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Research amending the Regulation on the Curricula for Primary Schools and Special Schools, the Regulation on the Curricula for Middle Schools, the Regulation on the Curricula for General Academic Secondary Schools, the Regulation on Entrance and Aptitude Examinations, and the External Examination Regulation; Announcement of the Curricula for Religious Education (*Verordnung des Bundesministers für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, mit der die Verordnung über die Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, die Verordnung über die Lehrpläne der Mittelschulen, die Verordnung über die Lehrpläne der allgemeinbildenden höheren Schulen, die Verordnung über Aufnahms- und Eignungsprüfungen sowie die Externistenprüfungsverordnung geändert werden; Bekanntmachung der Lehrpläne für den Religionsunterricht*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 8(3)	"The Austrian sign language is recognized as independent language." No further federal laws have been enacted, despite the Constitution stating that further provisions shall be set by law.
	No		However, ÖGS was recognised as intangible cultural heritage by the Austrian UNESCO Commission.
	No		There is no national framework mandating or funding schools providing bilingual education; nonetheless, some provide it thanks to local initiatives by parents and teachers.
	Yes	(6)	In academic secondary schools (AHS) and vocational secondary schools (BHS) for any learner, as well as in compulsory primary and lower secondary school for deaf children.
	Yes	(3) §56(7)	
	No	(4) §73a	
	No	(5)	Yet, the Austrian Deaf Association (ÖGLB) serves as an advisory body to the Austrian government on all matters related to ÖGS.
Final score	3 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination

on the grounds of Austrian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.

2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of a legal framework recognising ÖGS as a language of instruction for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in ÖGS.
5. Establishment of an Austrian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Austrian Sign Language.

# Belgium

Sign Languages	Langue des Signes de Belgique Francophone Vlaamse Gebarentaal Deutsche Gebärdensprache
Abbreviation Sign Languages	LSFB, VGT and DGS
Dates of Recognition	22 October 2003, 26 April 2006 and 25 February 2019
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Acts
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	Flemish Sign Language Users: 6,500 French Belgian Sign Language Users: 5,000 German Sign Language Users: 800
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 2 July 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 2 July 2009

The French Belgian Sign Language (*LSFB*), the Flemish Sign Language (*VGT*) and the German Sign Language (*DGS*) are each recognised by the respective Community in which they are used. However, they are not recognised at the Federal State level as languages on an equal step with Belgium's official languages (Nederlands, *Français*, *Deutsch*). Several hurdles remain before national-level recognition can be achieved for the three sign languages. The scope of their recognition is therefore limited to the competences of their respective Communities — namely, the Flemish Community (hereafter “Flanders”), the French Community (hereafter “Wallonia-Brussels Federation”), and the German-speaking Community (hereafter “Eastern Belgium”)— which include areas such as culture, education, and language use.

The French Belgian Sign Language (*LSFB*) was recognised by a Decree (1) on 22 October 2003 by the Parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation as the visual-gestural language used by the deaf community of the French Community: “The French Belgian Sign Language (*LSFB*), hereinafter referred to as ‘the sign language’ is recognised” (Art. 1). This recognition was achieved after a proposal for a resolution to recognise sign language was passed in 1999.<sup>27</sup> The initiative towards recognition of *LSFB* was only made possible with the contacts the French-Belgian Deaf Association (FFSB), had with the French- and German-speaking Green Party (Ecolo). A feasibility study on the recognition of *LSFB* was carried out by two research institutes and produced recommendations that informed the recognition process. The initiative towards recognition was abandoned several times before it was finally achieved in

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.pfwb.be/le-travail-du-parlement/doc-et-pub/documents-parlementaires-et-decrets/dossiers/000204839>

October 2003.<sup>28</sup> The recognition decree regulates the establishment of an Advisory Committee whose main tasks are to advise the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation on any issue relating to the LSFB (Art. 2). The Advisory Committee on Sign Language (*CCLS*) delivered twelve opinions between 2004 and 2012, then remained dormant for ten years before being reactivated for the 2022–2026 mandate with a higher number of deaf sign language users in its composition.<sup>29</sup>

The Flemish Sign Language (VGT) was recognised by a Decree (2) on 26 April 2006 by the Parliament of Flanders as the natural visual-gestural language used by deaf people and Flemish Sign Language users in the Flemish Community and in the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region, deaf people being described as belonging to the linguistic and cultural minority group for whom the Flemish Sign Language plays an identifying role: “The Flemish Sign Language is hereby recognised” (Art. 2). The recognition was achieved after a long process: in 1999, a first ‘Resolution on the Issues of Persons with Hearing Impairment’ (*Resolutie betreffende de problematiek van personen met een auditieve handicap*<sup>30</sup>), followed by a petition and a proposal for a decree by Helga Stevens,<sup>31</sup> first deaf member of the Parliament of Flanders, along with several other Parliamentarians. The Decree further regulates the establishment of an Advisory Committee on VGT whose main tasks are to advise the Flemish government and formulate proposals (Art. 3). The Decree also recognises an organisation conducting research on VGT (Art. 6) and secures funding to projects contributing to the dissemination of VGT in the society (Art. 7). In 2014, the Parliament of Flanders revised the Decree on the Recognition of VGT (3) to ensure stronger representation of deaf sign language users in the Advisory Committee, broaden the expertise within the Advisory Committee, reinforce the role of the Flemish Sign Language Research Centre, and redefine Flemish Sign Language users, both deaf and hearing, as a linguistic and cultural minority for whom VGT serves as an identifying element. Since its establishment, the Advisory Committee on Flemish Sign Language (*Adviescommissie VGT*) provided more than 25 opinions on matters related to VGT.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Flemish Sign Language Research Center (*Vlaams GebarentaalCentrum*) conducts research on VGT, publishes and disseminates its research results, publishes information on VGT, supports projects and initiatives related to VGT and provides courses on VGT throughout Flanders.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the Flemish Government allocated funds every year to projects that contribute to the social anchoring of VGT.<sup>34</sup>

The German Sign Language (DGS) was recognised on 25 February 2019 by a Decree (4) of the Parliament of Eastern Belgium: “By this decree, the German Sign Language is recognised as a language in its own right.” (Art. 1). The Government of Eastern

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28 <https://www.pfwb.be/documents-parlementaires/document-pjd-000355959>

29 <https://www.culture.be/langue-des-signes/>

30 <https://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/files/pfile?id=1054273>

31 <https://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/pfile?id=1017445>

32 <https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/nl/cultuur/vlaamse-gebarentaal/adviescommissie-vgt>

33 <https://vgtc.be/>

34 <https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/nl/cultuur/vlaamse-gebarentaal/gesubsidieerde-projecten-vgt>

Belgium is mandated to take the necessary measures to facilitate and promote the use of DGS across the areas falling within its competencies. These measures include providing grants to organise or support awareness-raising initiatives; adopting regulations to enable, promote, and facilitate the knowledge and transmission of DGS, as well as the development of pedagogical tools for its teaching and learning; and designating a contact point where individuals can obtain information on available support measures (Art. 2).

VGT and LSFB are also mentioned in the Education Law of their respective Communities.

In Flanders, VGT is mentioned in the Decision of the Flemish Government establishing the developmental objectives for special primary education type 7 (5), which describes the developmental aims for VGT education in primary schools in special education system. The Decree on Teacher Training in Flanders (6) states sign language as one of the possible qualifications for Flemish teachers. On 7 September 2011, the Court of Appeal in Ghent delivered a verdict based on the Decree establishing a framework for the Flemish equal opportunities and equal treatment policy (7) in a landmark case initiated by parents in March 2009. The ruling granted four deaf children the right to have a minimum of 70% of their teaching hours interpreted into sign language, compared with only 7 out of 30 hours previously provided. The Court upheld the equality legislation's requirement for reasonable accommodation, ordering revisions to the interpretation service procedures. As a result, the Parliament of Flanders enshrined, in the Decree on Primary Education (8), the right of deaf pupils to be provided sign language interpretation in primary education (Art. 91 §2). Following advocacy efforts of deaf parents of a deaf student in secondary education, this right was extended to other educational levels such as secondary education, higher education and adult education. The Decree of the Flemish Government on Interpretation (9) grants the possibility for deaf pupils and students to receive interpretation services corresponding to the total number of their lesson hours (Art. 6§1). However, for deaf students in the third stage of secondary education who, in addition to interpreter support, have also received approval for the assistive tool Speaksee, the available interpreter hours package has been reduced by 29 interpreter hours per school year as decided by the Minister of Education in a 2009 Circular on Interpretation Support for Pupils with a Hearing Impairment in Mainstream Primary and Secondary Education (10).

Eighteen years after the recognition of VGT, on 26 April 2024, the Parliament of Flanders, with the support of the Minister of Education, amended the Decree on Primary Education (8) through a Decree on language department Dutch-Flemish Sign Language (11) consisting of the introduction of bilingual classes (VGT and written Dutch) in mainstream primary education. This is the result of extensive advocacy by the National Association of the Deaf in Flanders (*DoofVlaanderen*), the Advisory Committee on VGT, and several experts in bilingual education and VGT who conducted research in preparation for this initiative. The bilingual programme, delivered in Flemish Sign Language and written Dutch, includes both the common

kindergarten and primary education curriculum and dedicated courses on VGT and deaf culture (Arts. 3, 52<sup>2</sup>bis/2, 7 and 11 of the Decree on Primary Education). Enrolment is open to both deaf and hearing pupils. From September 2025 onwards, schools interested in offering bilingual education within a separate unit (called “language department Dutch-Flemish Sign Language”) have been permitted to apply and implement the programme. However, deaf pupils registered in such a bilingual programme who are normally entitled to interpreter support funded by the Special Educational Resources unit are still entitled to 20% of the maximum number of interpreter hours they would normally receive at the primary education level as stipulated by the Decision of the Flemish Government on Interpretation (9) (Art 6, §1).

In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, following a pilot project for bilingual education for deaf children launched in 2000, the Parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation adopted a Decree regulating the provision of education to deaf pupils through immersion in sign language (12). Since September 2009, bilingual education combining written French and French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) has been available to deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils within the mainstream education system, in both kindergarten and primary education. This bilingual model is implemented through co-enrolment classes led jointly by a signing teacher and a non-signing teacher, bringing together deaf or hard of hearing pupils and their hearing peers. In addition to the general education programme, the deaf and hard of hearing pupils receive two weekly lessons dedicated to sign language and deaf culture pursuant the Decree on ordinary preschool and primary education (13). A similar framework exists in special education under the Decree regulating special education (14), which provides for a number of hours of sign language immersion from preschool through secondary education (Art. 46, Section 2, §3). Since September 2013, the bilingual framework has been extended to deaf and hard of hearing students in the first stage of secondary education under the Decree on the first degree of secondary education (15) who also receive two additional weekly lessons in French language, and since September 2016, to the second and third stages of secondary education under the Decree on full time secondary education (16).

With regard to the accessibility of audiovisual media, the use of sign language interpretation by broadcasters is regulated under the legislation and implementing decisions in Flanders and Brussels-Wallonia Federation.

Under Article 151/2 of the Decree on radio broadcasting and television in Flanders (17), public and private broadcasters must progressively make their programmes accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers through the use of sign language interpretation, according to timelines and quotas set by the Government of Flanders, which may also provide subsidies to support these measures. Under the new Management Agreement 2026–2030 (*Beheersovereenkomst*) between the Government of Flanders and the public broadcaster (VRT), accessibility and inclusion for deaf viewers are further strengthened. VRT provides both adult and children’s news with VGT interpretation and offers sign language coverage for major events and socially

relevant programmes, with a commitment to increase total broadcast hours in sign language by 5% over the duration of the agreement.

Under the Order of the Government of the French Community on the accessibility of broadcasting programmes (18), the Management Contract between the Government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and the public broadcaster serving Belgium's French-speaking Community (RTBF), requires RTBF to progressively increase the share of programmes interpreted into sign language as follows: the daily broadcast of the main evening news and the children's news programme with live sign language interpretation, ensuring access both on television and online (Section 18, *Sixième Contrat de gestion de la RTBF 2023-2027*). Moreover, local broadcasters and private broadcasters are also mandated to render their programmes accessible for deaf people under Article 8 of the Regulation of the Higher Audiovisual Council on the Accessibility of Broadcasting Programmes (19).

In the Regions (Flanders, Brussels-Capital and Wallonia), which are distinct from the Communities and Federal State, and hold competences in employment, social assistance, and disability support, among others, the authorities have adopted regulations governing the provision of sign language interpretation services.

In Flanders, the VGT interpretation service is regulated by the Decision of the Flemish Government laying down the rules for sign language interpretation (20). It regulates VGT interpretation services, including payment, hours, and qualifications. Under the Decision on Interpretation (9), deaf persons are entitled to 80 hours of interpretation services per year, while deafblind persons are entitled to 220 hours per year (Art. 6§2). Lastly, under the Decision of the Flemish Government Concerning the Professional Integration of Persons with an Employment Disability (21), deaf employees may receive sign language interpretation services for up to 30% of their working hours, while jobseekers are entitled to at least 18 hours annually with the possibility of additional hours upon request at the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training (*Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding*).

In the Brussels-Capital Region, the Decree on the inclusion of persons with disabilities (22) establishes a sign language interpretation service, further regulated by the Decree on communication and interpretation support services for deaf persons (23). Under this Decree, the service must provide interpretation support to at least 200 deaf or hard-of-hearing persons per year and deliver a minimum of 1,800 hours of interpretation services annually (Arts. 26 and 27).

In Wallonia, the Walloon Code of Social Action and Health (24) provides that sign language interpretation services shall be accredited and subsidised to enable deaf and hard-of-hearing persons to communicate in sign language with any other person, both in public and private life (Art. 831/76). The accredited service must provide at least 2,000 interpretation hours per year (Art. 831/105), and deaf clients, upon payment of an annual contribution determined by the service, are entitled to an annual allowance of up to 40 interpretation hours, which can be renewed upon payment of an additional

contribution once the quota has been exhausted (Art. 831/101).

Although LSFB, VGT, and DGS are recognised as languages in their own right within their respective Communities, this recognition remains largely symbolic and does not confer specific rights on deaf sign language users. The Advisory Committee on VGT proceeded to the evaluation of the Decree on the recognition of VGT with recommendations to broaden the scope and enshrine rights of sign language users.<sup>35</sup> The French-Belgian Deaf Association (FFSB) has conducted an initiative to revise the Decree on the recognition of LSFB to include additional provisions related to the rights of deaf sign language users.<sup>36</sup> In Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region, there remains a persistent shortage of sign language interpreters, despite the gradual increase in the number of interpretation hours available in Flanders over the years, partly as an indirect outcome of the Flemish Sign Language Recognition Decree. Progress has also been made in recognising the rights of deaf children to bilingual education in both Flanders and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. However, there is still a long way to go before the rights of deaf sign language users are fully enshrined across all areas of life.

## Legislation

- (1) Decree of 22 October 2003 on the recognition of sign language (*Décret du 22 octobre 2003 relatif à la reconnaissance de la langue des signes*)
- (2) Decree of 5 May 2006 on the recognition of the Flemish Sign Language (*Decreet van 5 mei 2006 houdende de erkenning van de Vlaamse Gebarentaal*)
- (3) Decree of 25 April 2014 amending the Decree of 5 May 2006 on the Recognition of the Flemish Sign Language (*Decreet van 25 april 2014 tot wijziging van het decreet van 5 mei 2006 houdende de erkenning van de Vlaamse Gebarentaal*)
- (4) Decree of 25 February 2019 on the Recognition of German Sign Language (*Dekret vom 25. Februar 2019 zur Anerkennung der Deutschen Gebärdensprache*)
- (5) Decision of the Flemish Government establishing the developmental objectives for special primary education type 7 (*Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering tot bepaling van de ontwikkelingsdoelen voor het buitengewoon basisonderwijs type 7*)
- (6) Decree on Teacher Training in Flanders (*Decreet betreffende de lerarenopleidingen in Vlaanderen*)
- (7) Decree establishing a framework for the Flemish equal opportunities and equal

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35 <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/72466>

36 <http://www.ffsb.be/ma-langue-des-signes-mon-droit/>

treatment policy (*Decreet houdende een kader voor het Vlaamse gelijkekansen- en gelijkebehandelingsbeleid*).

(8) Decree on Primary Education (*Decreet basisonderwijs*)

(9) Decree of the Flemish Government establishing overarching rules for the Central Interpretation Office for the policy areas of Education and Welfare, Public Health and Family (*Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering houdende de vaststelling van overkoepelende regels voor het centraal tolkenbureau voor de beleidsdomeinen Onderwijs en Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Gezin*)

(10) Circular of 15 May 2009 on Interpretation Support for Pupils with a Hearing Impairment in Mainstream Primary and Secondary Education (*Omzendbrief NO/2009/02 van 15 mei 2009 – Tolkondersteuning voor leerlingen met een auditieve functiebeperking in het gewoon basis- en secundair onderwijs*).

(11) Decree modifying the Decree on Primary Education regarding the language department Dutch-Flemish Sign Language (*Decreet van 26 april 2024 tot wijziging van het decreet basisonderwijs van 25 februari 1997, wat betreft de taalafdeling Nederlands-Vlaamse Gebarentaal*)

(12) Decree on Education through Language Immersion (*Décret relatif à l'enseignement en immersion linguistique*)

(13) Decree of 13 July 1998 on the organisation of ordinary preschool and primary education and amending the regulation of education (*Décret du 13 juillet 1998 portant organisation de l'enseignement maternel et primaire ordinaire et modifiant la réglementation de l'enseignement*).

(14) Decree Organising Special Education (*Décret organisant l'enseignement spécialisé*)

(15) Decree on the Pedagogical Organisation of the First Stage of Secondary Education (*Décret relatif à l'organisation pédagogique du 1er degré de l'enseignement secondaire*)

(16) Decree on the Organisation of Full-Time Secondary Education (*Décret portant organisation de l'enseignement secondaire de plein exercice*).

(17) Decree of 27 March 2009 concerning radio broadcasting and television in Flanders (*Decreet van 27 maart 2009 betreffende radio-omroep en televisie*)

(18) Order of the Government of the French Community of 12 December 2018 approving the Regulation of the Advisory Board of the Higher Audiovisual Council concerning the accessibility of programmes for persons with sensory disabilities (*Arrêté du Gouvernement de la Communauté française du 12 décembre 2018 portant approbation du Règlement du Collège d'avis du Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel relatif à l'accessibilité des programmes aux personnes en situation de déficience sensorielle*)

(19) Regulation on the Accessibility of Programmes for Persons with Sensory Disabilities (*Règlement de juillet 2018 du CSA relatif à l'accessibilité des programmes aux personnes en situation de déficience sensorielle*)

(20) Decision of the Flemish Government of 20 July 1994 laying down the rules according to which the [Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities] is responsible for the cost of assistance by [interpreters for the Deaf and hearing impaired] (*Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering van 20 juli 1994 houdende vaststelling van de regels volgens dewelke het [Vlaams Agentschap voor Personen met een Handicap] de kosten van bijstand door [tolken voor doven en slechthorenden] ten laste nemen*).

(21) Decision of the Flemish Government Concerning the Professional Integration of Persons with an Employment Disability (*Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering betreffende de professionele integratie van personen met een arbeidshandicap*)

(22) Decree of the French Community Commission of 17 January 2014 on the inclusion of persons with disabilities (*Décret de la Commission communautaire française du 17 janvier 2014 relatif à l'inclusion de la personne handicapée*)

(23) Decree of 1 March 2018 of the College of the French Community Commission on communication and interpretation support services for deaf persons (*Arrêté 2017/1388 du Collège de la Commission communautaire française du 1er mars 2018 relatif aux services d'appui à la communication et à l'interprétation pour les personnes sourdes*)

(24) Walloon Code of Social Action and Health (*Code wallon de l'Action sociale et de la Santé*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 (2) Art. 2 (3) Art. 1	"The French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB), hereinafter referred to as 'the sign language' is recognised" "The Flemish Sign Language is hereby recognised" "(...) the German Sign Language is recognised as a language in its own right." The three national sign languages are each recognised by the respective Community in which they are used, but not at the Federal State level.
	No		
	No		

	Yes	(8) Art. 3, 52°bis/2 (13) Art. 2 20° and 21°	Only in Flanders and Wallonia-Brussels Federation.
	Yes	(5) Art. 44§8 and Annex (13) Art. 3§2 and 4§2 (14) Art. 46, Section 2§3	Only in Flanders and Wallonia-Brussels Federation.
	Yes	(8) Art. 91§2 (9) Art. 7§2-3 and Art. 6§1-2 (23) Art. 26 and 27, and Annex I (24) Art. 831/76, 831/101, 831/105 and Annex 83/6	Only in Flanders, Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Brussels-Capital and Wallonia.
	Yes	(17) Art. 151/2 (19) Art. 8	None of the three Communities require broadcast emergency information to be accessible in sign language.
	Yes	(1) Art. 2§1 and §3 (2) Art. 3§1 and §3	Only in Flanders and Wallonia-Brussels Federation.
Final score	6 / 8		However, some criteria are not achieved in the German-speaking Community (Eastern Belgium)

## Recommendations

1. Recognition of the three national sign languages at the federal level.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people from the three language Communities as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Provision of German Sign Language both as a language of instruction and as a subject for deaf learners.
4. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Flemish Sign Language, French Belgian Sign Language and German Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use them in both private and public spheres.
5. Ensuring access to information from public authorities and enabling accessible communication with public services in the three national sign languages.
6. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in the three national sign languages.
7. Establishment of a German Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the German Sign Language.

# Bulgaria

Sign Language	Български жестов език
Abbreviation Sign Language	БЖЕ
Date of Recognition	21 January 2021
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	5,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 27 September 2007 Ratification: 22 March 2012
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 18 December 2008 Ratification: N/A

The Bulgarian Sign Language (БЖЕ) was recognised on 21 January 2021 as a natural language in its own right in the Bulgarian Sign Language Act (1). This Act also grants rights to deaf and deafblind people to express into and use this language as well as to access information in Bulgarian Sign Language. Moreover, the Act recognises the cultural and linguistic identity of the deaf community in Bulgaria, requiring the characteristic features of the Bulgarian Sign Language and the culture and identity of the deaf community in Bulgaria to be respected and preserved.

The Act also ensures the Bulgarian Sign Language is used to teach and communicate with schoolchildren at special schools for schoolchildren with hearing impairments (Art. 10(1)). Moreover, as of 15 September 2026, the Bulgarian Sign Language shall be taught as a dedicated subject to schoolchildren with hearing impairments and deaf schoolchildren in preschool and school education, and, depending on the degree of their visual and/or hearing impairment, also to deaf and deafblind children in kindergarten (Art. 10(2) and (3)). In addition, it shall be made available to hearing children as an elective course in school education and as an extracurricular activity (Art. 10(4)).

The Act also regulates the access to the profession of professional sign language interpreters from and into Bulgarian Sign Language revising thereby previous regulations in this area (Art. 15(1) and (2)). Prior to the Act, the profession “Sign Language Interpreter” was regulated by the Ordinance No. 48 of 9 January 2012 on the acquisition of the professional qualification (2). This regulation defined the educational requirements for acquiring a professional qualification as a sign language interpreter. After the recognition of the Bulgarian Sign Language through the Bulgarian Sign Language Act on 21 January 2021, the name of the profession was changed to “Interpreter from and into Bulgarian Sign Language”. As of 2025, the Regulation No. 5 of 1 February 2023 entered in effect, governing the acquisition of qualifications for the profession of “Interpreter from and into Bulgarian Sign Language” (3).

In accordance with the Vocational Education and Training Act (4) and with the Order No. 489 of 2 July 2010 approving the List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training (5), the Union of the Deaf in Bulgaria (СЪЮЗ НА ГЛУХИТЕ В БЪЛГАРИЯ, SGB) issued a licence to the Vocational Training Center to provide a training programme under the name “Sign Language Interpreter”, as one of the specialties in its training programmes. On 22 February 2021, the licence was amended, and the training for the profession is now provided under the name “Interpreter from and into Bulgarian Sign Language”.

According to the Bulgarian Sign Language Act, deaf and deafblind persons are entitled to free interpretation services in Bulgarian Sign Language up to an annual limit of 120 hours. Deaf and deafblind students and doctoral candidates in the process of their studies for higher education, in addition to the provided limit of up to 120 hours, are entitled to additional use of interpretation services in Bulgarian Sign Language up to 60 hours per semester (Art. 20(1) and (2)).

State institutions and local government bodies are obliged to provide interpretation into Bulgarian Sign Language beyond the provided limit of up to 120 hours when: “1. deaf and deafblind persons request and/or receive administrative services from the executive and local government bodies; 2. conducting events they organize with the participation of deaf and deafblind persons, when requested in advance”. (Art. 24)

Deaf and deafblind persons may also call upon interpretation services free of charge beyond the provided limit of up to 120 hours in Bulgarian Sign Language in the following cases: “1. hospitalisation in medical institutions for inpatient care, mental health centers, centers for skin and venereal diseases and complex oncology centers; 2. undertakings by the competent authorities involving investigative, judicial and other procedural actions under the Criminal Procedure Code, as well as the exercise of powers under the Ministry of Interior Act.” (Art. 20(4))

The Act also establishes a Bulgarian Sign Language Council under the leadership of the Minister of Education and Science with the purpose of assisting the Minister in its activities promoting the Bulgarian Sign Language. The Council consists of 13 members, most of whom are from the deaf and deafblind community, alongside with representatives of government academia and a sign language interpreter.

## Legislation

(1) Bulgarian Sign Language Act (ЗАКОН за българския жестов език)

(2) Ordinance No. 48 of 9 January 2012 on the acquisition of the professional qualification “Sign Language Interpreter” (НАРЕДБА № 48 ОТ 9 ЯНУАРИ 2012 Г. ЗА ПРИДОБИВАНЕ НА КВАЛИФИКАЦИЯ ПО ПРОФЕСИЯТА “ПРЕВОДАЧ ЖЕСТОМИМИЧЕН ЕЗИК”)

(3) Regulation No. 5 of 1 February 2023 on acquiring qualification for the profession “Interpreter from and into Bulgarian Sign Language” (*Наредба № 5 от 1 февруари 2023 г. за придобиване на квалификация по професията „Преводач от и на български жестов език“*)

(4) Vocational Education and Training Act (*Закон за професионалното образование и обучение*)

(5) Order No. 489 of 2 July 2010 approving the List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training (*Заповед № РД-09-489 от 2 юли 2010 г. на министъра на образованието, младежта и науката за утвърждаване на Списъка на професиите за професионално образование и обучени*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 1(1) Art. 6(1)	(...) recognition of Bulgarian sign (language) as a natural language in its own right.
	Yes	(1) Art. 2(1), Art. 3 Art. 5(5)	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of the use of the Bulgarian Sign Language.
	Yes	(1) Art. 2(2) Art. 5(3) Art. 6(3)	
	Yes	(1) Art. 5(2) Art. 6(5) Art. 10(1)	
	Yes	(1) Art. 10(2), Art. 10(3), Art. 10(4)	Entry into force as from 15 September 2026. For deaf and deafblind children in kindergarten, depending on their hearing and vision loss degree, and deaf children in preschool and school education. For hearing children as an elective course at school and as an extracurricular activity.
	Yes	(1) Art. 15(1) Art. 15(2) Art. 20	
	Yes	Art. 24	Central and local government to foresee interpretation from and into Bulgarian Sign Language during the provision of administrative services and the organisation of events. However, there is no specific provision on access to broadcast information, especially information in situations of emergencies.
	Yes	(1) Art. 26	

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Final score 8 / 8

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## Recommendations

Although the minimal requirements have been met in line with the assessed legal and regulatory provisions, two specific recommendations are necessary to fully meet the criteria:

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of the Bulgarian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of public information disseminated by the public authorities, particularly during emergencies, and broadcast programmes, in Bulgarian Sign Language.

# Croatia

Sign Language	Hrvatski znakovni jezik
Abbreviation Sign Language	HZJ
Date of Recognition	15 July 2015
Type of Recognition	Act on Sign Language and other means of communication
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	6,500
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 15 August 2007
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 15 August 2007

The Croatian Sign Language (HZJ) is recognized in a Sign Language Act, specifically the Act on the Croatian Sign Language and other communication systems of deaf and deafblind Persons in the Republic of Croatia (1), which was promulgated on 15 July 2015. The Act recognises the rights of deaf and deafblind persons to use, receive information and education in Croatian Sign Language and/or other means of communication suited to their needs (Art. 1). Its purpose is to guarantee accessibility and the right to use the Croatian Sign Language in education, communication and access to information. The process of adopting this Act was closely monitored by the representatives of the Croatian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Hrvatski savez gluhih i nagluhih, HSGN) who were part of the working group that drafted the Act.

The national recognition of Croatian Sign Language has played a key role in ensuring the inclusion of deaf persons in all aspects of life. Following the adoption and during the implementation of the Sign Language Act, several measures were undertaken. The Ministry of Education adopted the Regulation on Personal Assistants and Professional Communication Intermediaries (2) which requires schools to provide educational interpreters for deaf and hard of hearing children and young people. However, the Sign Language Act does not impose a general obligation on institutions to ensure interpreting services when needed.

Croatian national broadcaster (HRT), along with some local broadcasters, has started providing certain programmes accessible to the deaf community. HRT broadcasts the midday and evening news with sign language interpreting, a Sunday Mass, and sessions of Parliament, among others.

In 2023, the Act on Personal Assistance (3) entered into force. The Act provides that deaf and hard of hearing adults are entitled to service delivered by a sign language interpreter and/or communication intermediary. While sign language interpreters provide services in sign language, communication intermediaries provide the service

by using other forms of communication. Depending on the degree of hearing loss, deaf and hard of hearing persons are entitled from 10 and 40 hours of state-funded service per month (Art. 35(2) and (3)). This Act also regulates the access to the profession of sign language interpreters in Croatian Sign Language (Art. 19(2)).

## Legislation

- (1) Act on the Croatian Sign Language and other communication systems of deaf and deafblind Persons in the Republic of Croatia (*Zakon o hrvatskom znakovnom jeziku i ostalim sustavima komunikacije gluhih i gluhoslijepih osoba u Republici Hrvatskoj, NN 82/15*)
- (2) Regulation on Personal Assistants and Professional Communication Intermediaries (*Pravilnik o mjerilima za pružanje usluge osobne asistencije, utvrđivanju cijene, sadržaju obrasca za podnošenje prijave na javni poziv te načinu i uvjetima sklapanja ugovora, NN 92/2023*)
- (3) Act on Personal Assistance (*Zakon o osobnoj asistenciji, NN 71/2023*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 and 5(1)	Croatian Sign Language is the native language of the deaf and deaf-blind community in the Republic of Croatia.
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 and 14(2)	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of the use of the Croatian Sign Language.
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 and 14(1)	However, it is unclear whether the right to use Croatian Sign Language is ensured only by the provision of sign language interpretation or if it also includes Croatian Sign Language as a language of instruction.
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 14(2) (3) Art. 2(3), 19(2), 35(2) and 35(3) (2) Art. 6(2)	

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	Yes	(3) Art. 2(3), 19(2), 35(2) and 35(3)	Deaf people have the right to use all forms of communication systems for deaf and deafblind persons, or all forms of support in the form of a communication intermediary in all life situations and before state administration bodies, bodies of local and regional self-government units and legal entities with public authority.  However, there is no obligation to render the audiovisual content accessible in HZJ even though HRT provides sign language interpreted programmes.
	No		
Final score		5 / 8	

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## Recommendations

1. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as a part of the national cultural heritage.
2. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Croatian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
3. Establishment of a legal framework to ensure that Croatian Sign Language is provided as a mandatory subject for deaf learners and as a language of instruction, if applicable.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast information, including emergency communication, in Croatian Sign Language.
5. Establishment of a Croatian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to Croatian Sign Language and the rights of deaf sign language users.

# Cyprus

Sign Language	Κυπριακή Νοηματική Γλώσσα
Abbreviation Sign Language	ΚΝΓ
Date of Recognition	14 April 2006
Type of Recognition	Act on Sign Language and other means of communication
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	1,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 27 June 2011
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 27 June 2011

Cypriot Sign Language (KNΓ) was recognised in the Act on the Recognition of Cypriot Sign Language (1). This is the result of a successful collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Culture, the School for the Deaf in Nicosia, and the Cyprus Federation of the Deaf who reached out to Members of the Parliament and secured political support for the recognition of Cypriot Sign Language.

The Act recognises Cypriot Sign Language as a visual code of communication, used either as the sole or as an additional means of communication to speech, between deaf persons and other persons, based on Greek Sign Language as it has developed and is used in Cyprus, regardless of the mother tongue of those persons.

While the Act recognises this language and mandates the documentation of this language within 54 months from its entry into force, it does not grant further rights to deaf persons. However, it suggests the Council of Ministers to adopt additional measures within five years (60 months) to provide facilities for deaf persons to learn Cypriot Sign Language; to provide facilities for the use of interpreters by or on behalf of deaf persons; to issue a Handbook of Cypriot Sign Language in such a way as to facilitate the learning and use of this language by any interested person; to renew and improve the republication of this Handbook every three years, and its free provision to deaf persons, their teachers, and their interpreters; to oblige the School for the Deaf to recruit teachers of Cypriot Sign Language; and to include Cypriot Sign Language among the optional languages taught in public schools (Article 6 of the Act). Article 4 also recognises Cypriot Sign Language as an additional qualification for the recruitment of civil service staff, if it is necessary for them to have direct contact with deaf persons.

Following the Act on the Recognition of Cypriot Sign Language, the Council of

Ministers established a Scientific Committee to oversee its implementation.<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of Education appointed a deaf Special Scientist from Greece to lead the committee for a three-year project aimed at producing a Handbook of Cypriot Sign Language to promote its learning and use. In collaboration with Cypriot deaf adults, the project resulted in three publications: a communicative grammar book, a traditional grammar book, and a dictionary. Although the Act mandates the renewal and improvement of these materials every three years, no further updates have been made. In 2022, the Minister of Education and Culture reappointed the Scientific Committee to oversee the implementation of measures outlined in the Act. Three committee members with expertise in sign language linguistics were tasked with developing a curriculum to guide the teaching of sign language and producing supporting materials. It is important to note that there remains a shortage of qualified sign language teachers in Cyprus.

Cypriot Sign Language is currently taught at the Adult Education Centres of the Ministry of Education in Lemesos, Nicosia, Larnaka, and Paphos. It is also taught since 2014 at the European University of Cyprus, as a compulsory subject to the students of the Speech and Language Pathology Course, and since 2018, as a language subject at the University of Cyprus. However, it is not included as a subject in the school curriculum for either deaf or hearing students, including at the School for the Deaf. At this school, two sign language interpreters are employed to facilitate classroom communication and support academic activities.

In 2015, the Cyprus Association of Sign Language Interpreters was established, comprising 22 interpreters with diverse training backgrounds. However, there is currently no formal certification, registration system, or required qualifications to become a sign language interpreter in Cyprus. To enhance interpretation standards, the Association began organising seminars and training sessions with experts from Greece specialising in interpreter education. In 2021-2022, the Ministry of Education organised and conducted a series of lessons for interpreters of Cypriot Sign Language and in that same school year, a series of lessons were also provided to deaf Cypriot Sign Language teachers. The courses were provided by Greek instructors.

Most television channels in Cyprus provide at least ten minutes of interpreted news daily as mandated by the Radio and Television Broadcasters Law of 1998 (2). The national broadcaster, Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation (RIK-CYBC), offers one hour of interpreted evening news and provides interpretation for the weekly plenary sessions of Parliament. During emergencies, press conferences, and seminars attended by deaf individuals, sign language interpretation is also made available. Additionally, during presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, political parties and candidates hire interpreters to ensure accessibility for deaf audiences.

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37 [https://www.moec.gov.cy/eidiki\\_ekpaidefsi/kypriaki\\_noimatiiki\\_glossa/index.html](https://www.moec.gov.cy/eidiki_ekpaidefsi/kypriaki_noimatiiki_glossa/index.html)

## Legislation

(1) Act on the Recognition of Cypriot Sign Language of 2006 (*Ο περί της Αναγνώρισης της Κυπριακής Νοηματικής Γλώσσας Νόμος του 2006, 66(I) 2006*)

(2) Radio and Television Broadcasters Law of 1998 to (No. 2) of 2021 (*Ο περί Ραδιοφωνικών και Τηλεοπτικών Οργανισμών Νόμος του 1998 έως (Αρ. 2) του 2021*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 2§1	"Cypriot Sign Language" means a visual communication code, used either as the sole or as an additional means of communication to speech, between deaf people and other individuals.
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 6	Not effectively implemented, despite the Council of Ministers being mandated to adopt the necessary measures within 60 months from the date of entry into force of the Act.
	Yes	(1) Art. 6	Not effectively implemented, despite the Council of Ministers being mandated to adopt the necessary measures within 60 months from the date of entry into force of the Act.
	No		
	Yes	((1) Art. 4(1) (2) Art. 30B (1) and (2)	The Law recognises Cyprus Sign Language as a main or additional qualification for the recruitment of employees in public service positions which concern deaf persons, or in which direct communication with deaf persons who communicate in this language is necessary.
	No		Excepted for the establishment of a Scientific Committee to develop Cypriot Sign Language materials.
Final score	4 / 8		

## Recommendations

- Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as a part of the national cultural heritage.

2. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Cypriot Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
3. Implementation of Article 6 of the Act to provide Cypriot Sign Language both as a language of instruction and as a subject for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of a sign language interpreter training programme, along with a registration system that defines the required qualifications for the profession.
5. Establishment of a Cypriot Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Cypriot Sign Language.

# Czechia

Sign Language	Český Znakový Jazyk
Abbreviation Sign Language	ČZJ
Date of Recognition	11 June 1998
Type of Recognition	Act on Sign Language and other means of communication
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	10,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 28 September 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 24 August 2021

Czech Sign Language (ČZJ) was recognised as a language in its own right in the Sign Language Act 155/1998 (1). The subsequent and still current piece of legislation, the Act of 23 September 2008 (2) introduced a number of changes, most notably the removal of the term used for Sign System (*znamková řeč*). It was replaced with the official term for Czech Sign Language (*Český Znakový Jazyk*). This clarification became necessary as deaf people often could not tell whether an interpreter would be using ČZJ or Sign Supported Czech. The change was made possible through a series of Round Table meetings held in 2008, involving Members of Parliament, academics, legal experts, and representatives of organisations of deaf and deafblind people, as well as schools.

The amended Act contains provisions regarding sign language and other ‘communication systems’, which deaf and deafblind people can choose freely (Section 1(2)). Section 4 further describes Czech Sign Language and acknowledges it as a natural ‘communication system’ with linguistic and grammatical features. The separate section 6 contains information on ‘communication systems’ that visualise spoken Czech and mentions forms of communication of deafblind people. Section 7 not only gives the right to use sign language but also grants deaf and deafblind people the right to be educated in sign language and the right to learn sign language. Section 8 then grants rights regarding sign language interpreters in official matters, for doctor appointments and judicial proceedings. Interpreters must be provided free of charge to deaf people who have been granted ‘special privileges’ (a status that defines them as fully deaf) in judicial proceedings and in secondary and higher vocational schools and universities.

Additionally, parents with deaf or deafblind children are entitled to free of charge ‘communication system’ courses, including Czech Sign Language courses (Section 9). This is further regulated by the Decree No. 165/2018 on the content and scope of communication systems courses for deaf and deafblind people (3) according to which the courses are divided into a beginner’s level and an advanced level in

which two categories can be found: general (history and culture, main principles of communication with deaf children, basic alphabet, signs and grammatical rules) and specific on the Czech Sign Language (Section 3). The duration of the Czech Sign Language course consists of a maximum of 64 teaching hours (Section 5).

The Czech Education Act (4) stipulates that support measures in the education of a deaf child, pupil, or student shall be selected to ensure that the communication system corresponds to their needs (Section 16(7)). For deaf children, schools are obliged to deliver education in the communication system that suits them, such as Czech Sign Language. When educated in Czech Sign Language, they must also be provided with education in written Czech using methods similar to those used in foreign language instruction. When a school makes use of a sign language interpreter, sufficient qualifications in Czech Sign Language proficiency and interpretation skills are required. Furthermore, the Act allows students with special needs to bring their “assistance”, which can include a sign language interpreter, into the examination room. Decree No. 27/2016 on the education of pupils with special educational needs (5) specifies certain conditions for the provision of support measures, including Czech Sign Language interpretation, based on the recommendation of an educational counselling centre and the written consent of the deaf pupil’s legal guardian or the deaf adult student.

In addition to the right to sign language interpretation in judicial proceedings under the Act on Court Interpreters and Translators (6), the Social Services Act (7) provides for free interpretation services (Section 56). The Municipalities Act (8) also partially covers interpretation services in civil life (such as at registry offices, in municipal political activities, or during weddings) but does not guarantee funding for these services. Ongoing discussions aim to define qualifications and establish a formal examination for Czech Sign Language interpreters, but currently, there is no central interpreter register, only limited registration under the Social Services Act, which does not guarantee standardized qualifications or quality, as each social service provider has its own procedure.

Lastly, the Czech Television Act (9) from 1991 requires public broadcasters to have at least 2% of their programmes produced into Czech Sign Language or provided with simultaneous interpretation into Czech Sign Language (Section 3(1) j)). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency broadcasts on the public broadcaster Czech Television (ČT) have been interpreted into Czech Sign Language, and the main news on ČT24 is also interpreted. However, no legal provision requires that broadcasted emergency information be made accessible in Czech Sign Language.

The impact of the Sign Language Act No. 155/1998 has been considerable. The rights it establishes have been acknowledged and are partially enforced through subsequent legislation. However, the Act still lacks an implementing decree, which means its guarantees are incomplete and its effective enforcement remains limited.

Since the adoption of the Act, certain areas have been regulated in terms of the right to sign language interpretation, for example, education, social protection (social services), parts of health care, the judiciary, and employment, among others. Enforcement has also proved effective in some areas not directly covered by legislation, such as elections. By contrast, funding for sign language interpretation is not always guaranteed in private life (partly covered by the Municipalities Act). Moreover, no measures are in place regarding leisure and cultural life (including sports, culture, and hobbies), which are largely left to deaf organisations, who must independently seek funding, often with very limited resources.

## Legislation

- (1) Act No. 155/1998 of 11 June 1998 on Sign Language and on the Amendment of Other Laws (*Zákon ze dne 11. června 1998 o znakové řeči a o změně dalších zákonů*)
- (2) Act 384/2008 of 23 September 2008 amending Act No. 155/1998 Coll., on Sign Language and on Amendments to Other Acts, and other related laws (*Zákon ze dne 23. září 2008, kterým se mění zákon č. 155/1998 Sb., o znakové řeči a o změně dalších zákonů a další související zákony*)
- (3) Decree No. 165/2018 on the content and scope of communication systems courses for deaf and deafblind people (*Vyhláška č. 165/2018 Sb. o obsahu a rozsahu kurzů komunikačních systémů neslyšících a hluchoslepých osob*)
- (4) Act No. 561/2004 of 24 September 2004 on Preschool, Basic, Secondary, Tertiary Professional and Other Education (*Zákon ze dne 24. září 2004 o předškolním, základním, středním, vysším odborném a jiném vzdělávání*)
- (5) Decree No. 27/2016 on the education of pupils with special educational needs (*Vyhláška č. 27/2016 Sb., o vzdělávání žáků se speciálními vzdělávacími potřebami a žáků nadaných*)
- (6) Act No. 354/2019 Coll., on Court Interpreters and Court Translators (*Zákon č. 354/2019 Sb., o soudních tlumočnících a soudních překladatelích*)
- (7) Act No. 108/2006 Coll., on Social Services (*Zákon č. 108/2006 Sb., o sociálních službách*)
- (8) Act No. 128/2000 Coll., on Municipalities (*Zákon č. 128/2000 Sb., o obcích*)
- (9) Act No. 483/1991 Coll., on Czech Television (*Zákon č. 483/1991 Sb., o České televizi, ve znění pozdějších předpisů*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) §1(2) and §4	Czech Sign Language is the basic communication system of those deaf people in the Czech Republic who consider it their main form of communication.
	Yes	(1) §1(2)	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of ČzJ.
	No		
	Yes	(1) §7 (4) §16(7)	
	Yes	(1) §7 and §9 (3) §3 and §5	Right of parents of deaf or deafblind children to free instruction on Czech Sign Language, among other forms of communication.
	Yes	(1) §8 (6) §3(1) (7) §56 (8)	
	Yes	(1) §8 (9) §3(1) j)	Deaf and deafblind persons have the right to interpretation services providing interpretation in the communication system of their choice specified in this Act when handling official matters and providing other necessary needs. However, there is no legal provision requiring that broadcast emergency information must be accessible in Czech Sign Language.
	No		
Final score	6 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Czech Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in Czech Sign Language.
4. Establishment of a Czech Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Czech Sign Language.

# Denmark

Sign Language	Dansk tegnsprog
Abbreviation Sign Language	DTS
Date of Recognition	26 May 2014
Type of Recognition	Act establishing a language council
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	4,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 24 July 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: 23 September 2014

The deaf community in all territories mostly uses Danish Sign Language (DTS), as many deaf children from Greenland and the Faroe Islands are educated in mainland Denmark. Denmark has a number of laws relating to sign language. None of these officially recognised the national sign language, nor explicitly mentioned Danish Sign Language until 2014. The word being used was *tegnsprog* (sign language), not specifying which sign language.

On 26 May 2014, the Danish Sign Language (DTS) has been recognised through the Act No. 61 amending the Act on the Danish Language Council (1) which established the Danish Sign Language Council (*Dansk Tegnsprogsråd*). The enactment of the revised Act on Danish Language Council (2) has resulted in increased funds allocation for Danish Sign Language. In the state budget, 120,000 euros have been set aside for the department of Danish Sign Language under the Danish Language Council. The department of Danish Sign Language offers advice and information, in addition to devising principles and guidelines for monitoring Danish Sign Language.

Sign language is also mentioned in a number of laws and executive regulations in different areas. The Executive Order on the Teaching of Sign Language in Primary Schools (3) grants children with hearing loss the right to education in sign language. It further states that Danish Sign Language shall be taught as a compulsory subject and shall be used as a language of instruction. The Act on Special Educational Support in Further and Higher Education (4) gives deaf people support in education, so the courses can be attended on equal terms with other students (Section 2). The Act on Special Educational Support in Training (5) also gives deaf people support, meeting their specific training needs, enabling them to attend the training on equal terms with other students.

The Consolidated Health Act (6) proclaims the right of deaf people to free interpreter assistance during hospital treatment, treatment by general practitioners, and practicing specialists (Section 50). The Act for Compensation of Disabled Employees

(7) describes the support available to deaf people at work (Section 7) and the hours and payment scheme.

The Consolidation Act on Social Housing (8) states that deaf people who have a right to social housing cannot be placed on a waiting list unless they can move to a special sign language environment (Section 58b(3)). The Act on Housing for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (9) states the same for residential homes for the elderly and disabled (Section 17(7.3)).

The Act on the Interpretation for Persons with Hearing Disabilities (10) gives persons with hearing disabilities the right to interpretation hours for activities that are necessary to enable them to participate in society on an equal footing with other citizens (Section 10). The Act on Activities with Indefinite Interpretation of People with Hearing Disabilities (11) elaborates in part 1 of Act the scope of activities covered by the term “indefinite interpretation” and therefore paid for by the State Treasury (Section 1). The list of activities has been expanded continuously and most recently by the Act on Test with Application Funds under the Act on Interpreting of People with Hearing Disabilities (12). Activities not covered by the indefinite interpretation are covered in the Act on the Number of Hours in the Timebank to Indefinite Interpretation for People with Hearing Disabilities (13) by the time bank, which accounts for 7 hours per year per user (Section 1).

The Executive Order on the Education for a Professional Bachelor’s Degree as a Danish Sign Language and Written Interpreter (14) establishes a bachelor’s degree programme for Danish Sign Language and written interpreters consisting of 210 ECTS points.

The Consolidation Act on Radio and Television Broadcasting (15) requires the public channels to provide news in sign language (Section 6).

Enshrining sign language in Danish legislation was achieved through the efforts of the Danish Deaf Association (*DDL*) in cooperation with the national umbrella organisation for disabled people, the Disabled People’s Organisation (*DPOD*). The fact that sign language is part of the educational law could only be achieved in collaboration with the Association of Parents with Deaf Children and the deaf schools. Denmark also works closely together with other Nordic countries to achieve common standards for deaf people.

## Legislation

(1) Act No. 61 amending the Act on the Danish Language Council (*L 61 Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om Dansk Sprognævn*)

(2) Consolidation Act on the Danish Language Council (*Bekendtgørelse af lov om*

*Dansk Sprognævn)*

- (3) Statutory order on the teaching of sign language in primary schools (*Bekendtgørelse om folkeskolens undervisning i tegnsprog nr 1375 af 15/12/2005*)
- (4) Act on Special Educational Support in Further and Higher Education (*Bekendtgørelse af lov om specialpædagogisk støtte ved videregående uddannelser*)
- (5) Act on Special Educational Support in Training etc. (*Bekendtgørelse om specialpædagogisk støtte under erhvervsuddannelser m.v.*)
- (6) Consolidated Health Act (*Bekendtgørelse af sundhedsloven*)
- (7) Act for Compensation of Disabled Employees (*Bekendtgørelse af lov om kompensation til handicappede i erhverv m.v.*)
- (8) Consolidation Act on Social Housing (*Bekendtgørelse af lov om almene boliger m.v.*)
- (9) Act on Housing for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (*Bekendtgørelse af lov om boliger for ældre og personer med handicap*)
- (10) Act on the Interpretation for Persons with Hearing Disabilities (*Lov om tolkning til personer med hørehandicap*)
- (11) Act on Activities with Unlimited Interpretation for Persons with Hearing Disabilities (*Bekendtgørelse om aktiviteter med tidsubegrænset tolkning til personer med hørehandicap*)
- (12) Act on Test with Application Funds under the Act on Interpreting of People with Hearing Disabilities (*Bekendtgørelse om forsøg med ansøgningspuljer efter lov om tolkning til personer med hørehandicap*)
- (13) Act on the Number of Hours in the Timebank to Indefinite Interpretation for People with Hearing Disabilities (*Bekendtgørelse om størrelsen af timebanken til tidsubegrænset tolkning til personer med hørehandicap*)
- (14) Executive Order on the Education for a Professional Bachelor's Degree as a Danish Sign Language and Written Interpreter (*Bekendtgørelse om uddannelsen til professionsbachelor som dansk tegnsprogs- og skrivetolk*)
- (15) Consolidation Act on Radio and Television Broadcasting (*Bekendtgørelse af lov om radio- og fjernsynsvirksomhed*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1)	"In addition to giving Danish Sign Language a status equivalent to the Danish language, the bill also contributes to Denmark's future compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where, according to Article 21 e), the participating states must "recognise and promote the use of sign language" (Comments on the Bill)
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(3)	From kindergarten to 10th grade.
	Yes	(3)	From kindergarten to 10th grade.
	Yes	(6) §50 (7) §7 (10) §10 (11) §1 (12) (13) §1 (14)	Deaf people are granted the right to a broad range of sign language interpretation hours in various areas. However, there is no legal instrument or executive order governing access to the profession of sign language interpreters, though a bachelor's degree programme is provided to future interpreters.
	Yes	(10) (15) §6	However, there is no requirement to ensure that broadcast emergency information is accessible in Danish Sign Language.
	Yes	(2) §8	
Final score	6 / 8		

## Recommendations

5. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Danish Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
6. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
7. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in Danish Sign Language.
8. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Danish Sign Language interpreters.

# Estonia

Sign Language	Eesti viipekeel
Abbreviation Sign Language	EVK
Date of Recognition	1 March 2007
Type of Recognition	Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	2,500
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 25 September 2007 Ratification: 30 May 2012
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: 30 May 2012

Estonian Sign Language (EVK) was officially recognised on 1 March 2007 by the Act amending the Language Act (1). The process started in 2000 when a working group was formed. It had members from the following organisations: Estonian Association of the Deaf, Tallinn Helen's School (then called Tallinn School of the Deaf), Estonian Association of Sign Language Interpreters, Estonian Association of Parents with Hearing Impaired Children, the Institute of Estonian Language, and the Institute of Humanities. The Ministry of Education, the Estonian Government, and the Riigikogu also played an important role in achieving the recognition of Estonian Sign Language.

Estonian sign language is explicitly mentioned in only one piece of legislation: the Language Act (2). The Language Act has been slightly amended on 1 August 2020. The Language Act recognises Estonian Sign Language (EVK) as an independent language; not using 'sign language' as a generic term as follows: "Estonian Sign Language is an independent language and signed Estonian language is a mode of the Estonian language" (Section 3(2)).

The Language Act regulates the use of Estonian language and the use of Estonian Sign Language (EVK). The Language Act gives Estonian Sign Language a similar status to the surrounding spoken language, the Estonian language, separating it from other minority languages. Indeed, it states that "Every language other than Estonian and Estonian Sign Language is a foreign language" (Section 5(1)).

The deaf community in Estonia mainly uses EVK. A minority also uses Russian Sign Language. This is due to a large (hearing) Russian-speaking community in Estonia. To cover the needs of Russian Sign Language users, interpreters from spoken Estonian into Russian Sign Language are available. The law, however, does not specifically mention Russian Sign Language.

The Primary and Secondary School Act (3) has been amended several times, and as

of 17 April 2021, deaf children/students are considered to be among students with special educational needs (Section 46). The principles of inclusive education and special educational needs must be applied to them. Under the National Curriculum for Primary Education (4), deaf pupils and students may benefit from measures such as extending basic education up to 11 academic years, increasing the study volume in language and literature, waiving the requirement to study a B-foreign language, and replacing additional language lessons with sign language lessons (Section 17(5)). However, no legal framework currently guarantees the right of deaf children to receive education in Estonian Sign Language. Presently, there are two deaf schools in Estonia: Tallinn Helen's School, which uses a bilingual approach, and the Tartu Hiie School, which employs the oral method.

The Social Welfare Act (5) stipulates that State services must be accessible and tailored to individual needs through for example the assistance of a specialist with appropriate professional training (Section 3), but it does not specify the obligation to provide sign language interpretation services to deaf people. However, the Language Act (2) enshrines the right of a deaf person to communicate in Estonian Sign Language with the public authorities through the provision of Estonian Sign Language interpretation services (Section 8(2)).

Although Estonian Sign Language has been officially recognised since 2007 under the Language Act, the recognition is mostly symbolic and not fully implemented in practice.

## Legislation

- (1) Act amending the Language Act (*Keeleseaduse muutmise seadus*)
- (2) Language Act (*Keeleseadus*)
- (3) Primary and Secondary School Act (*Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumiseadus*)
- (4) National Curriculum for Primary Education (*Põhikooli riiklik õppekava*)
- (5) Social Welfare Act (*Sotsiaalhoolekande seadus*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(2) §3(2) and §5(1)	Estonian Sign Language is an independent language.
	No		
	No		
	No	(3) §46	The Primary and Secondary School Act requires the State to ensure the establishment and maintenance of schools for deaf students among other students with special educational needs. It does not specify whether deaf schools must provide Estonian Sign Language as the language of instruction.
	Yes	(4) §17(5)	Not mandatory and only in primary education.
	Yes	(2) §8(2) (5) §3	
	Yes	(2) §8(2)	The right of a deaf person with oral administration in Estonian sign language in state agencies, including Estonian foreign missions, the local government agencies, cultural governments and other agencies, among others, is ensured by providing translation services.
	No	(2) §7	There is however an Estonian Language Council.
Final score	4 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Estonian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in private spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of a legal framework to ensure that Estonian Sign Language is provided both as a language of instruction and as a mandatory subject for deaf learners.
4. Development of a legal framework for the provision of sign language interpretation services for deaf individuals in all aspects of their lives, including

private settings.

5. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in Estonian Sign Language.
6. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Estonian Sign Language interpreters.
7. Establishment of an Estonian Sign Language Council, similar to the existing Estonian Language Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Estonian Sign Language.

# Finland

Sign Languages	Suomalainen viittomakieli Finlandssvenskt teckenspråk
Abbreviation Sign Languages	SVK & SRVK
Dates of Recognition	17 July 1995 and 1 May 2015
Types of Recognition	Constitution and Sign Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) Users: 3,000 and Finland-Swedish Sign Language (FinSSL) Users: 90
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 11 May 2016
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 11 May 2016

Finland is a country with two national languages: Finnish and Swedish. Along with Sámi and Romani, sign language is recognised as a language in the Constitution of Finland (1) on 17 July 1995. It was the first EU country to mention sign language in its constitution, with four other countries following later (Austria, Hungary, Portugal, and Slovenia). Section 17 of the Finnish Constitution, on the ‘Right to one’s language and culture’, establishes provisions for Finnish, Swedish, Sámi and Romani, and also states that “the rights of persons using sign language and of persons in need of interpretation and translation aid owing to disability shall be guaranteed by an Act”.

The constitution does not specifically mention Finnish Sign Language or Finland-Swedish Sign Language. Although sign language was recognised in 1995, it did not guarantee sign language users’ full access to their rights. The provision in the Constitution of Finland created an obligation to adopt further legislation to safeguard the rights of sign language users.

The Sign Language Act (2) approved by the Finnish Parliament on 12 March 2015 and entering into force on 1 May 2015, is a concise general act designed to strengthen the linguistic rights of sign language users, including Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) and Siblings of Deaf Adults (SODAs). Its Section 1 explicitly states that sign language includes Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) and Finland-Swedish Sign Language (FinSSL).

While substantiative provisions on the linguistic rights of sign language users are scattered across the legislation of different administrative branches, this Act obliges the authorities to actively promote the opportunities for sign language users to use their own language and receive information in it. It reaffirms rights already enshrined in special legislation, such as the right to receive education in their own language and to study sign language as a subject, as well as their right to use sign language or to

benefit from interpretation and translation arranged by public authorities.

Although the Act does not create new rights for sign language users, it seeks to ensure their implementation in practice and to address them as linguistic rights. A cooperation group on sign language appointed by the Ministry of Justice has monitored the implementation of the Sign Language Act together with actors representing the sign language communities since 2015.

According to the new Government Decree on the Advisory Board of Sign Language Affairs (3) the cooperation group was replaced with a new organ: Advisory Board of Sign Language Affairs. The first board was nominated for four years (11 February 2021 to 10 February 2025). The members of both sign language communities as well as the representatives of the deafblind community are represented in the board. The board monitors the implementation of the Sign Language Act and promotes the implementation of equality, participation and basic rights of sign language users. In Spring 2025, upon completion of the first term, the Advisory Board of Sign Language Affairs was discontinued.

The constitutional recognition was also enabled due to the continued lobbying and advocacy work undertaken by the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD) and its allies with a variety of political stakeholders and deaf campaigners. They started by implementing linguistic research in the form of a detailed language policy programme, which was published in 1993. The second updated version of the language policy programme (*Suomen viittomakielten kielipolitiikan ohjelma*<sup>38</sup>) was published in September 2010 and led to the adoption of the Sign Language Act in March 2015.

Sign language is, for example, mentioned in the Language Act (4). Chapter 8 requires the government to provide a report to monitor and promote linguistic rights. This report should include sign language (Section 37 (2)). The Decree of the Government on the Enforcement of the Language Act (5) details the report referred to in the Language Act (Section 10).

The Act on the Institute for the Languages of Finland (6) states that one of the duties of the Institute is to co-ordinate the language planning of the Sámi languages, sign languages, and Romani. The Act further states that five language planning boards work together with the Institute: a board for Finnish, Swedish, and Sámi languages (North, Inari, and Skolt Sámi), sign languages (FinSL and FinSSL) and Romani. The task of the language planning boards is to issue decisions-in-principle and general guidelines on standard usage of language within each linguistic community. The Sign Language Board started working in 1997 and has had on average four yearly meetings from then on.

This new Act replaced the old Act and Decree on the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (7) (8) according to which, along with the language planning,

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38 <https://kaino.kotus.fi/www/verkkojulkaisut/julk15/>

also the research of sign language was the duty of the institute. The new Act caused the removal of basic research from the Research Institute to different Finnish universities in 2012. As an exception, the sign language researcher position was then moved to the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD). All removed research posts continue to be financed by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

There are a number of laws relating to education that mention sign language.

The Basic Education Act (9) states that the language of instruction may also be sign language (Section 10(1) and (2)). Section 12(2) refers to mother-tongue teaching, which may also include sign language. However, the lessons of sign language are not automatically offered to CODAs because the government bill leading to the adoption of the Act connects the mother tongue and language of instruction in a way that includes a definition of hearing impairment. This contradicts the Sign Language Act Section 1 (2). The Government Decree on the National Objectives for Education Referred to in the Basic Education Act and in the Distribution of Lesson Hours (10) provides further regulation on the teaching of sign language.

The National Curriculum for Basic Education (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet) offers several options for studying mother tongue, including Finnish Sign Language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language. These include sign language as a full-time language of instruction alongside a national language, as well as 1 to 2 weekly lesson periods of sign language as a subject. Deaf children could study Finnish Sign Language alongside Finnish in deaf or special schools, or in deaf and hard-of-hearing classes within mainstream schools. The same applied to Finland-Swedish children until the closure of the only deaf school providing instruction in this language in 1993. Since most special schools have closed or merged with mainstream schools, the allocated lesson hours for learning sign languages have not been updated accordingly.

In 2021 a general Act on Compulsory Education (11) came into force which means that also the general upper secondary education will be compulsory and free of charge until the student is 18 years old. No changes were made to the legislation concerning the rights of sign language users.

The Act on Vocational Education and Training (12) states in its Section 24 that “(...) the VET provider may provide instruction in Finland’s second national language, in Saami, in Roma, in sign language or in a foreign language.” This is also mentioned in Section 14 of the Act on General Upper Secondary Education (13). The Act on the Matriculation Examination (14) allows students using sign language to take their matriculation exams (general upper secondary education) in Finnish or Swedish as a second language (Section 11).

An Act on the Interpreters Services for Disabled Persons (15) includes sign language as a language of interpretation (Section 4). Deaf people are guaranteed the right to a sign language interpreter when arrested or in prison under Chapter 2, Section 3 of the Act on the Treatment of Persons Arrested by the Police (16). The Criminal

Investigation Act (17) contains the right to use sign language, and an obligation will be placed on the authorities to provide sign language interpretation during the pre-trial investigation process (Chapter 4, Section 12 (4)). The same is guaranteed in the Remand Imprisonment Act (18) and the Imprisonment Act (19). The Administrative Procedure Act (20) requires authorities to provide a sign language interpreter during administrative procedures (Section 26(1)). As there are no legal requirements for qualifications to work as an interpreter in public administration, the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (SKTL) has recently proposed the introduction of an Interpreting Act. The proposed Interpreting Act would set professional qualification requirements for interpreters in public administration, ensure confidentiality and address conflicts of interest, establish a national interpreter register, mandate public entities to call upon the services of registered interpreters, introduce quality control, and ban the use of children or family members as interpreters.

There are a number of pieces of legislation in the area of media that mention sign language. The Government Decree on Allowance for Press (21) gives public allowances to spread news services in sign language (Sections 2 and 5). The Act on the Finnish Broadcasting Company (22) requires the public broadcasting company *Yleisradio Oy* to produce services in sign language (Section 7(4)). The Copyright Act (23) states that only certain institutions have the right to make translations into sign language (Section 17(2)).

The Nationality Act (24) that was updated in 2011 states that Finnish Sign Language or Finland-Swedish Sign Language can be an option for the language requirements needed when applying for Finnish citizenship.

It should be noted that the situation of Finland-Swedish Sign Language has become increasingly delicate, with the closing down of the deaf school in 1993 and many deaf people moving to Sweden to learn Swedish Sign Language. The endangered status has been acknowledged by the Language Policy Programme for the Sign Languages of Finland (*Suomen viittomakielten kielipoliittinen ohjelma 2010*<sup>39</sup>) and a Memorandum “The Linguistic Rights of Sign Language Users” (*Muistio 24/2011 - Viittomakielisten kielelliset oikeudet*) by the Ministry of Justice. On 24 September 2025, the revitalisation programme for the Finland-Swedish Sign Language has been published.<sup>40</sup>

The Deaf Culture Festival (kuurojen kulttuuripäivät) has been inscribed in 2020 as intangible cultural heritage by the Finnish Heritage Agency under the framework of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

<sup>41</sup>

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39 [http://scripta.korus.fi/www/verkkojulkaisut/julk15/Viittomakielten\\_kielipoliittinen\\_ohjelma.pdf](http://scripta.korus.fi/www/verkkojulkaisut/julk15/Viittomakielten_kielipoliittinen_ohjelma.pdf)

40 <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/166453>

41 <https://www.ainetonkulttuuriperinto.fi/fi/artikkeli/elavan-perinnon-kansalliseen-luetteloon-12-uutta-kohdetta-2>

## Legislation

- (1) Constitution of Finland (*Suomen perustuslaki*)
- (2) Sign Language Act (*Viittomakielilaki 359/2015*)
- (3) Government Decree on the Advisory Board of Sign Language Affairs (*Valtioneuvoston asetus viittomakieliasioiden neuvottelukunnasta 690/2020*)
- (4) Language Act (*Kielilaki 423/2003*)
- (5) Decree of the Government on the Enforcement of the Language Act (*Valtioneuvoston asetus kielilain täytäntöönpanosta 433/2004*)
- (6) Act on the Institute for the Languages of Finland (*Laki Kotimaisten kielten keskuksesta 1403/2011*)
- (7) Act on the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (*Laki kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskuksesta annetun lain muuttamisesta 591/1996*)
- (8) Decree on the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (*Asetus kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskuksesta annetun asetuksen muuttamisesta 758/1996*)
- (9) Basic Education Act (*Perusopetuslaki 628/1998*)
- (10) Government Decree on the National Objectives for Education Referred to in the Basic Education Act and in the Distribution of Lesson Hours (*Valtioneuvoston asetus perusopetuslaissa tarkoitettun opetuksen valtakunnallisista tavoitteista ja perusopetuksen tuntijaaosta 422/2012*)
- (11) Act on Compulsory Education (*Oppivelvollisuuslaki 1214/2020*)
- (12) Act on Vocational Education and Training (*Laki ammatillisesta koulutuksesta 531/2017*)
- (13) Act on General Upper Secondary Education (*Lukiolaki 714/2018*)
- (14) Act on the Matriculation Examination (*Laki ylioppilastutkinnon järjestämisestä 502/2019*)
- (15) Act on the Interpreters Services for Disabled Persons (*Laki vammaisten henkilöiden tulkkauspalvelusta 133/2010*)
- (16) Act on the Treatment of Persons Arrested by the Police (*Laki poliisin säälyttämien henkilöiden kohtelusta 841/2006*)

(17) Criminal Investigation Act (*Esitutkintalaki 805/2011*)

(18) Remand Imprisonment Act (*Tutkintavankeuslaki 768/2005*)

(19) Imprisonment Act (*Vankeuslaki 767/2005*)

(20) Administrative Procedure Act (*Hallintolaki 434/2003*)

(21) Government Decree on Allowance for Press (*Valtioneuvoston asetus sanomalehdistön tuesta 389/2008*)

(22) Act on the Finnish Broadcasting Company (*Laki Yleisradio Oy:stä 1380/1993*)

(23) Copyright Act (*Tekijänoikeuslaki 404/1961*)

(24) Nationality Act (*Kansalaisuuslaki 359/2003*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Section 17 (2) Sections 1 and 2	<p>“The rights of persons using sign language and of persons in need of interpretation or translation aid owing to disability shall be guaranteed by an Act.”</p> <p>“In this Act sign language means Finnish and Finland-Swedish sign language. Sign language user means a person whose own language is sign language.”</p> <p>“The objective of this Act is to promote the linguistic rights of sign language users.”</p>
	Yes	(2) Sections 2 and 3(1)	The linguistic rights of sign language users, including the right to use their own language, are promoted but there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of FinSL and FinSSL.
	No		However, the Deaf Culture Festival ( <i>kuurojen kulttuuripäivät</i> ) has been inscribed in 2020 as intangible cultural heritage.
	Yes	(2) Section 4 (9) Sections 10(1) and 10(2) and 12(2) (12) Section 24 (13) Section 14 (14) Section 11	
	Yes	(2) Section 4 (10) Section 8(5)	

	Yes	(2) Sections 3 and 4	
		(15) Section 4	
		(16) Chapter 2, Section 3	
		(17) Chapter 4, Section 12(4)	
		(18) Chapter 2, Section 3	
		(19) Chapter 4, Section 4	
		(20) Section 26(1)	
	Yes	(3) Section 3	An authority shall arrange for interpretation and translation in matters that an authority may consider on its own motion if: 1) a party using sign language is not competent in the Finnish or Swedish language used by the authority.
		(20) Section 26(1)	
		(21) Sections 2 and 5	
		(22) Section 7(4)	However, there is no provision regarding the accessibility of emergency communications in sign language.
	Yes	(3) (6) §4	
Final score		7 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Finnish Sign Language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Finnish Sign Language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language interpreters through the proposed Interpreting Act, if applicable.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency communication in Finnish Sign Language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language.

# France

Sign Language	Langue des Signes Française
Abbreviation Sign Language	LSF
Date of Recognition	N/A
Type of Recognition	N/A
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	300,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 18 February 2010
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 23 September 2008 Ratification: 18 February 2010

French Sign Language (LSF) is mentioned in the field of education by the Law of 11 February 2005 on the Equality of Rights and Opportunities, Participation, and Citizenship of Persons with Disabilities (1) which introduced, through its Article 75, the following provision in the Education Code (2): “French Sign Language is recognised as a language in its own right” (Art. L312-9-1). This partial recognition of the French Sign Language in the Education Law was achieved by joint efforts of the French National Deaf Association (*Fédération Nationale des Sourds de France, FNSF*) and the Association of Parents of Deaf children. However, this recognition is limited to the field of educational and does not extend to other areas of deaf people’s lives, where recognition is still needed to fully uphold the rights of deaf sign language users.

The same provision grants any pupil concerned the right to study French Sign Language. The Higher Council of Education must ensure the promotion of its teaching. Moreover, French Sign Language can be chosen as an optional subject in examinations and competitions, including those for vocational training. However, this right is not explicitly granted to deaf pupils, nor recognised as their first language, thereby not guaranteeing the teaching of French Sign Language to them.

The same Education Code also establishes the freedom for deaf young people to choose between bilingual communication (sign language and French language) or communication in French language only (Art. L112-3). This provision requires the adoption of a Decree determining the conditions under which this choice may be exercised by deaf young people and their families as well as the measures to be taken by the institutions and services to guarantee its implementation. The Decree of 3 May 2006 relating to the education and schooling pathway of deaf young people (3) established implementation measures, in the meantime, integrated into the Education Code under Art. R351-21 to R351-25. According to these provisions, deaf young people, and if applicable, their legal representatives, must be informed about both communication modes and as soon as they made the decision, the chosen communication mode is registered in their life project plan. Based on this decision,

a multidisciplinary team of professionals establishes an individual educational plan and provides, if necessary, support to young deaf persons in their education. The same applies to schools, educational institutions and services contributing to the deaf young person's schooling pathway. However, these provisions are not always effectively implemented, causing barriers the French National Deaf Association actively seeks to address in its advocacy work.

The Code of Criminal Procedure (4) grants deaf persons who cannot read or write the right to sign language interpretation and further stipulates that when a person does not understand the French language, their rights must be communicated to them through an interpreter (Art. 63-1). Additionally, sign language interpreters must be provided by the investigating judge to a deaf witness during questioning (Art. 102), and by the president of the court to a deaf defendant (Art. 345).

The Law of 11 February 2005 on the Equality of Rights and Opportunities, Participation, and Citizenship of Persons with Disabilities (1) provides that deaf and hard of hearing persons are entitled, upon request, to sign language interpretation in their relations with public services of any kind (Art. 78). However, this right is often not effectively implemented, as accessibility in LSF is provided only sporadically and is not consistently made available by public services. Furthermore, it requires public services to ensure that relay services are provided to deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind persons free of cost (Art. 78). This provision is further completed by the Law n°2016-1321 of 7 October 2016 for a Digital Republic (5) which establishes qualifications requirements for the professionals ensuring the relay services, including sign language interpreters (Art. 105, IV). However, the only legal framework governing access to the profession of sign language interpreters applies to relay services, leaving a regulatory gap in other areas. In practice, most services hire or engage interpreters who hold a Master's degree in the field of French Sign Language interpretation.

As there is currently no legal requirement to provide LSF in audiovisual media, the French National Deaf Association is working with the Regulatory Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication (ARCOM) to strengthen the regulatory framework and ensure that messages of public importance and nationally broadcast programmes are accessible in LSF. In the meantime, ARCOM's Quality Charter on LSF is being used voluntarily by broadcasters to enhance the quality and visibility of LSF on screen.

In the absence of a French Sign Language Board or Council, the protection, promotion, and institutional support of French Sign Language, along with the policy-level recognition of deaf sign language users' rights, are hindered. However, the French National Deaf Association plays an active role within the National Consultative Council of Persons with Disabilities (CNCPh), where it works to advance and defend the rights of deaf individuals.

## Legislation

(1) Law n°2005-102 of 11 February 2005 on the Equality of Rights and Opportunities, Participation, and Citizenship of Persons with Disabilities (*Loi n°2005-102 du 11 février 2005 pour l'égalité des droits et des chances, la participation et la citoyenneté des personnes handicapées*)

(2) Education Code (*Code de l'éducation*)

(3) Decree n°2006-503 of 3 May 2006 relating to the education and schooling pathway of deaf young people (*Décret n°2006-503 du 3 mai 2006 relatif à l'éducation et au parcours scolaire des jeunes sourds*)

(4) Code of Criminal Procedure (*Code de procédure pénale*)

(5) Law n°2016-1321 of 7 October 2016 for a Digital Republic (*Loi n° 2016-1321 du 7 octobre 2016 pour une République numérique*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	No	(1) Art. 75 (2) Art. L312-9-1	The scope of the recognition is limited to the education of deaf pupils.
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(2) Art. L112-3, R351-21 to R351-25	The freedom to choose between bilingual communication (French Sign Language and French language) and communication in French language is a recognised right to deaf pupils and young people in their education and schooling.
	Yes	(2) L312-9-1	
	Yes	(4) Art. 63-1, 102 and 345 (1) Art. 78 (5) Art. 105, IV	

	Yes	(1) Art. 78	<p>In their interactions with public services, whether managed by the State, local authorities, or an organisation representing them, as well as by private individuals entrusted with a public service mission, deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are entitled, upon request, to a simultaneous written and visual translation of any oral or sound-based information concerning them.</p> <p>However, there is no provision on the accessibility of broadcasted information, except for the ARCOM's Quality Charter on LSF.</p>
	No		
Final score	4 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Recognising the French Sign Language as a language of their own right in all areas of lives of deaf people.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as a part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of French Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
4. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of French Sign Language interpreters.
5. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast information, including emergency communication, in French Sign Language.
6. Establishment of a French Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the French Sign Language.

# Germany

Sign Language	Deutsche Gebärdensprache
Abbreviation Sign Language	DGS
Date of Recognition	1 May 2002
Type of Recognition	Disability Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	83,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 24 February 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 24 February 2009

German Sign Language (DGS) is recognised as a language in its own right in the Disability Equality Act (1) from 1 May 2002: “German Sign Language is recognised as a language in its own right” (Section 6(1)). It makes a distinction between German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache) and Sign Supported German (Lautsprachbegleitende Gebärden, LBG). Section 6(2) recognises LBG as a communication form of German, rather than a separate language. Deaf people have the right to use German Sign Language (Section 6(3)) and the right to an interpreter for official purposes, who has to be paid by public agencies (Section 9(1)). As this law is of federal nature, all 16 states have now also passed State Equality Legislation (2) to provide support not only at federal level but also at state level.

An important regulation mentioning German Sign Language is the Ordinance on the Use of Sign Language and Other Communication Aids in Administrative Procedures under the Disability Equality Act (3). It supports the Disability Equality Act and further describes the rights relating to sign language interpreters. Section 2(2) states that persons with hearing or speech disabilities are allowed to choose their means of communication and also their interpreter in administrative procedures free of charge (Section 3(2) 1) and Section 4(1)).

The Social Code Book I (4) provides that persons with hearing disabilities have the right to communicate in German Sign Language when receiving social services, especially during medical examinations and treatments (Section 17(2)). A similar provision is contained in the Social Code Book IX (5) which states that sign language interpretation services must be provided to enable or facilitate the communication between deaf persons and the society (Section 82). The Social Code Book X (6) states that persons with hearing disabilities have the right to communicate in German Sign Language and that the costs of sign language interpreters are to be borne by the authorities or the social security service provider responsible for the social benefit (Section 19(1)). Furthermore, under Section 45 of the Federal Aid Ordinance (7), deaf and hard of hearing persons are entitled to sign language interpretation in medical

settings. The Judicial Remuneration and Compensation Act (8) serves as the basis for calculating interpreter fees, although it does not explicitly refer to sign language. In addition, the Federal Association of Integration Offices and Main Welfare Offices (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Integrationsämter und Hauptfürsorgestellen, BIH) has issued Recommendations on the Subsidisation of Costs for Sign Language Interpreters within the Framework of Accompanying Assistance in Working Life (9),<sup>42</sup> which establishes detailed guidance on interpreter eligibility and remuneration for interpretation services provided to support the participation of deaf persons in working life.

Since education is not a matter of federal law but of state law, educational approaches vary therefore from state to state and range from full oral education to bilingual environments. Moreover, German Sign Language is not mentioned within nationwide educational legislation. However, on 8 October 2021, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) adopted a non-binding resolution allowing DGS to be introduced as an elective or compulsory elective subject in the federal states.<sup>43</sup> The accompanying recommendations on competence-oriented curricular guidelines for the elective subject “DGS” at lower secondary level aim to support the development and adaptation of curricula across all 16 federal states (Länder).<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the resolution encourages the training and recruitment of additional qualified DGS teachers.

To date, no federal state has enacted legislation that mandates DGS as a language of instruction. However, some states have developed curricula or pilot projects where DGS is offered as a subject or elective. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the curriculum for special schools includes DGS as an educational language to be acquired. In Hamburg, the framework curriculum for “German Sign Language” enables students to develop communicative competence in DGS. In Hesse, DGS is being used experimentally in teaching programmes with the purpose of further expanding. These initiatives are curricular or organisational in nature, rather than statutory obligations.

While the Interstate Media Treaty (10) sets out general accessibility obligations for broadcasting, it does not require that all broadcasts and press conferences be provided in DGS. In practice, some public broadcasts (e.g. ARD, ZDF) voluntarily offer selected news programmes with German Sign Language interpretation.

The Barrier-Free Information Technology Ordinance (11), based on the Disability Equality Act, requires that on the home page of a public body’s website, the following explanatory notes must be provided in German Sign Language: 1) Information about the essential content; 2) Instructions on how to navigate the site; 3) An explanation of the main points of the accessibility statement; and 4) References to other information

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42 [https://www.bih.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/BIH\\_Empfehlungen\\_Gebaerdensprachdolmetscherleitung\\_01022021\\_pdf-ua.pdf](https://www.bih.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BIH_Empfehlungen_Gebaerdensprachdolmetscherleitung_01022021_pdf-ua.pdf)

43 <https://www.kmk.org/aktuelles/artikelansicht/kmk-sieht-schulischen-regelbetrieb-im-schuljahr-20212022-in-alien-laendern-gesichert.html>

44 [https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2021/2021\\_10\\_07-Gebaerdensprache.pdf](https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2021/2021_10_07-Gebaerdensprache.pdf)

on the website available in German Sign Language (Section 4). It defines technical and visual standards for DGS videos, including lighting, contrast, resolution, frame rate, and the mandatory DGS logo to ensure consistent accessibility across public websites (Annex II). However, these obligations do not extend to live broadcasts, television content, or press conferences. Regarding emergency and crisis communication, some federal states provide videos in DGS containing public warnings or crisis information. However, these efforts are not standardised nationwide and depend on voluntary initiatives by regional authorities, as there is no specific national law requiring full accessibility in DGS in these contexts.

On 19 March 2021, the German Commission for UNESCO and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs jointly announced that German Sign Language is officially inscribed in the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage, recognising its cultural and linguistic significance within Germany.<sup>45</sup>

While there is currently no German Sign Language Council or Board, the German Deaf Association (Deutscher Gehörlosen-Bund, DGB) plays a key consultative and advocacy role, albeit not as a statutory body. For many years, the DGB has advocated for the creation of a National Sign Language Council and the adoption of a dedicated Sign Language Act to further advance the recognition and rights of DGS users. Indeed, the DGB criticises the current legal framework for continuing to classify German Sign Language merely as a communication aid or auxiliary means of expression. The DGB argues that such a classification fails to acknowledge DGS as a fully independent and complete language, with its own culture and community, where deaf people form a linguistic and cultural minority. It therefore calls for DGS to be formally recognised, preserved, protected, promoted, and strengthened as a cultural minority language, in line with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, particularly in the areas of language, education, culture, and media.

## Legislation

- (1) Disability Equality Act (*Gesetz zur Gleichstellung von Menschen mit Behinderungen, BGG*)
- (2) State Equality Legislation (*Landesgleichstellungsgesetze, LGG*)
- (3) Ordinance on the Use of Sign Language and Other Communication Aids in Administrative Procedures under the Disability Equality Act (*Verordnung zur Verwendung von Gebärdensprache und anderen Kommunikationshilfen im Verwaltungsverfahren nach dem BGG bzw. Kommunikationshilfenverordnung, KHV*)

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45 <https://www.unesco.de/staette/deutsche-gebaerdensprache-dgs/>

(4) Social Code Book I (*Sozialgesetzbuch Erstes Buch – Allgemeiner Teil, SGB I*)

(5) Social Code Book IX (*Sozialgesetzbuch Neuntes Buch – Rehabilitation und Teilhabe von Menschen mit Behinderungen, SGB IX*)

(6) Social Code Book X (*Sozialgesetzbuch Zehntes Buch – Sozialverwaltungsverfahren und Sozialdatenschutz, SGB X*)

(7) Federal Aid Ordinance (*Bundesbeihilfeverordnung, BBhV*)

(8) Judicial Remuneration and Compensation Act (*Justizvergütungs- und -entschädigungsgesetz, JVEG*)

(9) Recommendations on the Subsidisation of Costs for Sign Language Interpreters within the Framework of Accompanying Assistance in Working Life (*Empfehlungen zur Bezugsschussung von Kosten für Gebärdensprachdolmetschende (GSD) im Rahmen der begleitenden Hilfe im Arbeitsleben*)

(10) Interstate Media Treaty (*Medienstaatsvertrag, MStV*)

(11) Barrier-Free Information Technology Ordinance (*Barrierefreie-Informationstechnik-Verordnung, BITV 2.0*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) §6(1)	German Sign Language is recognised as an independent language.
	Yes	(1) §6(3)	However, there is no specific prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of DGS.
	No		However, DGS is inscribed in the UNESCO National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Germany.
	No		Regulated at state level.
	No		However, the recommendations on Curricular Guidelines for a Competence-Oriented Elective or Optional Subject "German Sign Language (DGS)" for Lower Secondary Education have been issued as guidance for the states. Some states established curricula on DGS as subject, but these are not established by legislation and/or regulations.

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			(1) §9(1)
			(3) §2(2), §3(2)1 and §4(1)
			(4) §17(2)
	Yes		(5) §82
			(6) §19(1)
			(7) §45
			(8)
			(9)
	Yes	(1) §9(1)	Deaf people have the right to communicate with public authorities in order to exercise their rights in administrative proceedings using German Sign Language.  However, there is no provision on the accessibility of broadcasted information in DGS.
	No		
Final score	4 / 8		

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## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of German Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of a legal framework recognising German Sign Language as a language subject and a language of instruction for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcasted information, especially emergency-related information in German Sign Language.
5. Establishment of a German Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the German Sign Language.

## Greece

Sign Language	Ελληνική Νοηματική Γλώσσα
Abbreviation Sign Language	ΕΝΓ
Date of Recognition	13 September 2017
Type of Recognition	Other legislative instrument
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	5,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 31 May 2012
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 27 September 2010 Ratification: 31 May 2012

The Greek Sign Language (ΕΝΓ) was recognised as equal to the Greek language on 13 September 2017 by the Law 4488/2017 on Pension Provisions, Labour Protection and Disability Rights (1) which establishes guidelines for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Specifically, Article 65(2) states: “Greek Sign Language is recognised as equal to the Greek language. The State shall take measures to promote its use and to address all communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing citizens”. This law was not merely a significant legislative milestone for the deaf and hard of hearing community in Greece, but also the starting point of a new era in the country’s wider disability policy.

Through its guiding principles and organisational provisions, the law sets out the framework for the implementation of the UNCRPD and its Optional Protocol, promoting equal treatment and the full enjoyment of fundamental rights by persons with disabilities, including deaf and hard of hearing people. It introduces obligations to remove barriers, apply universal design, provide reasonable accommodation, and prevent discrimination (Articles 61(1) and 63(2)), while also requiring non-discrimination in mass media and audiovisual activities through accessibility measures such as subtitling and sign language interpretation (Articles 67(1) and (2)).

Greek Sign Language was initially mentioned for the first time in Law 2817/2000 on the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs and Other Provisions (2). Article 1(4) a) states that Greek Sign Language is recognised as the language of deaf and hard of hearing students. Section 1(4)b) requires teachers in deaf schools to know sign language.

Building on this Law, the Law 3699/2008 on the Special Education and Training for Persons with Disabilities or Special Educational Needs (3) introduced additional measures regulating the use of Greek Sign Language in education. This law recognises Greek Sign Language in the education system “as the first language of deaf and hard of hearing students, while Greek is considered their second language. Greek is received

and expressed in its written form, whereas its oral perception and expression constitute an additional social choice for deaf students. Greek Sign Language and spoken/written Greek are recognized as equal languages, establishing bilingual education as the most appropriate pedagogical approach.” (Article 7(1)). This law further requires teachers and specialised educational staff in deaf schools to be certified in their knowledge of Greek Sign Language as a mandatory qualification alongside other required qualifications.

The Ministerial Decision 85317/Δ3/29-05-2019 (4), later updated by the Ministerial Decision 94189/Δ3/29-07-2021 (5), provides that the Greek Sign Language can be taught to deaf and hard of hearing children enrolled in special-education kindergartens and primary schools, according to their individual needs, for the purposes of language development and Greek Sign Language acquisition (Article 2(2) of the Ministerial Decision of 2019). However, there is no equivalent legal provision for teaching Greek Sign Language as a language subject in mainstream school curricula.

Article 58(3) of the Law 4589/2019 on Synergies of Universities and other provisions (6), further expanded the obligation established in Law 3699/2008 by requiring Special Education teachers certified in Greek Sign Language to be appointed or hired with priority for the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The Law 3106/2003 on the Reorganisation of the National System of Social Care and other provisions (7), addresses in its Article 15 the implementation of sign language interpretation programmes for deaf people to facilitate their communication with public, judicial and other authorities. The Ministry of Health and Welfare allocates funds each year in its regular budget to cover such expenses. The details of the interpretation programmes, their scope, the implementation process, and other details were further determined by the competent Ministers: in 2006 by the Minister of Health and Welfare (G.G. 1708/2006; G.G. 1808/2006), in the subsequent years by the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, and since 2023 by the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs.

The Law 5023/2023 on the Principle of Equal Treatment Regardless of Disability or Chronic Condition and other provisions (8) amended the existing provisions in the Civil Code, the Penal Code, and the Codes of Civil, Criminal, and Administrative Procedure to align with the UNCRPD regarding the terminology on deaf persons and the right of deaf persons to choose their preferred method of communication. Among other measures, it grants the right to deaf persons to respond during judicial proceedings either orally, in writing, or in sign language, according to the means of communication most appropriate to them (Art. 10).

Although there is no legal framework regulating the access to the profession of sign language interpreters, aspiring Greek Sign Language interpreters must pass the State-recognised certification led by the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf (HFD), complete a two-year training programme in a sign language institute, succeed in examinations administered by the Association of Greek Sign Language Interpreters

under the auspices of the Ionian University and with the support of the HFD and the participation of the Association of Teachers of Greek Sign Language, and complete 120 hours of practical internship.

The Law 4339/2015 on Media Ownership and Licensing of Enterprises and other provisions (9) initially provided minimum requirements for private broadcasting channels to render their news accessible in sign language. However, the Law 4855/2021 on the Amendments to the Codes and other urgent provisions (10) strengthened this obligation with specific measures in its Article 202 by integrating this paragraph in the Law 4339/2015 under Article 8(6) as follows: Providers of general information content must broadcast at least one seven-minute news bulletins in Greek Sign Language with simultaneous subtitles between 13:00 and 23:00. They must also share these bulletins on their official website, free of charge, in video-on-demand format for at least one week after broadcasting. Moreover, the presenters in Greek Sign Language must be selected by the providers following a proposal from the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf.

The Ministerial Decision 5491/2018 on Determination of the means, procedures, and any other technical or detailed matters for ensuring the access of Persons with Disabilities to the services provided by audiovisual media service providers (11) stipulates that public announcements, including addresses by the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, as well as statements in exceptional or critical situations, such as natural disasters, must be broadcast in Greek Sign Language, alongside other accessibility measures (Article 4). Adopted prior to the Law 4779/2021 on the Transposition of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Directive (EU) 2018/1808) (12), the Ministerial Decision's framework is reinforced by Article 10(5) of that Law as follows: implementing Article 7 of the Directive, it requires media service providers to ensure that emergency information, including public updates and announcement in cases of natural disasters, is accessible and understandable to persons with disabilities.

The Law 5083/2024 on the Election of Members of the European Parliament and other provisions (13) guarantees access of persons with disabilities, including deaf sign language users, to the pre-election dialogues as follows: political party messages, events and press conferences broadcast under Article 45 of Presidential Decree 26/2012 must include either subtitling or sign language interpretation covering one sixth of the screen, but for party messages specifically, both are mandatory. If these accessibility requirements are not met, the content may not be broadcast. Interviews of political party leaders by public television as well as by nationwide private channels must also include sign language interpretation covering one sixth of the screen, and in case of non-compliance, it is punishable by fines up to €20,000 from the National Council for Radio and Television.

Even though there is no Greek Sign Language Board or Council advising the government on Greek Sign Language, the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf serves as the official partner of the State on matters concerning deaf and hard-of-hearing

citizens. In addition, other organisations cooperate on related issues, including the Association of Teachers of Greek Sign Language and the Association of Greek Sign Language Interpreters.

## Legislation

- (1) Law 4488/2017 on Pension Provisions, Labour Protection and Disability Rights (*Νόμος 4488/2017 - Συνταξιοδοτικές ρυθμίσεις Δημοσίου και λοιπές ασφαλιστικές διατάξεις, ενίσχυση της προστασίας των εργαζομένων, δικαιώματα ατόμων με αναπηρίες και άλλες διατάξεις*)
- (2) Law 2817/2000 on the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs and Other Provisions (*Νόμος 2817/2000 - Εκπαίδευση των ατόμων με ειδικές εκπαιδευτικές ανάγκες και άλλες διατάξεις*)
- (3) Law 3699/2008 on the Special Education and Training for Persons with Disabilities or Special Educational Needs (*Νόμος 3699/2008 — Ειδική Αγωγή και Εκπαίδευση Ατόμων με Αναπηρία ή με Ειδικές Εκπαιδευτικές Ανάγκες*)
- (4) Ministerial Decision 85317/ Δ3/29-05-2019 “Timetable for Special Kindergartens and Special Primary Schools” (*Υπουργική Απόφαση 85317/Δ3/29-05-2019 «Ωρολόγιο πρόγραμμα των Ειδικών Νηπιαγωγείων και των Ειδικών Δημοτικών Σχολείων» (ΦΕΚ Β' 2171/2019)*)
- (5) Ministerial Decision 94189/Δ3/29-07-2021 “Amendment to Ministerial Decision 85317/Δ3/29-05-2019 ‘Timetable for Special Kindergartens and Special Primary Schools’” (*Υπουργική Απόφαση 94189/Δ3/29-07-2021 «Τροποποίηση της νπ’ αρ. 85317/Δ3/29-05-2019 υπουργικής απόφασης “Ωρολόγιο πρόγραμμα των Ειδικών Νηπιαγωγείων και των Ειδικών Δημοτικών Σχολείων”» (ΦΕΚ Β' 3540/2021)*)
- (6) Article 58(3) of the Law 4589/2019 on Synergies of Universities and other provisions (*Νόμος 4589/2019 — Συνέργειες Πανεπιστημίων και άλλες διατάξεις*)
- (7) Law 3106/2003 on the Reorganisation of the National System of Social Care and other provisions (*ΝΟΜΟΣ ΥΠ' ΑΡΙΘ. 3106 Αναδιοργάνωση του Εθνικού Συστήματος Κοινωνικής Φροντίδας και άλλες διατάξεις*)
- (8) Law 5023/2023 on the Principle of Equal Treatment Regardless of Disability or Chronic Condition and other provisions (*Νόμος 5023/2023 — Αρχή Ισης Μεταχείρισης Ανεξαρτήτως Αναπηρίας ή Χρόνιας Πάθησης και άλλες διατάξεις*)
- (9) Law 4339/2015 on Media Ownership and Licensing of Enterprises and other provisions (*Νόμος 4339/2015 — Συγκέντρωση και αδειοδότηση Επιχειρήσεων*)

*(Μέσων Ενημέρωσης και άλλες διατάξεις)*

(10) Law 4855/2021 on the Amendments to the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and other urgent provisions (Νόμος 4855/2021 — *Τροποποιήσεις του Ποινικού Κώδικα, του Κώδικα Ποινικής Δικονομίας και άλλες επειγονοσες διατάξεις*)

(11) Ministerial Decision 5491/2018 on Determination of the means, procedures, and any other technical or detailed matters for ensuring the access of Persons with Disabilities to the services provided by audiovisual media service providers (Υπουργική Απόφαση: *Καθορισμός των μέσων, της διαδικασίας καθώς και κάθε άλλου θέματος τεχνικού ή λεπτομερειακού χαρακτήρα για την διασφάλιση της πρόσβασης των Ατόμων με Αναπηρία στις υπηρεσίες των παροχών υπηρεσιών μέσων μαζικής ενημέρωσης και επικοινωνίας (ΦΕΚ 5491/2018)*)

(12) Law 4779/2021 on the Transposition of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Νόμος 4779/2021 (*Ενσωμάτωση της Οδηγίας για τις Υπηρεσίες Οπτικοακουστικών Μέσων*))

(13) Law 5083/2024 on the Election of Members of the European Parliament and other provisions (Νόμος 5083/2024 — *Εκλογή ευρωβουλευτών και άλλες διατάξεις*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 65(2) (2) Art. 1(4)a)	Greek Sign Language is recognised as equal to the Greek language.
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(3) Art. 7(1) (6) Art. 58(3)	Only in the field of special education.
	Yes	(4) Art. 2(2)	Only in special education from kindergarten to primary education.
	Yes	(7) Art. 15 (8) Art. 10	However, there is no legal framework regulating access to the profession of sign language interpreters.

	Yes	<p>Messages of parties and coalitions of cooperating parties, as well as political events, press conferences and other related events broadcast shall be accompanied by sign language interpretation and interviews of political party leaders on public television, as well as on private nationwide television stations shall be broadcast simultaneously in sign language.</p> <p>(8) Art. 10            (9) Art. 8(6)            (11) Art. 4            (13) Art. 32</p>
	No	<p>Public announcements, such as addresses by the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, as well as announcements in exceptional or critical situations, including in cases of natural disasters, must be broadcast to the general public via audiovisual media services in Greek Sign Language.</p> <p>Yet, the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf (HFD) serves as the official partner of the State on matters concerning deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens.</p>
Final score	5 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Greek Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establish a legal framework recognising Greek Sign Language as a language subject for deaf learners in mainstream schools.
4. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Greek Sign Language interpreters.
5. Establishment of a Greek Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Greek Sign Language.

# Hungary

Sign Language	Magyar Jelnyelv
Abbreviation Sign Language	MJNY
Dates of Recognition	25 April 2011 and 9 November 2009
Types of Recognition	Constitution and Sign Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	6,303
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 20 July 2007
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 20 July 2007

Hungary is one of the five countries in the EU to have recognised its national sign language in its Fundamental Law (1), which forms the new Constitution of Hungary. Since 2011 it states in its Article H(3) that: “Hungary shall protect Hungarian Sign Language as a part of Hungarian culture”. The recognition of Hungarian Sign Language at the legislative level, in the world’s most complex sign language legislation was largely due in large part to Dr. Ádám Kósa, the first deaf Member of the European Parliament from Hungary and President of SINOSZ, the Hungarian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Dr. Gergely Tapolczai, who became the first deaf Member of the Parliament in Hungary in 2010, but had already supported significantly in the recognition process in 2009.

After six months of judicial proceedings and many committee meetings, two debates at the plenary session at the Parliament, Hungarian Sign Language (MJNY) was recognised as a language in its own right in Section 3 of the Act on the Hungarian Sign Language and the use of Hungarian Sign Language (2). On 29 September 2009, Dr Ádám Kósa, as Member of the European Parliament, was the first deaf person to address the Hungarian Parliament in Hungarian Sign Language during the detailed debate in the Plenary on this Act. On 9 November 2009 the Act was adopted unanimously.

The Act on the Hungarian Sign Language and the use of Hungarian Sign Language (hereafter “Sign Language Act”) stipulates that deaf, hard-of-hearing, and deafblind persons must be provided with the opportunity to learn and use Hungarian Sign Language or special communication systems that best suit their individual needs. It mandates specifically that deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind children must learn Hungarian Sign Language in preschool and as from the preparatory year of school education as well as in special institutions, or upon request by the parent/guardian, in mainstream institutions (Sections 11 and 12). In addition, parents and guardians of deaf or deafblind children in early education, preschool, or school education, are entitled to Hungarian Sign Language courses upon written request made through the

referring special institution (Section 13). Further, it is stipulated that, based on the parents or guardians' decision, deaf and hard of hearing children must be provided with bilingual education in early intervention, preschool, and school education (Section 14). Unfortunately, this is only stipulated at the legislative level in Hungary and has not yet been implemented.

It also provides equal access to public services by guaranteeing sign language interpretation (Section 15). It grants the right to interpretation for deaf Members of the Hungarian Parliament, of the European Parliament, and for local government representatives (Section 19-21). It also requires sign language interpretation to be provided during criminal, civil, administrative, misdemeanour, and notarial proceedings (Sections 22-28). The Act guarantees the provision of state-funded free sign language interpretation services specifying the eligibility of users, the qualifications of sign language interpreters in the National Register of Sign Language Interpreters, and the allocation of interpretation hours, up to 120 hours a year, with additional hours granted for students in gymnasium, vocational secondary schools, higher education, and adult education programmes (Sections 4-8).

The provisions contained in Sections 11-30 of the Sign Language Act have been transposed into other laws, hence their removal from the Sign Language Act in its current form as follows:

- The principle of equal access has been addressed more broadly in the Act XXVI of 1998 on the rights of persons with disabilities and ensuring equal opportunities (3), such as the inclusion of the concept of equal access.
- The sections 19 to 21 of the Act regarding the right of Hungarian or European Parliament Members and local government representatives to sign language interpretation have been transposed into the Act LV of 1990 on the Legal Status of Members of Parliament (4), the Act LVII of 2004 on the Legal Status of Members of the European Parliament in Hungary (5), and the Act XCVI of 2000 on Certain Issues of the Legal Status of Local Government Representatives (6).
- The sections 22 to 28 regarding the right to sign language interpretation during criminal, civil, misdemeanour, administrative, and notarial proceedings have been transposed into the Act CXL of 2004 on the General Rules of Administrative Procedure and Services (7), the Act LXIX of 1999 on Administrative Offences (8), the Act XIX of 1998 on Criminal Procedure (9), the Act III of 1952 on the Code of Civil Procedure (10), and the Act XLI of 1991 on Notaries (11).

The Act also amended the Act I of 1996 on Radio and Television Broadcasting Act (12), by obliging public services to provide sign language interpretation, with concrete deadlines set for the number of hours to broadcast (Section 8/A).

Since 2010, a new Media Act (13) has been in force, introducing additional obligations to subtitle television programmes. This legislation has been amended on several occasions since its adoption. The implementation of the provisions of the Media Act is monitored by the National Media and Infocommunications Authority. However, many television channels that are popular among persons with hearing impairments are not legally required to ensure accessibility. Another major shortcoming is that the legislation does not contain provisions to meet the needs of deaf and hard of hearing children who are unable to read.

Overall, the provisions of the Sign Language Act, have contributed significantly to the quality of life of deaf and hard of hearing people in Hungary, although significant challenges and tasks remain.

## Legislation

- (1) Fundamental Law (*Alaptörvény*)
- (2) Act CXXV of 2009 on the Hungarian Sign Language and the use of Hungarian Sign Language (*2009. évi CXXV. törvény a magyar jelnyelvről és a magyar jelnyelv használatáról*)
- (3) Act XXVI of 1998 on the rights of persons with disabilities and ensuring equal opportunities (*1998. évi XXVI. törvény a fogyatékos személyek jogairól és esélyegyenlőségük biztosításáról*)
- (4) Act LV of 1990 on the Legal Status of Members of Parliament (*1990. évi LV. törvény az Országgyűlési képviselők jogállásáról*)
- (5) Act LVII of 2004 on the Legal Status of Members of the European Parliament in Hungary (*2004. évi LVII. törvény a Magyar Köztársaságban megválasztott európai parlamenti képviselők jogállásáról*)
- (6) Act XCVI of 2000 on Certain Issues of the Legal Status of Local Government Representatives (*2000. évi XCVI. törvény az önkormányzati képviselők jogállásával kapcsolatos egyes kérdésekről*).
- (7) Act CXL of 2004 on the General Rules of Administrative Procedure and Services (*2004. évi CXL. törvény a közigazgatási hatósági eljárás és szolgáltatás általános szabályairól*)
- (8) Act LXIX of 1999 on Administrative Offences (*1999. évi LXIX. törvény a szabálysértésekéről*)
- (9) Act XIX of 1998 on Criminal Procedure (*1998. évi XIX. törvény a büntetőeljárásról*)

(10) Act III of 1952 on the Code of Civil Procedure (*1952. évi III. törvény a polgári perrendtartásról*)

(11) Act XLI of 1991 on Notaries (*1991. évi XLI. törvény a közjegyzőkről*)

(12) Act I of 1996 on Radio and Television Broadcasting Act (*1996. évi I. törvény a rádiózásról és a televíziózásról*)

(13) Act CLXXXV of 2010 on Media Services and Mass Communication (*2010. évi CLXXXV. törvény a médiászolgáltatásokról és a tömegkommunikációról*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Section H(3) (2) Sections 1 and 3(1)	“Hungary shall protect Hungarian Sign Language as a part of Hungarian culture” “The Republic of Hungary recognises the Hungarian Sign Language as an independent natural language.”
	Yes	(2) Sections 3(2), 15 and 16	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of MJNY.
	Yes	(1) Section H(3)	Hungarian Sign Language shall be protected as a part of Hungarian culture.
	Yes	(2) Section 14	In early development and care, kindergarten and school education.
	Yes	(2) Sections 11, 12 and 13  (2) Sections 4(1), 5 and 8 (4) Section 8(5) (5) Section 15(7) (6) Section 12/A  (7) Section 60(2) (8) Section 62(2) (9) Sections 46c), 114(2) and 318(2) (10) Section 184(2) (11) Section 127	In kindergarten and school education for deaf and deafblind children as well as for their parents or guardians.

	Yes	<p>(2) Sections 10(3) and 15 (12) Section 8/A (13) Section 39(2)</p> <p>Equal access to a service shall mean that it can be used, as independently as one's state allows, and information shall be deemed equally accessible by anyone, in particular by deaf people, in an accessible, reliable, understandable and perceivable manner.</p> <p>In the case of a public service activity, the cost of sign language interpreting shall be borne by the agency, organization or institution performing the activity or providing the service.</p>
	No	
Final score	7 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Hungarian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Establishment of a Hungarian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Hungarian Sign Language.

# Iceland

Sign Language	íslenskt táknmál
Abbreviation Sign Language	N/A
Date of Recognition	7 June 2011
Type of Recognition	Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	250
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 23 September 2016
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: N/A

On 7 June 2011 Icelandic Sign Language (íslenskt táknmál) was recognised as an official language of Iceland along with Icelandic by the Act No. 61/2011 on the Status of the Icelandic Language and Icelandic Sign Language (1). Article 3 of this Language Act describes Icelandic Sign Language as the first language “of those who rely on it for expressing themselves and communicating with others. It is also the first language of their children. The government should foster and support it.” It further states: “Anyone who has need of sign language shall have the opportunity to learn and use Icelandic Sign Language at the onset of language acquisition, or from such time as deafness, hearing impairment or deafblindness is diagnosed. The same right applies to close relatives.” (Article 3). Moreover, the Icelandic state and local governments must promote the development, studying, teaching and dissemination of Icelandic Sign Language as well as support culture, schooling and education for deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind people (Article 5). An Icelandic Sign Language Council is established with the purpose of advising the authorities on all matters relating to Icelandic Sign Language and its use in Icelandic society (Article 7). The Icelandic state and local governments must consult this Council when addressing sign language policy and the status of Icelandic Sign Language (Article 5).

Article 9 of the Act covers interpretation and sign language interpretation before Icelandic authorities. It states that the right to interpretation services and the obligations of courts to seek the assistance of interpreters and sign language interpreters are governed by the Civil Procedure Act (2) and the Criminal Procedure Act (3). It also states that authorities shall strive to ensure that a person who does not understand Icelandic can have his or her affairs resolved and can understand the content of documents and certificates that are important to him or her (Article 9).

Article 13 of the Act establishes the obligations of the Icelandic government and municipalities with regard to Icelandic Sign Language. It states that the Icelandic government and municipalities shall ensure that everyone who needs it has access to services in Icelandic Sign Language. The government and municipalities are

responsible for preserving Icelandic Sign Language, developing it and promoting its use. The Act further states that Icelandic Sign Language is equal to Icelandic as a form of expression in interpersonal communication, and it is not permitted to discriminate against people based on which language they use (Article 13).

Article 5 of Act No. 74/1997 on the Rights of Patients (4) states in short that a patient has the right to information on his health status and recommended treatment. It further states that a patient who does not speak Icelandic or uses sign language shall be guaranteed interpretation of information in accordance with this article. The explanatory memorandum to this Act states that Article 5 is one of the main pillars of patients' rights and therefore, it is necessary to ensure that patients who use sign language are guaranteed interpretation by the healthcare institutions. It is therefore clear that the assessment of whether a patient who uses sign language for communication needs the assistance of a sign language interpreter lies with the healthcare professional, not with the patient himself.

In 1990 the Icelandic Communication Centre was set up with the aim of promoting equality of deaf people by providing services in sign language through the adoption of Act No. 129/1990 on The Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (5) was passed to ensure this was achieved. The legal role of the Communication Centre is to carry out research in Icelandic Sign Language, to teach it, to provide Icelandic Sign Language interpretation and other services (Article 2(1)). The organisation of its services is further regulated in Regulation No. 1058/2003 (6). The Act is currently under revision.

Preschool is the first level of education in the Icelandic school system and operates in accordance with the Act on Preschools No. 90/2008 (7), the Regulation on Preschool Activities No. 655/2009 (8) and the National Curriculum Guide for Preschool Activities. The Act on Preschools does not state explicitly sign language as a language of instruction but allows parents who use sign language to receive interpretation to get information from the school. The explanatory memorandum to the Act states that the Act does not prescribe the rights of certain groups over others in the law itself, but such rights should be stipulated in special laws made for that purpose. It is specifically stated that the same applies to the rights of children who rely on Icelandic Sign Language for expression and communication. The Act does therefore not specifically stipulate the right for access to Icelandic Sign Language in preschool for a child who relies on sign language for expression and communication. Such a right is provided in Act No. 61/2011 on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic Sign Language. Each municipality is legally responsible for the operation of preschools. According to Article 4 on the Act on Preschools (7), municipalities are responsible for special measures and specialist services in preschools. Article 21 and 22 of the Act stipulates that children who need special assistance and training are entitled to such services within the preschool. Article 13 of Act no. 61/2011 on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic Sign Language, states the legal obligation of municipalities to ensure that everyone in need for access to Icelandic Sign Language has such access.

Compulsory schools are governed by the Compulsory Schools Act no. 91/2008 (9) and regulations issued there upon. Municipalities in Iceland bear the legal responsibility and cost of the operation of compulsory schools according to Article 5 of the Act. Article 13 of the Act on Compulsory Schools states that all students have the right to appropriate instruction that considers their needs. Furthermore Article 16 of the Act stipulates that teaching in compulsory schools shall be conducted in Icelandic but can be conducted in other languages by definition or if required by the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory schools. Article 17 states that students have the right to have their educational needs met in compulsory schools without discrimination, e.g. regardless of physical ability. Furthermore, it stipulates that students who have difficulty learning due to disability are entitled to special support in their studies accordance with their assessed support needs.

The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory schools<sup>46</sup> stipulates in Chapter 19.7 that a solid knowledge of Icelandic Sign Language and Icelandic is one of the main foundations of a solid education for the deaf and hard of hearing. The subject of bilingualism in Icelandic Sign Language and Icelandic is organized as a comprehensive subject in the same way as Icelandic as a mother tongue. In addition, training in sign language, written Icelandic and even spoken Icelandic, when the children use it for communication, is incorporated into all subjects in compulsory school. Sign language students should be given the opportunity to use Icelandic Sign Language in their studies in all subjects, as far as possible, and receive appropriate sign language interpretation. It is further stated that a good command of Icelandic Sign Language is the foundation of Icelandic and other language learning and is useful in all other subjects. The use of interpretation services in schoolwork must be a natural part and with increasing frequency.

Act No. 92/2008, on upper secondary school (10), applies to schoolwork at the upper secondary school level. Regulation no. 230/2012, on students with special needs in upper secondary schools (11), was issued in reference to Article 34(6) of the Act. The regulation also provides for the right of hearing-impaired or deaf students to special instruction in Icelandic Sign Language. The regulation applies to students who have been enrolled in upper secondary school regardless of whether the upper secondary school in question is run by the State or another party. Article 5(e) of Regulation no. 230/2012 stipulates that upper secondary school students have the right to access appropriate means of communication, e.g. sign language. According to Article 6 of the Regulation, students who have a need for sign language can learn and use Icelandic Sign Language in upper secondary school, in accordance with Act no. 61/2011 on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic Sign Language. Furthermore, it stipulates that deaf and hard of hearing students have the right to appropriate instruction in Icelandic Sign Language as a first language. The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary School does not contain any provisions on student's access to sign language.

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46 [https://www.government.is/library/01-Ministries/Ministry-of-Education/Curriculum/adskr\\_grsk\\_ens\\_2012.pdf](https://www.government.is/library/01-Ministries/Ministry-of-Education/Curriculum/adskr_grsk_ens_2012.pdf)

Act no. 65/2019 on folk high schools (12) applies to folk high schools in Iceland. The Ministry of Education and Culture has not issued a national curriculum guide for folk high schools. In addition, no folk high school curriculum guide has been published despite legal obligation thereof set out in Article 10(2) of the Act. According to Article 3(10) of the Act, teaching in folk high schools shall normally take place in Icelandic language unless otherwise stated in the school curriculum guide. In the commentary on the article, it is stated that the provision is in accordance with Act no. 61/2011 on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic Sign Language. As mentioned above, it is the right of those who rely on Icelandic Sign Language to acquire knowledge and skills in two languages, Icelandic Sign Language and Icelandic (Article 3 of the Act on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic Sign Language).

Act no. 23/2013, on Ríkisútvæðið, the Icelandic State Broadcasting Corporation, a media in the public interest (13) provides hearing-impaired people with access to subtitles on news and other television material, via teletext, sign language broadcasts and/or other means of communication (Article 6).

Act no. 38/2011 on media (14) applies to all media and media providers established in Iceland. Article 30 covers accessibility of visual and hearing-impaired people to media content. The article states that media providers that provide visual content shall “constantly and progressively” make their services accessible to the visually and hearing impaired, as well as to those with developmental disabilities. According to the article, means to ensure accessibility include sign language, subtitles and audio description. The Act does not impose comparable obligations on private media as on public media. In Article 31 it is stipulated that the private media is obliged, if urgent necessity arises and the public good requires it, to broadcast free of charge announcements from civil defence, law enforcement, accident prevention associations or aid groups. It further states that accessibility for the visually and hearing impaired shall be ensured, including through sign language, subtitles and audio description.

Act no. 38/2018 on services for disabled people with long-term support needs (15), was enacted with the aim of ensuring that disabled people have access to the best possible services that can be provided at any time to meet their specific support needs. Article 26 of the Act states that municipalities shall employ specialists to work on projects under the Act and where necessary staff who uses Icelandic Sign Language. In the explanatory memorandum it is stated that in order for municipalities to provide good services and care for their disabled residents, it is necessary that they have educated staff. It is also stated that, where necessary, staff who use Icelandic Sign Language, shall be employed as it is a natural requirement that individuals whose mother tongue is Icelandic Sign Language can communicate in that language with the staff who provide services to them.

Act no. 91/1991, on Civil Procedure (2) states that if a person gives a statement before court that relies on sign language as means of communication, the party that asked for the statement shall call for an interpreter. The remuneration and other costs for the work of a sign language interpreter are paid by the Treasury (Article 10(4)).

Act no. 88/2008, on Criminal Procedure (3) states that where persons who are questioned in court or under police investigation, rely on sign language as a means of communication, the prosecution or the police shall call for a sign language interpreter. The remuneration and other costs for the work of a sign language interpreter is paid by the Treasury (Article 12 and Article 63).

It took 25 years for the Icelandic Deaf Association (Félag heyrnarlausra) to achieve the legal recognition of Icelandic Sign Language. The Icelandic Deaf Association worked closely together with well-known public figures to raise awareness through media campaigns. A draft amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of Iceland has been produced. The draft proposes that a new article be added to the Constitution addressing the Icelandic Sign Language. The proposed article states that the Icelandic Sign Language is the language of those who need to rely on it for expression and communication and that the government should support and protect it. The commentary on the draft amendment states that the amendment is based, among other things, on proposals from the Icelandic Deaf Association. Furthermore, it states that the proposed article puts emphasis on the right of the deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind Icelanders to use their language. The new article would render a more solid legal foundation for the government and legislators to act in favour of Icelandic Sign Language.

## Legislation

- (1) Act No. 61/2011 on the Status of the Icelandic Language and Icelandic Sign Language (*Lög nr. 61/2011 um stöðu íslenskrar tungu og íslensks táknmáls*)
- (2) Act no. 91/1991, on Civil Procedure (*Lög um meðferð einkamála nr. 91/1991*)
- (3) Act no. 88/2008, on Criminal Procedure (*Lög um meðferð sakamála nr. 88/2008*)
- (4) Act No. 74/1997 on the Rights of Patients (*Lög nr. 74/1997 um réttindi sjúklinga*)
- (5) Act No. 129/1990 on The Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (*Lög nr. 129/1990 um Samskiptamiðstöð heyrnarlausra og heyrnarskertra*)
- (6) Regulation No. 1058/2003 on The Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (*Reglugerð nr. 1058/2003, um Samskiptamiðstöð heyrnarlausra og heyrnarskertra*)
- (7) Act on Preschools No. 90/2008 (*Lög nr. 90/2008 um leikskóla*)
- (8) Regulation on Preschool Activities No. 655/2009 (*Reglugerð nr. 655/2009 um starfsumhverfi leikskóla*)

(9) Compulsory Schools Act no. 91/2008 (*Lög nr. 91/2008 um grunnskóla*)

(10) Act No. 92/2008, on upper secondary school (*Lög nr. 92/2008 um framhaldsskóla*)

(11) Regulation no. 230/2012, on students with special needs in upper secondary schools (*Reglugerð nr. 230/2012 um nemendur með sérþarfir í framhaldsskólum*)

(12) Act no. 65/2019 on folk high schools (*Lög nr. 65/2019 um lýðskóla*)

(13) Act no. 23/2013, on Ríkisútvarpið, the Icelandic State Broadcasting Corporation (*Lög nr. 23/2013 um Ríkisútvarpið, fjölmíðil í almannapágu*)

(14) Act no. 38/2011 on media (*Lög nr. 38/2011 um fjölmíðla*)

(15) Act no. 38/2018 on services for disabled people with long-term support needs (*Lög nr. 38/2018 um þjónustu við fatlað fólk með langvarandi stuðningsþarfir*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 3 and 13	"Icelandic sign language is the first language of those who rely on it for expressing themselves and communicating with others. It is also the first language of their children. The authorities shall nurture and support it."
			"Icelandic sign language has equal status to Icelandic as a form of communication between people and no one may be discriminated against on the basis of which language they use."
	Yes	(1) Art. 13	
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 13 (9) Art. 16 (11) Art. 5(e) and 6 (12) Art. 3(10)	Icelandic Sign Language is recognised across all levels of education. This includes preschools under municipal responsibility, compulsory schooling, and upper secondary education, and at the folk high school level.
	Yes	(1) Art. 3 (9) Art. 25 (11) Art. 6	

	Yes	(1) Art. 9 and 13 (2) Art. 10(4) (3) Art. 12 and 63 (4) Art. 5 (7) Art. 9 (9) Art. 18 (15) Art. 26	However, there are no specific rules on access to the profession of sign language interpreters. Including staff proficient in Icelandic Sign Language.
	Yes	(1) Art. 13 (13) Art. 6 (14) Art. 30 and 31	The state and local governments shall ensure that anyone who needs it is provided with services in Icelandic sign language. Accessibility of broadcasted information, including emergency broadcasts, is ensured by both the public broadcaster and private media providers.
	Yes	(1) Art. 7	
Final score	7 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
2. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Icelandic Sign Language interpreters.

# Ireland

Sign Language	Irish Sign Language
Abbreviation Sign Language	ISL
Date of Recognition	24 December 2017
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	5,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 20 March 2018
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: 31 October 2024

Irish Sign Language (ISL) was officially recognised by means of the Irish Sign Language Act (1) on 24 December 2017 which came into effect on 24 December 2020 (Section 11(2)). The Act acknowledges ISL as a native and independent language, affirming the rights of the ISL community to use, develop, and preserve it (Section 3). Prior to this, the only reference to ISL in a legal document was in the Education Act (2) where it was referenced as a “support service”.

The Irish Sign Language Act (hereafter “ISL Act”) mandates the Minister for Education and Skills to ensure that ISL classes are provided for family members of deaf children (Section 5(a) of the ISL Act). This has been implemented through the ISL Tuition Scheme<sup>47</sup> that provides funding for a weekly tuition service: tutors visit the home of a deaf or hard of hearing preschool child or school-going pupil to provide training in ISL for the child, their siblings, their grandparents and parents or guardians.

In schools, the ISL support is provided to deaf children whose primary language is ISL via the ISL Scheme<sup>48</sup> which was introduced in 2023 (Section 5(b) of the ISL Act). Further, sufficient higher education placements for ISL training for teachers must be ensured, and minimum qualifications for teachers of deaf or hard-of-hearing children must be established (Section 5(c) and (d) of the ISL Act). However, as there is no ISL curriculum yet, the Department of Education has been assessing this possibility and recently hired an ISL Education Officer to develop it. In addition, as part of the Government’s initiative “Say Yes to Languages”, the ISL has been introduced as a modern foreign language in a module of six weeks in primary schools with the support of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI). In 2025/26 school year, over 1,300 primary schools are expected to participate, introducing tens of thousands of pupils nationwide to ISL and other languages.

47 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/irish-sign-language-isl-tuition-scheme/>

48 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/irish-sign-language-isl-scheme/>

The ISL Act states that public bodies are mandated to provide ISL interpretation, ensuring access to statutory entitlements or services (Section 6). Individuals may use ISL in any court, with courts required to ensure that ISL users can participate without disadvantage (Section 4). Courts and public bodies must provide ISL interpreters whose qualifications have been verified by the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (RISLI) (Section 7). Limited access to interpreters for social, educational and cultural events and services (including medical) is provided via the Social Inclusion Voucher Scheme (Section 9).

Under Section 8 of the ISL Act, broadcasters are required to adhere to principles of equality, dignity, and respect by providing ISL in their programmes under the Broadcasting Act 2009 (3). Section 43 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 mandates the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to establish rules to broadcasters to ensure access to their programmes for deaf persons, among other persons with sensory disabilities, and it may include providing sign language interpretation.

The Act mandates that a report on its operation be prepared every five years in consultation with the deaf community and representative organisations to assess its effectiveness and any necessary amendments (Section 10 of the ISL Act). In this framework, a Reporting Advisory Group, composed of organisations representative of the deaf community and professionals, was established to provide guidance in the reporting process.

The Act was reviewed by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in December 2021. The Report on the Operation of the ISL Act<sup>49</sup> was published in January 2023 and found that the Act was not operating as intended. Its implementation has been described as poor across most sectors. The critical shortage of ISL interpreters is considered a major barrier to the full implementation of the Act.

The next review has been initiated in 2025 by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.<sup>50</sup> As part of the reporting process, it launched a public consultation among the ISL users and family members about their experience of accessing public services and entitlements through ISL in the past five years.

As there is no Irish Sign Language Board, the Irish Deaf Society recommended during the current review of the ISL Act to establish it, whose purpose would be to create an official channel of communication between deaf community representatives and government departments, advising them on the implementation of the ISL Act and other matters concerning deaf people. The ISL Advisory Board would be deaf-led and composed of deaf ISL users and experts in various fields such as education, interpretation, and health.

In the meantime, the Irish Deaf Society established the ISL Act Cross-Community

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49 <https://nda.ie/publications/report-on-the-operation-of-the-irish-sign-language-act-2017-december-2021>

50 <https://nda.ie/monitoring/irish-sign-language/isl-act-report-2025>

Group, an alliance of national deaf community organisations, aimed at coordinating deaf community activities to campaign for the full commencement and implementation of the ISL Act, as well as to monitor the State's progress in fulfilling its responsibilities under the ISL Act.

The Irish Government recently launched its National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030<sup>51</sup> containing several actions related to the Irish Sign Language and deaf people's rights as follows:

- Specific policy focus and targeted actions in 2025-2026 on strengthening the supply of ISL interpreters in line with the ISL Act.
- Monitor and enforce compliance by broadcasters and video-on-demand providers with their obligations in relation to the provision of Irish Sign Language as well as engage with the Irish Media Commission to increase the provision of ISL for news content (Actions 8.3 and 8.4).
- Scope the requirements for the provision of Irish Sign Language Bilingual education and the examination of a newly developed Irish Sign Language subject to maximise learning potential for students whose preferred language is Irish Sign Language (Action 1.9).

## Legislation

(1) Irish Sign Language Act (*Act No. 40 of 2017*)

(2) Education Act (*Act No. 51 of 1998*)

(3) Broadcasting Act (*Act No. 18 of 2009*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Section 3	"The State recognises the right of Irish Sign Language users to use Irish Sign Language as their native language and the corresponding duty on all public bodies to provide Irish Sign Language users with free interpretation when availing of or seeking to access statutory entitlements and services."

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51 [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/33a36e70/National\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Strategy\\_for\\_Disabled\\_People\\_WEB\\_04.09.25.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/33a36e70/National_Human_Rights_Strategy_for_Disabled_People_WEB_04.09.25.pdf)

	Yes	(1) Section 3	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of ISL.
	No		
	Yes	(1) Section 5	
	No	(1) Section 5	However, sign language classes must be provided to the parents or guardians, siblings, and grandparents of a deaf child.
	Yes	(1) Sections 4, 6, 7, and 9	
	Yes	(1) Sections 6 and 8 (3) Section 43	"A public body shall do all that is reasonable to ensure that interpretation into Irish Sign Language is provided for a person who is competent in that language and cannot hear or understand English or Irish when that person is seeking to avail of or access statutory entitlements or services provided by or under statute by that public body."
	No	(1) Section 10(3)	The Minister is required to consult with deaf organisations when preparing the periodic report on the implementation of the ISL Act. However, there is no Irish Sign Language Board.
Final score	5 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Irish Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establish a legal framework recognising Irish Sign Language as a language subject for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of an Irish Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Irish Sign Language.

# Italy

Sign Language	Lingua dei Segni Italiana
Abbreviation Sign Language	LIS
Date of Recognition	19 May 2021
Type of Recognition	Other legislative instrument
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	40,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 15 May 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 15 May 2009

Following the entry into force of Decree-Law No. 41 of 22 March 2021, entitled “Urgent measures to support businesses and economic operators, employment, health, and territorial services connected to the COVID-19 emergency” or so-called “Sostegni Decree”(1) converted, with amendments, into Law No. 69 of 21 May 2021 (2), Italy officially recognised Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Italian Tactile Sign Language (LIST) as follows: “In implementation of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution, and Articles 21 and 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, as well as in conformity with Articles 9, 21 and 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in New York on 13 December 2006 and ratified by Law No. 18 of 3 March 2009, the Republic recognises, promotes and safeguards Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Italian Tactile Sign Language (LIST).” (Article 34ter (1)).

It is important to note that the provisions under Article 34ter were inserted into the Sostegni Decree, a decree dealing with various administrative matters of the State, rather than a framework law on disability, education, or accessibility. However, the recognition of LIS and LIST by the Sostegni Decree marked a historic achievement for all deaf people and society at large, the result of a decades-long struggle characterised by actions in every arena: awareness campaigns, sit-ins, petitions, conferences, projects, and large-scale street demonstrations, led by the Italian National Deaf Association (ENS) and supported by the entire Italian deaf community.

The Sostegni Decree was not an endpoint, but rather a crucial new beginning. Since then, ENS with its leadership elected in July 2022, has been working tirelessly through decisive advocacy to turn the recognition of LIS into concrete reality. Its efforts aim to finally secure the rights of deaf people in every sphere of life: from employment to education, from access to information to social and health services, as well as ensuring freedom of communication choice and the full participation of deaf people in the economic, political and social life of the country.

In order to ensure the highest level of participation and to present institutions with a proposal that offers maximum protection for both deaf people and the professionals working alongside the deaf community, a technical working group was established in the following months. Strongly promoted by ENS, this initiative brought together a wide range of associations representing the diverse and multifaceted deaf community, alongside research institutes and universities that have long been engaged in studying LIS and broader issues relating to deafness.

The Sostegni Decree also establishes provisions on the profession of interpreter and introduces interpreter training within universities, although the profession of sign language interpreter was already regulated in previous legal instruments: the Law No. 104 of 5 February 1992 on Framework Law on assistance, social inclusion and the rights of persons with disabilities (3) which acknowledges the right of deaf citizens to be provided interpretation services, among other forms of support (Article 9), and the Law No. 89 of 16 February 1913 on the Organisation of the Notarial Profession and Notarial Acts (4) mentioned, in a somewhat old-fashioned manner, the need for mediation in legal matters:

“Where the deaf person is unable to read, an interpreter must be present at the act. The interpreter shall be appointed by the President of the Court or by the notary designated to execute the deed, and shall be chosen from among persons accustomed to communicating with the deaf person and able to make themselves understood through signs and gestures. (Articles 56–57)”

Following the Sostegni Decree, two implementation decrees were adopted in the field of sign language interpretation.

The first Decree of 10 January 2022 on the Provisions on the professions of Italian Sign Language and Tactile Italian Sign Language interpreters (5), offered an initial – though still limited – definition of the interpretation profession and set out the framework for its regulation. Notably, it failed to take into account deaf-led training programmes, which gave rise to renewed dialogue with the government. These discussions culminated in a subsequent Decree of 10 December 2024 on Provisions on the professions of Italian Sign Language and Tactile Italian Sign Language interpreters (6), which clarified interpreter training pathways, entrusted to universities under the Sostegni Decree. This new legislative text explicitly stated that “native LIS-signing deaf individuals may be involved by universities in tutoring or laboratory activities within degree programs.” (Art. 2 (1bis) of the revised Decree of 10 January 2022). In addition, the decree introduced the establishment of professional training programmes managed by qualified entities, with particular emphasis on teaching provided by deaf instructors and native LIS experts. These programmes are to be organised within associations that meet the requirements set out in the decree of 10 December 2024.

The two texts aimed to define who can practice as an interpreter and to provide “incentives for the establishment of experimental bachelor’s degree programs with a professional focus in LIS and LIST interpreting,” thus allocating funds to

universities to create interpreter training programmes (Article 34ter(3)). As a result, several universities have started interpreter training courses. However, from the deaf community's perspective, this has caused friction, as some associations, including the ENS, had long been carrying out such training. The two corrective decrees sought to extend the transition period for these activities. The current situation is still evolving, aiming to maintain balance and avoid undermining the expertise and procedures that associations of deaf people have built over many years.

Article 34ter(3) not only requires the allocation of funds for interpreter training courses, but also obliges public administrations to promote pilot projects aimed at the broader dissemination of LIS and LIST. This provision led to the establishment of the Fund for the Inclusion of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Persons, which allocates resources to the Italian regions based on their annual activity plans in this field. The regions are responsible for designing and implementing programmes that address the needs of deaf persons, sometimes in collaboration with representative associations. While co-design with such organisations is encouraged, it is not mandatory. Whenever possible, deaf organisations, including the ENS, submit proposals in response to regional public calls for projects. These initiatives have resulted in the creation of social secretariat services for deaf people, video remote and on-site interpretation services, information websites, and various other accessibility measures.

With regard to the provision of LIS as a language of instruction in the education of deaf learners, there is currently no national legal framework regulating this aspect, resulting in diverse educational approaches across the regions. Some regional or provincial regulations implement measures promoting the use of LIS at the local level, including within schools, such as in Piedmont Region and in the Province of Rome.

The ENS has actively advocated for the inclusion of LIS as a language subject within the LIS recognition law through several legislative proposals, which, however, were not ultimately approved by the Parliament. Over the years, various experimental projects have introduced the teaching of LIS as a school subject in schools in different Italian regions; nevertheless, there is still no structural framework ensuring the continuity or consistency of these initiatives. For example, some schools and institutions, such as the School of Cossato (Biella) and the Istituto dei Sordi di Via Nomentana (Rome), provide teaching of LIS to deaf students.

Regarding accessibility of audiovisual media in LIS, a Service Contract between the national public broadcaster (RAI) and the Italian Government requires the RAI to provide sign language interpretation and subtitling services, and the ENS participates in consultations ensuring the quality of those services.

While the Sostegni Decree represents a significant milestone for the deaf community, ENS continues to advocate to ensure that the legal recognition of LIS is translated into tangible services and effective support measures for deaf and deafblind people in Italy, across all areas of daily life. ENS notably is mandated since 2023 to undertake legal action in defence of deaf persons who are victims of discrimination under the

Decree of 12 May 2025 of the Minister for Disabilities on the Recognition and confirmation of associations and entities entitled to take legal action in defence of persons with disabilities who are victims of discrimination, pursuant to Article 5 of the Prime Minister's Decree of 2 December 2020 (7) following the Decree of 16 March 2023 of the Minister for Disabilities on the Recognition and confirmation of associations and entities entitled to take legal action in defence of persons with disabilities who are victims of discrimination (8), in accordance with Law No. 67 of 1 March 2006, Article 4.

## Legislation

- (1) Decree-law N°41 of 22 March 2021 on Urgent measures in support of businesses and economic operators, employment, health and local services connected with the COVID-19 emergency (*Decreto-Legge 22 marzo 2021, n. 41 — “Misure urgenti in materia di sostegno alle imprese e agli operatori economici, di lavoro, salute e servizi territoriali, connesse all'emergenza da COVID-19”*)
- (2) Law N°69 of 21 May 2021 on the Conversion into law, with amendments, of Decree Law No. 41 of March 22, 2021, containing urgent measures to support businesses and economic operators, employment, health, and local services, in connection with the COVID-19 emergency (*Legge 21 maggio 2021, n. 69 - “Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 22 marzo 2021, n. 41, recante misure urgenti in materia di sostegno alle imprese e agli operatori economici, di lavoro, salute e servizi territoriali, connesse all'emergenza da COVID-19”*)
- (3) Law No. 104 of 5 February 1992 on Framework Law on assistance, social inclusion and the rights of persons with disabilities (*Legge 5 febbraio 1992, n. 104 — Legge-quadro per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate*)
- (4) Law No. 89 of 16 February 1913 on the Organisation of the Notarial Profession and Notarial Acts (*Legge 16 febbraio 1913, n. 89 — Sull'ordinamento del notariato e degli archivi notarili*)
- (5) Decree of 10 January 2022 on the Provisions on the professions of Italian Sign Language and Tactile Italian Sign Language interpreters (*Decreto 10 gennaio 2022, n. 153 — “Disposizioni in materia di professioni di interprete in lingua dei segni italiana e lingua dei segni italiana tattile”*)
- (6) Decree of 10 December 2024 on Provisions on the professions of Italian Sign Language and Tactile Italian Sign Language interpreters (*Decreto 10 dicembre 2024, n. 233 — “Disposizioni in materia di professioni di interprete in lingua dei segni italiana e lingua dei segni italiana tattile”*)
- (7) Decree of 12 May 2025 of the Minister for Disabilities on the Recognition and

confirmation of associations and entities entitled to take legal action in defence of persons with disabilities who are victims of discrimination, pursuant to Article 5 of the Prime Minister's Decree of 2 December 2020 (*Decreto 12 maggio 2025 del Ministro per le Disabilità – Riconoscimento e conferma delle associazioni e degli enti legittimati ad agire in giudizio in difesa delle persone con disabilità vittime di discriminazioni, ai sensi dell'articolo 5 del DPCM 2 dicembre 2020*)

(8) Decree of 16 March 2023 of the Minister for Disabilities on the Recognition and confirmation of associations and entities entitled to take legal action in defence of persons with disabilities who are victims of discrimination (*Decreto 16 marzo 2023 del Ministro per le Disabilità, di concerto con il Ministro per la Famiglia, la Natalità e le Pari Opportunità e il Ministro del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali — “Riconoscimento e conferma delle associazioni e degli enti legittimati ad agire in giudizio in difesa delle persone con disabilità vittime di discriminazioni”*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 34ter(1)	In implementation of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution, and Articles 21 and 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, as well as in conformity with Articles 9, 21 and 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in New York on 13 December 2006 and ratified by Law No. 18 of 3 March 2009, the Republic recognises, promotes and safeguards Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Italian Tactile Sign Language (LIST).
	No		However, it refers to international, European and national provisions that enshrine the principles of equality and non-discrimination in the broad sense, and the ENS is mandated to undertake legal action on behalf of deaf persons who are victims of discrimination.
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 34ter(2) and 34ter(3) (3) Art. 9 (4) Art. 56-57 (5) (6)	

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	Yes	(1) Art. 34ter(3)	Public administrations shall promote pilot projects for the dissemination of LIS and LIST interpreting services and subtitling
	No		There is no provision on the accessibility of broadcasted information, however, the Service Contract between the Italian government and the public broadcaster (RAI) addresses the accessibility of media in LIS.
Final score		3 / 8	

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## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions ensuring equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Italian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establish a legal framework recognising Italian Sign Language as a language of instruction and a mandatory language subject for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast information, including emergency communication, in Italian Sign Language.
5. Establishment of an Italian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Italian Sign Language.

# Latvia

Sign Language	Latviešu Zīmju Valoda
Abbreviation Sign Language	LZV
Date of Recognition	1 September 2000
Type of Recognition	Language Law
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	2,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 18 July 2008 Ratification: 1 March 2010
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 22 January 2010 Ratification: 31 August 2010

Latvian Sign Language (LZV) is explicitly mentioned in the Official Language Law (1), adopted on 9 December 1999 and in force since 1 September 2000. Besides stating that the official language of Latvia is the Latvian language, Section 3(3) states that: "The State shall ensure the development and use of the Latvian Sign Language for communication with people with impaired hearing." It grants deaf people rights in relation to their language since the public authorities are under a duty to promote its development, provide for its use, and ensure its availability in communication between the State and deaf persons.

The 2010 Disability Law (2) refers to sign language only in the context of interpretation, defining the role of a sign language interpreter (surdotulks) in Section 1(10) but not recognising the language itself. Under Section 12(5) and (6) and Section 13, the Disability Law grants persons with hearing impairment the right to receive sign language interpretation services funded by the State budget for the participation in educational programmes (vocational basic education, vocational secondary education, and higher education institution) and for the communication with other persons and institutions. Furthermore, deaf people are entitled to sign language interpretation during judicial proceedings under Criminal Procedure Law (3) and Civil Procedure Law (4).

Based on Section 13 of the Disability Law (2), since 20 April 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers Regulation n°250 on the Procedures for the Latvian Blind Society and the Latvian Association of the Deaf to provide social rehabilitation services and technical aids (5) regulates the provision of sign language interpretation services. It regulates not only the number of sign language interpretation hours available in primary, secondary, vocational, and higher education programmes (Section 41), but also the hours allocated for communication with individuals and organisations (Section 42). Moreover, it establishes the eligibility conditions for sign language interpreters to provide their services (Section 43) and the booking procedures through the Latvian Association of the Deaf (Latvijas Nedzirdīgo savienība) that is a service provider for

sign language interpretation funded by the State. Pursuant to these provisions, since 8 July 2022, pupils and students with a hearing disability may receive up to 960 hours a year, and, since 1 January 2013, persons with a hearing disability may receive up to 120 hours a year to facilitate communication with private individuals and public institutions. Interpretation services, however, are provided within the limits of available state budget resources.

The impact of the Official Language Law in 2000 was initially limited, only after Latvia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities did its provisions begin to be applied more effectively in practice. In Latvia, Latvian Sign Language is recognised and deaf and hard of hearing persons are entitled to sign language interpretation services for education and for communication purposes, yet sustained government action and increased public awareness remain essential to achieving their full inclusion in the society. Since then, several further legal developments have explicitly mentioned sign language and strengthened access to it.

The Education Law (6) provides that, from 1 September 2019, educational institutions implementing special needs education programmes for students with hearing impairments, as well as other institutions offering an appropriate learning environment for obtaining education in Latvian Sign Language, may deliver education in Latvian Sign Language as the language of instruction (Section 9). Although Latvian Sign Language is not a compulsory subject in the national general education curriculum, some schools offer it as an elective one for hearing students. The State Language Policy Guidelines 2021–2027 outline goals to promote the accessibility and use of Latvian Sign Language but do not establish a legal framework for its inclusion as a compulsory or elective subject in national education standards.

The Law on Public Electronic Media and Their Management (7) requires public broadcasters, as far as possible, to ensure the accessibility of their programmes and services to persons with disabilities. Since 1 January 2021, public electronic media have been obliged to adapt certain audiovisual content for persons with hearing impairments, either through subtitling or interpretation into Latvian Sign Language (Section 3(6) of the Law on Public Electronic Media and Their Management). Under Section 21 of the Official Language Law (1), information of public importance must be provided in the State language, and in emergencies, it may also appear in foreign languages pursuant to Cabinet Regulation No. 130 (8). Although sign language is not a foreign language, these rules encourage diverse communication methods. In line with the UNCRPD and the accessibility principle, the government routinely provides sign language interpretation during press conferences, especially in crises, reflecting a policy commitment rather than a legal obligation.

Until 2021, due to insufficient funding, no state budget allocations were provided to support the development of Latvian Sign Language. However, since 2022, the Latvian Association of the Deaf (LNS) secured state funding for the implementation of sign language development measures. Within the LNS' structure, a Sign

Language Commission has been established and is responsible for the development, standardisation and terminology of Latvian Sign Language.

Ongoing challenges include:

1. Development of high-quality Latvian Sign Language learning materials;
2. A shortage of professional sign language teachers;
3. A lack of teachers with sign language skills in primary and secondary education;
4. An insufficient number of qualified sign language interpreters.

The legal recognition in the Official Language Law primarily protects the rights of deaf persons on paper. The underlying challenge remains the insufficient level of state funding to meet everyday communication needs, for example, ensuring deaf people can interact with others and access essential information in sign language.

## Legislation

(1) Official Language Law (*Valsts valodas likums*)

(2) 2010 Disability Law (*Invaliditātes likums*)

(3) Criminal Procedure Law (*Kriminālprocesa likums*)

(4) Civil Procedure Law (*Civilprocesa likums*)

(5) Cabinet of Ministers Regulation n°250 on the Procedures for the Latvian Blind Society and the Latvian Association of the Deaf to provide social rehabilitation services and technical aids – typhlotechnics and surdotechnics (*Ministru kabineta noteikumi Nr. 250 - Kārtība, kādā Latvijas Neredzīgo biedrība un Latvijas Nedzīrdīgo savienība sniedz sociālās rehabilitācijas pakalpojumus un nodrošina tehniskos palīglīdzekļus – tiflotehniku un surdotehniku*)

(6) Education Law (*Izglītības likums*)

(7) Law on Public Electronic Media and Their Management (*Sabiedrisko elektronisko plāssaziņas līdzekļu un to pārvaldības likums*)

(8) Cabinet Regulation No. 130 on the Usage of Languages in Information (*Ministru kabineta 2005. gada 15. februāra noteikumi Nr. 130 “Noteikumi par valodu lietošanu informācijā”*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Section 3(3)	"The State shall ensure the development and use of the Latvian sign language for communication with people with impaired hearing."
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(6) Section 9	
	No		In some educational institutions, sign language is offered to hearing students as an elective, non-compulsory subject.
	Yes	(5) Sections 41, 42 and 43 (3) Section 11 (4) Section 13 (2) Sections 1(10), 12(5) and 12(6) and 13	
	Yes	(7) Section 3(6) (8) (1) Section 21	
	No		
Final score	4 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Latvian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establish a legal framework recognising Latvian Sign Language as a language subject for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of a Latvian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Latvian Sign Language.

# Lithuania

Sign Language	Lietuvių Gestų kalba
Abbreviation Sign Language	LGK
Date of Recognition	4 May 1995
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Resolution
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	8,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 18 August 2010
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 18 August 2010

Lithuanian Sign Language (LGK) was first recognised on 4 May 1995 as the mother tongue of deaf people in a Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania on the Recognition of the Sign Language of the Deaf as Their Native Language (1), granting deaf people the right to choose for their native language as well as the language of their parents.

On 20 December 2022, the Law on the Social Integration of Disabled People (2) further recognised sign language as a language in its own right: “Sign language is the native language of deaf people” (Art. 2(12)). It recognises the inherent right of deaf and hard of hearing persons to language and communication, including the right to provide and receive information and services in Lithuanian Sign Language (Article 6(1)), and guarantees the freedom of expression in Lithuanian Sign Language (Article 4(1)). The law obliges state and municipal institutions to create conditions for learning Lithuanian Sign Language, to ensure that information and services are accessible in Lithuanian Sign Language (Article 6(4)) and to encourage media managers and public and private service providers to ensure that information and services are accessible, including through Lithuanian Sign Language (Article 4(2)).

A Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania approved the Programme for the Use of Lithuanian Sign Language (LGK) and the Provision of Interpretation Services for 2005-2008 (3). The programme aimed to promote the social inclusion of deaf persons, enrich the lexicon of Lithuanian Sign Language, and ensure that the use of sign language and interpretation services support full participation in society. It sought to contribute to the development of a Lithuanian Sign Language dictionary, the training of qualified interpreters, and the provision of interpretation services for deaf persons (Section III of the programme). In 2021, the Ministerial Order No. V-121 introduced an updated “Procedure for the Provision of Lithuanian Sign Language Interpretation Services” (4) which is currently in force and ensures clearer standards and broader accessibility for sign language interpretation.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education issued an Order on the Approval of the Concept of Bilingual Education for the Deaf (5). The Concept attached to the Order establishes bilingual education for the deaf in both Lithuanian Sign Language and Lithuanian as essential from early childhood through upper secondary education (Section I). Its objectives include ensuring that deaf children acquire Lithuanian Sign Language before entering school, receive instruction in Lithuanian Sign Language as their first language and Lithuanian as their second, that teachers are trained to teach through sign language, and that a communicative environment supporting bilingual learning is created (Section III).

Article 5(10) 2) of the Law on the National Radio and Television (6) requires the Lithuanian public broadcaster (LRT) to devote at least 20% of the total monthly broadcasting time to productions interpreted into Lithuanian Sign Language.

In addition, the Law on Accessibility Requirements for Products and Services (7), implementing the EU Directive 2019/882, which entered into force in June 2025, further strengthens the rights of persons with disabilities, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing, to access information, communication, and services.

While sign language has already been recognised as a distinct language in Lithuania, a specific Lithuanian Sign Language Act has not yet been adopted. Such a law would comprehensively regulate the status of Lithuanian Sign Language, ensure the linguistic and cultural rights of its users, and define the obligations of public institutions to provide services in sign language.

## Legislation

- (1) Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania on the Recognition of the Sign Language of the Deaf as Their Native Language (*Nutarimas dėl kurčiųjų gestų kalbos pripažinimo gimtaja kalba*)
- (2) Law on the Social Integration of Disabled People (*Lietuvos Respublikos neigaliųjų socialinės integracijos įstatymas*)
- (3) Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania approved the Programme for the Use of Lithuanian Sign Language (LGK) and the Provision of Interpretation Services for 2005-2008 (*Nutarimas dėl lietuvių gestų kalbos vartojimo ir vertėjų paslaugų teikimo 2005–2008 metų programos patvirtinimo*)
- (4) Ministerial Order No. V-121 on the Procedure for the Provision of Lithuanian Sign Language Interpretation Services (*Isakymas dėl Lietuviai gestų kalbos vertimo paslaugų teikimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo*)
- (5) Order on the Approval of the Concept of Bilingual Education for the Deaf

(*Isakymas dėl Dvikalbio Kurčiųjų Ugdymo Sampratos Patvirtinimo*)

(6) Law on the National Radio and Television (*Lietuvos nacionalinio radio ir televizijos įstatymas*)

(7) Law on Accessibility Requirements for Products and Services (*Lietuvos Respublikos gaminių ir paslaugų prieinamumo reikalavimų įstatymas*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) (2) Art. 2(12)	Lithuanian Sign Language is a native language used in Lithuania, equivalent to other languages, by the deaf and hearing-impaired, which ensures their cultural and linguistic identity.
	Yes	(2) Art. 6	However, there is no prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of LGK.
	No		
	Yes	(5) Sections I and III of the Concept	
	Yes	(2) Art. 6(4) (5) Section III of the Concept	
	Yes	(2) Art. 4 and 6 (3) Section III (4)	
	Yes	(2) Art. 6 (6) Art. 5(10) 2	State and municipal institutions and bodies, within their competence, ensure that information and/or services are provided to deaf people in Lithuanian sign language.
	No		
Final score	6 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Lithuanian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.

2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of a Lithuanian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Lithuanian Sign Language.

# Luxembourg

Sign Language	Deutsche Gebärdensprache
Abbreviation Sign Language	DGS
Date of Recognition	24 July 2018
Type of Recognition	Language Law
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	250
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 26 September 2011
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 26 September 2011

The German Sign Language (DGS) was recognised on 23 September 2018 by the Law of 24 February 1984 on the language regime (1) through an amendment by the Law of 23 September 2018 (2), which inserted new clauses granting recognition and related rights.

According to the Law on the language regime, Luxembourgish is the national language, while French, German and Luxembourgish are used for administrative and judicial purpose, with French holding exclusive validity for legislation. Since 2018, German Sign Language (DGS) has been recognised in a separate clause (Article 3bis(1) of the Law on the language regime), granting deaf people the right to use it in their interactions with public authorities and, upon prior request, obliging the Ministry responsible for Disability Affairs to provide sign language interpretation (Article 3bis(2) of the Law on the language regime).

Under Article 3bis(3), any deaf, hard of hearing or non-speaking person, as well as close family members and partners of those who use sign language, and residing in Luxembourg, are entitled to free sign language instruction of up to 100 hours per person. Furthermore, every deaf, hard of hearing or non-speaking pupil and student has the right to receive primary and secondary education in sign language under the conditions set by the Law of 20 July 2018 establishing the Competence centres in Specialised Psycho-Pedagogy in favour of inclusive schooling (3). This Law designated the Centre for the Development of Language, Hearing and Communication Skills (*Centre pour le développement des compétences langagières, auditives et communicatives, also called Centre de Logopédie*) as one of the Competence centres, with a special focus on supporting deaf and hard of hearing children and young people.

The only school for deaf children in Luxembourg, Centre de *Logopédie*, applies a bilingual approach by combining the oral method with German Sign Language. The deaf pupils and students are expected to learn both French (spoken/written) and German. After the law recognising sign language came into force, the teaching staff

completed a two-year training course in German Sign Language.

The school employs two sign language interpreters, who also provide interpretation services to all government agencies in Luxembourg. Another sign language interpreter is employed by *Solidarität mit Hörgeschädigten asbl* (Solidarity with the Hearing Impaired) and provides interpretation services for different matters. There is also close cooperation with the sign language interpretation service in Trier in the Federal Republic of Germany. In total, Luxembourg has three sign language interpreters, although a greater number of sign language interpreters would be desirable. Alongside this, a written interpretation service is available, currently staffed by one written language interpreter.

## Legislation

(1) Law of 24 February 1984 on the language regime (*Loi du 24 février 1984 sur le régime des langues*)

(2) Law of 23 September 2018 amending the Law of 24 February 1984 on the language regime (*Loi du 23 septembre 2018 modifiant la loi du 24 février 1984 sur le régime des langues*)

(3) Law of 20 July 2018 establishing the Competence centres in Specialised Psycho-Pedagogy in favour of inclusive schooling (*Loi du 20 juillet 2018 portant création des Centres de compétences en psycho-pédagogie spécialisée en faveur de l'inclusion scolaire*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 3bis(1)	German sign language is recognised in Luxembourg.
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 3bis(3)	In primary and secondary education.
	Yes	(1) Art. 3bis(3)	Not as part of the school curriculum but through the Centre for the Development of Language, Hearing and Communication Skills, for both deaf persons and their family members.
	No		



Yes (1) Art. 3bis(2)

Deaf persons have the right to use sign language in their dealings with State authorities. On written request to the Minister responsible for policy on the disabled, at least forty-eight hours before the meeting, the latter will organise interpretation. The cost of the interpreter is borne by the State budget.



No

Final score

4 / 8

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of German Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of a legal framework recognising German Sign Language as a language subject for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of German Sign Language interpreters.
5. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast information, and especially emergency-related information, in German Sign Language.
6. Establishment of a German Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to German Sign Language.

# Malta

Sign Language	Lingwa tas-Sinjali Maltija
Abbreviation Sign Language	LSM
Date of Recognition	16 March 2016
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Law
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	200
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 10 Oct 2012
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 10 Oct 2012

The Maltese Sign Language (LSM) was recognised on 16 March 2016 by the Maltese Sign Language Recognition Act (1) as “an official language of Malta” making it the third official language of Malta (Article 4). It is described as “the visual and gestural language that is the first or preferred language in Malta of the distinct linguistic and cultural Deaf community” (Article 3).

The legislation places a clear obligation on the Government to actively promote and ensure the use of the Maltese Sign Language (LSM) across all areas of public life. As the Act states: “The Government of Malta shall promote through all possible means the widest use of Maltese Sign Language in all government information and services, education, broadcasting, media, at the law courts, and in political, administrative, economic, social and cultural life” (Article 4).

During the process of the adoption of the Maltese Sign Language Recognition Act, the Deaf People Association Malta (DPAM) and several members of the deaf community were actively involved. The Association was consulted by the relevant authorities at every stage leading to the adoption of the law. Several meetings were held to ensure that the final legislation reflected the needs and aims of the deaf community. DPAM strongly advocated for a dedicated law recognising Maltese Sign Language. Recognition was considered vital because it paves the way for the deaf community to be included by right in national announcements, the justice and health systems, education, and other areas of public life.

Following the enactment of the law, the government appointed the Maltese Sign Language Council. The council is composed of five members who are knowledgeable in matters relating to sign language, with 51% of its members being deaf persons with broad experience and knowledge of Maltese Sign Language (LSM). These deaf members were nominated by Deaf People Association Malta. The council was established to monitor the implementation of the law and to support the further development and expansion of LSM.

While the Maltese Sign Language Recognition Act has brought important recognition, challenges remain. Progress is constrained by the limited number of professionally employed sign language interpreters and teachers of Maltese Sign Language, and by the small size of the deaf community, which makes it more difficult to sustain long-term initiatives. Awareness of sign language and deaf rights in society is still growing slowly, and sign language is too often perceived as an additional cost rather than as a fundamental right. There is also a need for stronger and more consistent financial support. The Maltese Sign Language Council usually submits proposals to the government requesting specific budgets to carry out projects. Opportunities for deaf leadership and employment in sign language-related professions are also still scarce.

The Maltese Sign Language is not yet formally included as a subject in the national school curriculum. However, through the National Disability Strategy 2021-2030, the Government of Malta committed to establish “Basic Teaching of Sign Language to certain workers and to students (in secondary schools)” (Action 3.4).

Looking forward, the Maltese Sign Language Council hopes to achieve several long-term goals. These include:

- training more LSM teachers, starting with the first course in October 2025 at the University of Malta (sponsored by the Ministry for Inclusion), to meet growing demand, support deaf children and their families, and integrate LSM into the national curriculum.
- increasing the number of sign language interpreters in Malta.
- providing training opportunities for deaf persons to work as Deaf Interpreters.
- making tourism in Malta more accessible to deaf tourists through the use of International Signs (IS) and Maltese Sign Language (LSM).
- ensuring greater access to information and communication in Maltese Sign Language (LSM) across all sectors, including education, healthcare, media, and public services, in recognition of its status as Malta’s third official language.
- raising awareness of Maltese Sign Language and deaf rights in society to promote greater understanding, inclusion, and recognition of sign language as a fundamental right.

These aspirations guide the council’s ongoing work and represent the areas where further investment and support are most needed.

In the meantime, the Maltese Sign Language Council has led important initiatives. In collaboration with the National Archives of Malta and the University of Malta, the council carried out a project to preserve the history of Maltese deaf people and Maltese Sign Language. This project, sponsored by the Ministry for Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector and by the University of Malta, involved interviewing and video-recording several deaf persons, parents, and educators who had worked with deaf

people in the past, ensuring that their experiences and stories are safeguarded for future generations.

In November 2025, the Parliament of Malta approved unanimously the Bill for the registration and warranting of sign language interpreters. The Act No. XXXVIII of 2025 to provide for the registration and warranting of sign language interpreters and any matter ancillary thereto (2), entering into force in January 2026, regulates the profession of sign language interpretation with a registration procedure, and establishes the Interpreter Registration and Warranting Board is established to advise the Council on the measures relevant to sign language interpreters. This outcome is the result of extensive advocacy efforts carried out by the DPAM and the Maltese Sign Language Council, in accordance with the mandate granted to the Council by the Sign Language Recognition Act to establish regulations for the profession.

## Legislation

(1) Maltese Sign Language Recognition Act (*Att Dwar ir-Rikonoxximent tal-Lingwa Maltija tas-Sinjali*)

(2) Act No. XXXVIII of 2025 to provide for the registration and warranting of sign language interpreters and any matter ancillary thereto

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 3 and 4	<p>"The Republic of Malta recognises Maltese sign language as an expression of culture and endorsement for equal opportunities and inclusion."</p> <p>"Maltese Sign Language is declared to be an official language of Malta and the Government of Malta shall promote through all possible means the widest use of Maltese Sign Language in all government information and services, education, broadcasting, media, at the law courts, and in political, administrative, economic, social and cultural life."</p>
	Yes	(1) Art. 5 and 6	<p>The Act is based on principles of human rights, equal opportunities and linguistic rights. At the same time, it places limits on the right of deaf people to use LSM by ensuring respect for the rights of other linguistic communities in Malta and by making government obligations subject to reasonable and proportionate measures under the Equal Opportunities Act.</p>

	No	However, the Republic of Malta recognises Maltese Sign Language as an expression of culture.
	No	
	No	However, the National Disability Strategy 2021-2030 foresees the establishment of basic training of Maltese Sign Language to some professionals and students.
	Yes (1) Art. 8(i) (2)	The profession of sign language interpreters is regulated by the Act and the Interpreter Registration and Warranting Board is established to advise the Council on the measures relevant to sign language interpreters.
	Yes (1) Art. 4 and 5	The Government of Malta shall promote through all possible means the widest use of Maltese Sign Language in all government information and services, education, broadcasting, media, at the law courts, and in political, administrative, economic, social and cultural life.
	Yes (1) Art.3(2), 7, 8, 9 and 10	
Final score	5 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
2. Establishment of a legal framework recognising Maltese Sign Language as a language subject and a language of instruction for deaf learners.
3. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Maltese Sign Language interpreters.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast information, and especially emergency-related information, in Maltese Sign Language.

# Netherlands

Sign Language	Nederlandse Gebarentaal
Abbreviation Sign Language	NGT
Date of Recognition	16 March 2021
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	7,500
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 14 June 2016
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: N/A

The Dutch Sign Language (NGT) has been recognised as a language of its own on 16 March 2021 through the adoption of the Act on the Recognition of Dutch Sign Language (1): “Dutch Sign Language is hereby recognised” (Article 2). Dutch Sign Language (NGT) is defined as the visual-manual language that is used by sign language users in the Netherlands (Article 1). It is the result of a number of efforts to get NGT legally recognised since spoken Dutch was not enshrined in federal legislation. In 1996, a commission was set up with representatives from the Dutch Deaf Association (*Dovenschap*), the Federation of Parents of Deaf Children (*FODOK*), the Dutch Sign Centre (*Nederlands Gebarencentrum*), and the Universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht. On 9 June 1997 the Committee published the report *‘Méér dan een gebaar’* (‘More than just a sign’<sup>52</sup>). It concluded that legal recognition is crucial for NGT and issued a number of recommendations. An update of this report was released in 2001 (*Actualisatie 1997-2001*<sup>53</sup>). As not much had changed during that time, a Committee for the Recognition of Dutch Sign Language (hereafter “the committee”) was established in 2003 with the aim of advancing the legal recognition of the Dutch Sign Language. This committee organised several meetings between key stakeholders and the Ministry of Education, Education, Culture and Science (OCW) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), seeking to convince the government of the importance of formal recognition and to remind them of their earlier commitment that such recognition would follow the standardisation of the NGT lexicon, which has been completed. In 2010, the committee attempted to secure constitutional recognition of NGT. However, the Council of State issued a negative advisory opinion. Subsequently, the committee ceased all its activities in 2010. In 2014, the Dutch parliament recognised the Frisian language, opening the opportunity for the deaf community to get the Dutch Sign Language (NGT) recognised in a similar Act. At this time, the Dutch Deaf Association (*Dovenschap*),

52 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254772434\\_Meer\\_dan\\_een\\_gebaar\\_rapport\\_van\\_de\\_Commisie\\_Nederlandse\\_Gebarentaal](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254772434_Meer_dan_een_gebaar_rapport_van_de_Commisie_Nederlandse_Gebarentaal)

53 <https://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.425562>

together with politicians from the Christian Union (*CU*) and the Labour Party (*PvdA*) revived efforts to obtain the legal recognition of NGT. A first draft bill was submitted in 2016, marking the formal reinitiation of the legislative process. On 22 September 2020, the Act on the Recognition of Dutch Sign Language (1) was unanimously passed by the House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*) and on 13 October 2020, it was unanimously approved by the Senate (*Eerste Kamer*), resulting with the official adoption of the Act on 16 March 2021 and its entry into force on 1 July 2021.

The Act on the Recognition of Dutch Sign Language ensures the right of sign language users to use Dutch Sign Language (NGT) when taking an oath, making a promise or affirmation, by using the corresponding signs to the words prescribed by law (Article 5(1)). Furthermore, sign language users have the right to use NGT during a court hearing (Article 6) and when they do so, the judicial authorities must cover the interpretation costs (Article 7).

An Advisory Board, composed of five members, is established with the purpose of advising the government on promoting the use of Dutch Sign Language in society (Articles 8, 9 and 10).

Under Article 3 of the Act, public authorities are required to promote the use of Dutch Sign Language (NGT) in government public addresses, administrative communication and judicial proceedings. The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations is mandated to consult the relevant authorities and adopt policy measures, following the advice of the Advisory Council on Dutch Sign Language. However, this article has not yet entered into force, delaying its implementation.

Under application of Articles 4 and 11 of the Act, the Act containing rules on the organisation and management of fire services, disaster response, crisis management, and medical assistance (2) has been amended to ensure that the information provided by the mayor on the origin, scale, and consequences of a disaster or crisis that threatens or affects the municipality, as well as about the course of action to be followed is promptly made available in Dutch Sign Language (Article 7).

Before the recognition, sign language was already mentioned in several legal instruments in the field of interpretation in criminal cases, employment and social support and the Act did not replace the existing provisions, yet it just added several procedural rights as mentioned above. A Decree establishing the rates for reimbursements as referred in the Act on Tariffs in Criminal Cases 2003 (3) regulates the fees of sign language interpreters in criminal cases (Article 4).

Educational legislation also mentions sign language. The Decree establishing the core objectives for special education (4) offers the possibility of bilingual education (Dutch and Dutch Sign Language). (Annex 1). Dutch Sign Language (NGT) can be provided as a language of instruction to deaf pupils and/or as an additional subject area by deaf schools and other schools depending on the school's chosen approach to the role of NGT within the curriculum.

Deaf people have the right to sign language interpretation up to 15% of their working hours, unless additional hours are reasonably justified according to Article 7a of the Decree laying down rules concerning the reintegration of persons with disabilities and other benefit recipients (5). Deaf people are also entitled to a specified number of hours of sign language interpretation for private life situations under Article 4a.1.1 of the Decree laying down rules for the implementation of the Social Support Act 2015 (6).

There is no specific legal provision concerning sign language interpretation on television in the Netherlands. However, under the Media Act 2008 (7), broadcasters are legally obliged to ensure that at least 95% of all Dutch-language television programmes are subtitled. This obligation has been in force since 1 January 2008 to guarantee accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers.

## Legislation

- (1) Act on the Recognition of Dutch Sign Language (*Wet erkenning Nederlandse Gebarentaal*)
- (2) Act containing rules on the organisation and management of fire services, disaster response, crisis management, and medical assistance (*Wet van 11 februari 2010 houdende regels omtrek de organisatie en het beheer van de brandweerzorg, rampenbestrijding, crisisbeheersing en geneeskundige hulpverlening*)
- (3) Decree establishing the rates for reimbursements as referred in the Act on Tariffs in Criminal Cases 2003 (*Besluit van 16 augustus 2003 houdende vaststelling van tarieven voor vergoedingen als bedoeld in artikelen 3, 4, 6, 7, 17 en 18 van de Wet tarieven in strafzaken*)
- (4) Decree establishing the core objectives for special education (*Besluit van 18 mei 2009 houdende de vaststelling van kerndoelen voor het speciaal onderwijs*)
- (5) Decree laying down rules concerning the reintegration of persons with disabilities and other benefit recipients (*Besluit van 2 december 2005 tot vaststelling van een algemene maatregel van bestuur houdende regels met betrekking tot reintegratie (Reïntegratiebesluit)*)
- (6) Decree laying down rules for the implementation of the Social Support Act 2015 (*Besluit van 27 oktober 2014, houdende regels ter uitvoering van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning 2015 (Uitvoeringsbesluit Wmo 2015)*)
- (7) Media Act 2008 (*Mediawet 2008*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 2	"Dutch Sign Language is hereby recognised"
	No	(1) Art. 5(1) and 6	However, the right to use Dutch Sign Language when taking an oath, making a promise or affirmation, by using the corresponding signs to the words prescribed by law, and during a court hearing, is stipulated.
	No		
	Yes	(4) Annex I	Only in special education.
	Yes	(4) Annex I	It is, however, not enshrined as a right but as a possibility that schools may provide.
	Yes	(1) Art. 3 and 7 (3) Art. 4 (5) Art. 7a and 7b (6) Art. 4a.11, 4a.12, 4a.13 and 4a.21	Article 3 of the Act on the Recognition of Dutch Sign Language has not entered into force yet as the Minister has to issue a policy addressing the use of Dutch Sign Language in public addresses by the Government, in administrative communication and in judicial communication by consulting the relevant authorities. The Dutch Sign Language Advisory Board (Adviescollege) is tasked to provide advice on the implementation of this policy.
	Yes	(1) Art. 3, 4 and 11 (2) Art. 7	The Minister shall pursue a policy aimed at promoting the use of Dutch Sign Language in public addresses by members of the Cabinet, in administrative communication and in judicial communication, and shall report annually to the House of Representatives thereon. In consultation with the provinces, municipalities, water authorities and the Council for the Judiciary, the Minister shall establish policy rules concerning the manner in which the use of Dutch Sign Language shall be promoted. (Art. 3)
	Yes	(1) Art. 8, 9 and 10	There are specific provisions on access to information in crisis or emergency situations in sign language.
Final score		6 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Dutch Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the

- national cultural heritage.
- 3. Establishment of a legal framework recognising Dutch Sign Language as a language subject and a language of instruction for deaf learners in regular education.

# Norway

Sign Language	Norsk Tegnspråk
Abbreviation Sign Language	NTS
Date of Recognition	Language Act
Type of Recognition	25 March 2021
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	5,500
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 3 June 2013
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: N/A

Norwegian Sign Language (NTS) was recognised on 25 March 2021 by the Parliament through the adoption of the Language Act (1) that formally passed in the Parliament's records in April 2021. Norwegian Sign Language (NTS) is included as one of the official languages of Norway (along with the two variants of Norwegian [Bokmål and Nynorsk], and as well as Sámi languages, Kven, Romani and Romanes). The purpose set out in Section 1(c) of the Language Act is to ensure that public bodies take responsibility for protecting and promoting Kven, Romani, Romanes and Norwegian Sign Language. Furthermore, Section 7 states that Norwegian Sign Language is the national sign language in Norway. As an expression of both language and culture, Norwegian Sign Language is recognised as having equal status to Norwegian.

In Norway, consultation rounds are always held on proposed legal instruments, new policies, and political initiatives, enabling the entire population to give their views in writing and thereby influence the proposals. In addition to this, the Norwegian Deaf Association (Norges Døveforbund) frequently had contact with the Ministry of Culture regarding its wishes and concerns related to the proposal for the Language Act and the new language policy. In addition to this, the Norwegian Deaf Association also maintained regular contact with politicians in the Parliament, as well as with the Ministry of Culture and other relevant departments, where it presented views and demands. The Association felt that it was being taken seriously.

The work on the linguistic recognition of Norwegian Sign Language (NTS) intensified in 2000. Before this time, the authorities had not considered that Norwegian (Bokmål and Nynorsk) itself was not even established by statute as the the national language. Lobbying, demonstrations, investigations and alliance-building with politicians who understood the need for statutory recognition of NTS were carried out. This culminated in a separate White Paper "Goals and Purpose – A Comprehensive Norwegian Language Policy"<sup>54</sup> (2), adopted by the Parliament in 2009, in which NTS

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54 <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-35-2007-2008-/id519923/>

received recognition as a value, a marker of identity and part of Norwegian cultural heritage. At this time, the NTS was recognised as a full-fledged language but was not yet granted equal status as an official language alongside Norwegian. Measures were then announced to strengthen the Norwegian languages mentioned in the White paper. The Norwegian Language Council was tasked with expanded linguistic responsibility for several languages, including Norwegian Sign Language (NTS). This included allocating funding for a dedicated position working on NTS. Furthermore, a general Language Act was also required for the languages discussed in the White Paper. This was finally passed in 2011, after 12 years of work. Norway does not have a tradition of frequently amending its Constitution, instead legislating through legal instruments outside the Constitution. The Language Act is a framework legislation that affects and influences other special legal instruments, and their interpretation.

The Language Act (1) entered into force on 1 January 2022. The Language Act is a key measure to raise the status of Norwegian Sign Language (NTS). The Language Council of Norway was given responsibility to supervise and coordinate the public sector so that each authority takes responsibility for NTS within its policy area. In addition to the Language Act, another major step to raise the status and recognition of NTS was the Government's appointment of a Committee on Norwegian Sign Language in the Royal Decree of 13 August 2021 establishing the Norwegian Sign Language Committee (3). The Committee's main mission is to propose how access to NTS could be increased in relevant public sectors. Its work consists of providing the basis for a renewed sign language policy in accordance with the Language Act.

The Government has mandated the Committee to<sup>55</sup>:

1. review legislation, arrangements, and measures that in different sectors include Norwegian Sign Language.
2. summarise available knowledge about how different regulations that grant rights to sign language users are complied with.
3. acquire new knowledge about the main challenges when it comes to access to sign language.
4. obtain documentation of how these challenges affect different areas of life.
5. submit a linguistic description of Norwegian Sign Language, which complements Section 7 of the Language Act, where Norwegian Sign Language is recognised as a language.
6. identify the need for documentation of Norwegian Sign Language, which will strengthen research in the language and promote its use.
7. refer to the policy instruments in other countries.

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55 <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dep/kud/org/styrer-rad-og-utvalg/tidligere-styrer-rad-og-utvalg/tegnspakutvalget/mandat-for-tegnspakutvalget/id2869753/>

8. give an assessment of attitudes towards the deaf and politics that have been labelled deaf and sign language users.
9. propose relevant measures and schemes that can strengthen access to sign language.
10. propose relevant perspectives and strategic efforts, which will be suitable for creating trust between the deaf community and society at large.
11. facilitate input to and public debate on the report.

On 13 June 2023, the Sign Language Committee, chaired by Dr. Hilde Haualand, Norway's first deaf PhD holder, delivered its report on "Sign Language for Life – Proposal for a Comprehensive Policy for Norwegian Sign Language" (*Norges Offentlige Utredninger 2023:20 - Tegnspråk for livet – forslag til en helhetlig politikk for norsk tegnspråk*)<sup>56</sup>, which sets out 65 measures to promote and strengthen the language and containing six steps to protect and promote Norwegian Sign Language (NTS): (1) to provide training in sign language environments; (2) to ensure early access to sign language; (3) to strengthen the quality of training; (4) to raise sign language competence; (5) to ensure access to equivalent services; (6) to ensure more research on NTS and language documentation. After submitting its report, the Sign Language Committee was discontinued in 2023. Following the Committee's proposed measures, the government reviewed them and communicated its decision on whether they would be implemented.<sup>57</sup>

Even before the recognition of NTS in the Language Act, sign language has been mentioned several times in Norwegian legislation such as the Education Act, the Kindergarten Act, and the Broadcasting Act. The Welfare, and Insurance Act and The Interpreter Act all include Norwegian Sign Language, but it is not mentioned explicitly because this legal instrument includes several languages and interpretation methods.

The 2023 Education Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education (4) states that pupils with hearing impairments in primary and lower secondary school have the right to receive education in and through Norwegian Sign Language at school (Section 3-4). The decision rests with the parents until the start of Grades 8-10, after which the pupil may decide independently. Indeed, some students with hearing impairments do not sufficiently benefit from physical accommodations and hearing assistive technologies alone, as stated in Section 11-5 of the Education Act. These students need sign language to access the language community. Students who have sign language as their first language require language stimulation in sign language from their close environment and at school, just like other students. Under Section 3-4 of the Education Act, students may choose between education in Norwegian Sign Language (with Norwegian Sign Language as a subject) or education in and through

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2023-20/id2984187/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/kultur-idrett-og-frivillighet/sprak-og-litteratur/innsiktartikler/rapportering-pa-tiltak-fra-tegnsprakutvalget/id3094435/?expand=factbox3095213>

sign language (with Norwegian Sign Language both as a subject and as a language of instruction). Some municipalities choose to gather students receiving sign language instruction in specialised schools with strong expertise in hearing and sign language education. However, most municipalities do not offer such a program and in this case, when they require assistance, the local Pedagogical-Psychological Service (PPT) can apply to the national specialist service for special educational needs (Statped) for the pupil to receive part-time education (grades 1–10) in and through Norwegian Sign Language.

Furthermore, under Section 6-3 of the 2023 Education Act, students with hearing impairments in upper secondary education have the right to receive instruction with the help of a sign language interpreter or to attend an upper secondary school that offers education in and through Norwegian Sign Language. Those who attend ordinary upper secondary schools with sign language interpretation may also choose to receive instruction in Norwegian Sign Language (as a subject). Therefore, students may choose whether they want education only in Norwegian Sign Language or both in and through Norwegian Sign Language. If the students receive only education in Norwegian Sign Language, they are taught the subject of Norwegian Sign Language while following the regular curriculum for other subjects. If the students receive education in and through Norwegian Sign Language, they follow the entire curriculum for students with sign language. Additionally, they receive instruction in sign language for subjects without a separate sign language curriculum. The municipality is responsible for ensuring that personnel with relevant competence are available to provide the required education. If the school lacks sign language expertise, a sign language interpreter must be provided. Four curricula have been developed for subjects tailored to students using sign language.

Sign language education may also be provided at a location other than the local school, within the municipality, or through intermunicipal cooperation. In some cases, this arrangement may allow the student to be part of a larger sign language community. The municipality must assess whether this setup is in the best interest of the student. Even if education is provided at a school other than the local one, the local school remains responsible for the student's education. Students receiving education in and through sign language may receive part of this education at a location other than their regular school as *Statped* offers part-time education for sign language students, and *Signo School and Competence Center* also provides part-time education for students with deafblindness.

Students with hearing impairments may also apply to a regular county-level upper secondary school that offers adapted educational programmes for students with hearing impairments. Some students with hearing impairments may require more than the standard time to complete upper secondary education. Under Section 5-1 of the Education Act, the right to upper secondary education remains until the student has achieved university entrance qualifications or vocational qualifications. If the student has not completed their education by the end of the school year in which they turn 24, they have the right to upper secondary education for adults (Section 18-3).

Since 2016, Norwegian Sign Language has been expressly mentioned in the Act relating to Kindergartens (5) as part of the right to sign language education. It states that children below compulsory school age who have sign language as their first language, or who are found, following an expert assessment, to need sign language education, are entitled to be provided sign language education (Section 38). This right applies whether or not the child attends a kindergarten. The municipality is responsible for fulfilling this right for children residing in the municipality. Before the municipality decides on sign language education, an expert assessment must be made by the pedagogical-psychological service. Consent must be obtained from the child's parents before an expert assessment is carried out, and a decision is made regarding sign language education. The parents have the right to familiarise themselves with the content of the assessment and to make a statement before a decision is made. Insofar as possible, the provision of sign language education must be designed in cooperation with the child and the child's parents, and significant emphasis must be placed on their viewpoints. If the child moves to another municipality, the decision regarding sign language education will apply until a new decision is made in the case. The rights to transport, supervision, a travel companion and lodging apply to children who are entitled to sign language education. The latter is a language-planning measure enabling sign language environments to be established in some kindergartens.

The National Insurance Act (6) provides an entitlement to interpreter assistance for persons with hearing impairments (Section 10-7). This legislation established the right for deaf and hard of hearing people to sign language interpretation 24/7. The scheme covers sign language interpretation, written (speech-to-text) interpretation and interpretation and guiding for deafblind persons. Under its scope of application, only public institutions are required to provide sign language interpretation as further described by its Circular on Section 10-7 regarding interpreter assistance for people with hearing impairments (7). In practice, deaf people are granted the right to sign language interpretation in all areas of their lives since everything is state funded: education, justice, health, work, major events (Section 5). The Interpretation Act (8), covering both spoken and sign languages, regulates the provision of sign language interpretation since 1 January 2022. It sets requirements for registration, quality, professionalism, and certification.

Since 1989, daily news in Norwegian Sign Language (*Tegnspråknytt*) have been available from Monday to Friday. In 1999, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (*NRK*) established the Sign Language Channel (*Tegnspråkkanalen*), which mainly provides access to interpreted programs from the main channel. Since 1 January 2021, the Broadcasting Act (9) states in Section 2-19 that the *NRK* must adapt programmes in broadcasting and audiovisual on-demand services for people with disabilities by means of subtitles, interpreting by sign language, audio description, audio subtitles, among others. Nationwide commercial television channels that have more than five per cent of the total number of television viewers, must adapt programmes for persons with disabilities by means of subtitles, interpreting by sign language, audio description, audio subtitles, among others (Section 2-19). Specifically, the Broadcasting Regulations (10), as of 1 May 2025, require the *NRK* to

broadcast daily TV programmes with sign language interpretation and to broadcast television programmes in Norwegian Sign Language daily, as well as to render these contents available on *NRK*'s streaming services (Section 2A-1). Moreover, Section 2-19 and Section 2-20 of the Broadcasting Act, read together with Language Act and Interpretation Act ensure that messages from state authorities that are of significant importance, including crisis broadcasts and press conferences, shall be made accessible through sign language interpretation, and this obligation also applies to online streaming under the application of the Regulations of Universal Design of ICT Solutions (11), read together with the previously mentioned instruments.

The advantages of the Language Act are that it explicitly recognises Norwegian Sign Language as equal to Norwegian as a language and cultural expression. By incorporating Norwegian Sign Language into the Act, it becomes harder to differentiate unjustifiably between the languages and language communities named in the statute. The Act also goes further than Norwegian anti-discrimination legislation. The challenges now lie in changing language attitudes so that access to sign language is ensured regardless of hearing status, and in reforming university programmes that perpetuate negative language attitudes. Specialists and professionals must ensure that children gain timely access to Norwegian Sign Language, and public bodies, being duty-bearers, must protect and promote it.

It is too early to assess long-term impact, but an immediate effect was that the proposed new Interpreting Act took account of the Language Act by not excluding Norwegian Sign Language as an interpretation language. The Interpreting Act, in force since 2022, strengthens the legal security of sign language users and the quality of sign language interpretation. Another immediate impact was that the parliamentary debate on the Language Act was interpreted on the floor of the Parliament of Norway (Storting), and politicians learned that Norwegian Sign Language is an identity marker and part of Norway's cultural heritage, regardless of hearing status. Finally, Norwegian signers felt affirmed by being placed on an equal footing with other citizens, and the Norwegian Deaf Association spontaneously organised an online celebration.

## Legislation

- (1) Language Act (*Språklova*)
- (2) Parliament of Norway, White Paper “Goals and Purpose – A Comprehensive Norwegian Language Policy” (*Mål og mening – Ein heilskapleg norsk språkpolitikk*)
- (3) Royal Decree of 13 August 2021 establishing the Norwegian Sign Language Committee (*Kongelig resolusjon 13. august 2021 om oppnevning av Tegnspråkutvalget*)
- (4) Education Act (*Lov om grunnskoleopplæringa og den vidaregående opplæringa*)

(5) Act relating to Kindergartens (*Lov om barnehager*)

(6) National Insurance Act (*Lov om folketrygd*)

(7) Circular on Section 10-7 regarding interpreter assistance for people with hearing impairments (*Rundskriv til ftrl § 10-7 første ledd bokstav f: Tölkehjelp for hørselshemmede*)

(8) Act on the responsibility of public bodies for the use of interpreters, etc (*Lov om offentlige organers ansvar for bruk av tolk mv.*)

(9) Act relating to Broadcasting and Audiovisual On-Demand Services (*Lov om kringkasting og audiovisuelle bestillingstjenester*)

(10) Regulations on Broadcasting and Audiovisual On-Demand Services (*Forskrift om kringkasting og audiovisuelle bestillingstjenester*)

(11) Regulations on Universal Design of Information and Communication Technology Solutions (*Forskrift om universell utforming av informasjons- og kommunikasjonsteknologiske (IKT)-løsninger*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) §1(c) and §7	"Norwegian sign language is the national sign language in Norway. As an expression of language and culture, Norwegian sign language is equal in value to Norwegian." "(...) public bodies take responsibility for protecting and promoting Kven, Romani, Romanes and Norwegian sign language."
	No		
	Yes	(1) §1(c) and §7 (2)	
	Yes	(4) §3-4 and §6-3 (5) §38	In kindergarten for deaf children, and in primary and secondary education for deaf learners.
	Yes	(4) §3-4 and §6-3 (5) §38	In kindergarten for deaf children, and in primary and secondary education for deaf learners.
	Yes	(6) §10-7 (7) (8)	
	Yes	(9) §2-19 and §2-20 (10) §2A1	

	Yes	(3)	Only between 2021 and 2023 with a specific mandate.
Final score	7 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Norwegian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.

# Poland

Sign Language	Polski Język Migowy
Abbreviation Sign Language	PJM
Date of Recognition	1 April 2011
Type of Recognition	Act on Sign Language and other means of communication
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	50,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 25 September 2012
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: N/A

Polish Sign Language (PJM) was legislated on 1 April 2011 by the Act on Sign Language and Other Means of Communication (1). Article 3(2) defines PJM as “a natural visual-gestural language”. It makes a distinction between the sign system (*System Językowo-Migowy, SJM*) and Polish Sign Language (*Polski Język Migowy, PJM*). The Act grants deaf people the right to access a sign language interpreter when seeking assistance from public services such as the police, hospitals, or fire and rescue, as well as when visiting a doctor or public office (Articles 5 and 6). Furthermore, it explicitly states that the public entity is responsible for the interpretation costs, and not the deaf person (Articles 7 to 11). It also regulates booking procedures of interpreters and the maintenance of an official register of interpreters (Articles 12 to 17).

The Act also grants the possibility to deaf persons and/or their family members to learn Polish Sign Language (PJM), Signed Polish system (SJM) or communications methods for deafblind persons (SKOGN) or as a deafblind interpreter-guide in a training whose costs can be subsidised by the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities (Article 18).

Articles 19 to 25 of the Act on Sign Language and Other Means of Communication regulate the Polish Council of Sign Language within the Ministry of Family and Social Policy. The Council consists of 16 members, including nine representatives of non-governmental organisations (four of whom are deaf) and seven representatives of various government ministries. It advises the Minister of Family and Social Policy and the Government Plenipotentiary for Persons with Disabilities on matters concerning deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind persons. Constituted for its third term in October 2021, the Council serves a four-year mandate and is currently focusing on four main issues. First, the development and implementation of requirements for certified Polish Sign Language interpreters, given that many interpreters currently lack sufficient skills or fluency in PJM. Second, the development of similar requirement for PJM interpreters employed by the Ministry of Justice. Third, the establishment of the first Sign Language Communication Centre, aimed at enabling video communication

between deaf or hard of hearing persons who use sign language and hearing persons in both the public and private sectors who require spoken interpretation, thereby fostering more inclusive communication between them. Fourth, the implementation of a bilingual approach in deaf education system. The Polish Association of the Deaf (PSD) has had representatives in the Polish Council of Sign Language who protect deaf matters during sessions since the Council was established.

Polish Sign Language (PJM) is also mentioned in the Act of 19 July 2019 on Ensuring Accessibility to People with Special Needs (2). Article 6 of the Act stipulates that persons with special needs have the right to communicate with public authorities using any means of communication they find suitable, including Polish Sign Language. Furthermore, all public bodies are required to provide information in PJM on their websites and mobile applications.

The Act of 22 March 2018 amending the Broadcasting Act (3) requires television broadcasters to ensure accessibility through sign language interpretation, subtitles and audio description, reaching at least 50% of the total quarterly broadcasting time by 2025 (Art. 2). The National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT) sets regulations requiring increasing percentages of sign language interpretation (PJM) and subtitles in various TV programmes. By 2025, general programmes must include at least 40% subtitles and 3% PJM, news programmes 44% subtitles and 6% PJM, film channels 43% subtitles, and children's channels 20% PJM.

The Act of 4 April 2019 on Ensuring the Digital Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Bodies (4). This Act requires that the websites and mobile applications of all public bodies be designed or adapted in accordance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 to ensure digital accessibility for all users.

Education in general is largely inclusive and has historically been closely linked to the Church, which has long been one of the main providers of education for children with disabilities. Although the number of schools for deaf children has remained stable, enrolment in these schools has declined in recent years as more parents choose to mainstream their children since they have the unlimited right to choose the educational path for their deaf child. Sign language is largely still seen as a 'tool' and not as an independent language despite being accepted as a language in the research area. Only a few schools use Polish Sign Language (PJM) as part of their programme; most schools use SJM. On the other hand, Polish Sign Language is now being taught as a foreign language at the University of Warsaw. While PJM is not officially a separate subject in the curriculum of deaf learners, it may be taught as part of up to 12 revalidation hours per week, during which other alternatives, such as Polish language, hearing training, and more, can also be offered. However, several reports such as the 2022 Supreme Audit Office's report on the Education of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children and Youth (*Edukacja głuchych i niedosłyszących dzieci i młodzieży*) which

recommends PJM to be implemented into the education system.<sup>58</sup>

The Polish Association of the Deaf (PSD) is actively involved in initiatives that have a significant impact on the Polish legal system concerning people with disabilities. In cooperation with the Government Plenipotentiary for Disabled People within the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and other partners, PSD is implementing a project aimed at developing comprehensive, tailor-made support instruments for people with disabilities, including deaf and hard of hearing individuals. These instruments are designed to improve their situation in the labour market and will subsequently be incorporated into the Polish legal system. Another project in which PSD is involved is entitled “Public Administration is Accessible: Training and Workshops.” Through this initiative, PSD provides training to officials from both central and local authorities on what it means to be a person with a disability, the content and implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), its influence on the Polish legal framework, and the provisions of Polish acts on accessibility for persons with special needs. Moreover, PSD has developed new requirements for Polish Sign Language instructors and PJM interpreters.

Furthermore, the Polish Association of the Deaf (PSD) actively participates in two key national bodies. First, it is represented by its President in the National Consultative Council for People with Disabilities where he is serving a second term and advocates for equal rights of disabled people in Poland, especially deaf and hard of hearing people. Second, the PSD has one representative in the Polish Institute of Language Diversity, established by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in 2024. The Institute’s primary mission is to promote awareness and understanding of Poland’s linguistic diversity. It supports and initiates activities related to the general (literary) Polish language, regional languages such as Kashubian (legally recognised as such), the languages of national and ethnic minorities (including German, Ukrainian, Czech, Lithuanian, Karaim, and Lemko), dialects, linguistic varieties, migrant languages, and Polish Sign Language. The PSD’s involvement had a real impact on the programmes run by the institute, thereby promoting deaf culture and heritage.

## Legislation

- (1) Act on Sign Language and Other Means of Communication (*Ustawa o języku migowym i innych środkach komunikowania się*)
- (2) Act of 19 July 2019 on Ensuring Accessibility to People with Special Needs (*Ustawa z dnia 19 lipca 2019 r. o zapewnieniu dostępnosci osobom ze szczególnymi potrzebami*)
- (3) Act of 22 March 2018 amending the Broadcasting Act (*Ustawa z dnia 22 marca*

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58 <https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id.26970.vp.29769.pdf>

*(2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o radiofonii i telewizji)*

(4) Act of 4 April 2019 on Ensuring the Digital Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Bodies (*Ustawa z dnia 4 kwietnia 2019 r. o dostępości cyfrowej stron internetowych i aplikacji mobilnych podmiotów publicznych*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 3§2	Polish Sign Language (PJM) is defined as the natural visual-spatial language used by deaf and hard of hearing persons.
	Yes	(1) Art. 4 (2) Art. 6	Right to use the form of communication of their choice (including PJM), but there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of PJM.
	No		Yet the Polish Association of the Deaf is actively participating in the Polish Institute of Language Diversity.
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 18	Deaf persons and/or their family members have the possibility to learn Polish Sign Language (PJM), among others. However, no provision of PJM as part of the curriculum, excepted through the revalidation hours for deaf learners.
	Yes	(1) Art. 5 to 17 (2) Art. 6	
	Yes	(1) Art. 11 (3) Art. 2	A public administration body shall ensure access to the services of interpreters in Polish Sign Language (PJM). The service may also be provided by an employee of the public administration body who knows PJM. The service shall be free of charge. Even though there is a provision on accessibility of broadcasted information, there isn't on accessibility of emergency information.
	Yes	(1) Art. 19 to 25	
Final score	6 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Polish Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.

2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of a legal framework recognising Polish Sign Language as a language subject and a language of instruction for deaf learners.
4. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in Polish Sign Language.

# Portugal

Sign Language	Língua Gestual Portuguesa
Abbreviation Sign Language	LGP
Date of Recognition	20 September 1997
Type of Recognition	Constitution
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	60,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 23 September 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 23 September 2009

Portugal is one of the five countries in the EU mentioning sign language in its national constitution. Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) is recognised in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (1) following an amendment introduced by the Constitutional Law n°1/97 of 20 September 1997 (2). Article 74 of the Constitution, which concerns the right to education, provides as follows: “2. In implementing the education policy, the State shall be charged with: (...) h) Protecting and developing Portuguese Sign Language, as an expression of culture and an instrument for access to education and equal opportunities”.

Unlike the Austrian and Finnish constitutions, the Portuguese Constitution reserves, with different constitutional implications, Chapter III on cultural rights, fully recognising Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) as a cultural expression and as an instrument for access to education and equal opportunities in various areas of daily life, not only specifically in the area of education, but also with interrelated implications with other constitutional norms. As a result, the Portuguese Constitution recognises LGP as a fully-fledged language constitutionally recognised with a strengthened status. This implies that LGP is protected against discrimination on the grounds of the language used, is recognised as a language of instruction and bilingual learning and is legally used in various areas of daily life.

The constitutional recognition of the LGP implies that, in practice, this language has come to be seen as a language in its own right with several relevant effects on the daily lives of deaf people in general. This recognition has had and is having a very transforming impact, gradually, in the daily lives of deaf people. It is true that constitutional recognition means that the enjoyment and exercise of fundamental rights are now guaranteed and assured by public authorities in general, namely access to public services, for example, services in the area of health and medical emergency (MAI1121 and SNS242), access to justice and to social security services provided through an interpretation service in LGP, at no additional cost for deaf people. In addition, access to education for deaf people is duly recognised as the right of deaf

students to attend bilingual schools where the bilingual curriculum is available, the LGP's own discipline with an equal workload with Portuguese as a second language.

Since the constitutional amendment in 1997, there are numerous legal references that explicitly mentioned sign language in the field of equality and non-discrimination, education, access to information and media.

In 2016, Law N° 46/2006 of 28 August Prohibiting and Punishing Discrimination on Account of Disability and Aggravated Health Risk (3) aims to prevent and prohibit discrimination, direct or indirect, on account of disability, in all its forms, and sanction the practice of acts that result in violation of any fundamental rights, or in the refusal or conditioning the exercise of any economic, social, cultural or other rights, by any person, due to any disability. Specifically, discriminatory practices against deaf people are considered to be intentional or negligent actions or omissions that, violate the principle of equality, "the refusal or impediment of use and dissemination of sign language" (Art. 4 d)).

With regard to the right to education in Portuguese Sign Language for deaf children, this was first addressed in the Decree-Law N°3/2008 on Special Support in Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (4). Under this law, deaf children (or their parents) were given the option of bilingual education with LGP as the first language.

In 2018, the Government approved a new legislation on inclusive education, the Decree-Law N° 54/2018 of 6 July Establishing the Legal Framework for Inclusive Education (5) replacing the previous Decree-Law N° 3/2008 (4). Most recently, the Parliament issued an amendment through the Law N° 116/2019 of 13 September making a First Amendment to Decree-Law No. 54/2018, of 6 July Establishing the Legal Framework for Inclusive Education (6) to strengthen the inclusive education provisions of the Decree-Law N° 54/2018, maintaining the provisions on bilingual education in LGP. The new provision dedicated to bilingual education designates Portuguese Sign Language as the vehicular language of teaching and learning as follows:

1. It is a specialized educational response with the objective of implementing the bilingual education model, while guaranteeing access to the common national curriculum, ensuring, namely:
  - a) The development of Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) as a first language (L1);
  - b) The development of written Portuguese language as a second language (L2);
  - c) The creation of spaces for reflection and training, including in the area of LGP, in a perspective of collaborative work between different professionals, families and the educational community in general.
2. Reference schools for bilingual education include teachers with specialized training in special education in the area of deafness, LGP teachers, LGP interpreters and speech therapists.

3. The reference schools for bilingual education have specific equipment and materials that guarantee access to information and the curriculum, namely equipment and visual support materials for learning.
4. It is up to schools to organize differentiated educational responses, according to the levels of education and teaching and the characteristics of the students, namely through access to the curriculum, participation in school activities and the development of bilingual environments, promoting its inclusion. (Article 15)

In addition, there is specific educational legislation concerning the professional status of qualified Portuguese Sign Language teachers. This statute, approved in 2018, is Decree-Law No. 16/2018 Creating the Recruitment Group for Portuguese Sign Language and Approves the Access Conditions for LGP Teachers to the External Selection Contest (7). Adopted in line with the objectives established by Article 24 (5) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it establishes a framework of rights and duties for qualified teachers, ensuring equal treatment with regard to the teaching profession and career progression within the educational field of Portuguese Sign Language.

Law N° 89/1999 of 5 July Defining the Conditions of Access to and Exercise of the Activity of Sign Language Interpreter (8) establishes the measures necessary to ensure professional standards in sign language interpretation, including provisions on training and a code of conduct. It also formally recognises the profession, confirming its official status, and provides a legal definition of the role of a sign language interpreter.

Sign language, though not Portuguese Sign Language specifically, is also referenced in the Law N° 38/2004 of 18 August on the Legal Regime for the Prevention, Habilitation, Rehabilitation and Participation of Persons with Disabilities (9). Article 43(1) stipulates that information about services, resources and benefits must be made available in sign language. There is no law guaranteeing interpretation into LGP in court. Instead, a protocol that was drawn up between the Ministry of Justice and the Portuguese Deaf Association (FPAS) guarantees that the Ministry of Justice will contact FPAS, if in need of a sign language interpreter.<sup>59</sup>

Regarding access to television and information, the Government adopted the Law N° 27/2007 of 30 July on Television Law and On-Demand Audiovisual Services (10). Article 34-A requires television broadcasters and on-demand audiovisual service providers to make their services progressively and continuously more accessible to deaf people. Depending on the type of service, this must include measures such as subtitling and interpretation in Portuguese Sign Language. To implement this requirement, the public regulatory body, ERC (*Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social*), is responsible for adopting a multi-annual plan. This plan sets out the timetable for gradually raising accessibility standards and defines the specific

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59 <https://fpasurdos.pt/assets/regulamentos/regulamento-interno-protocolo-fpas-mj.pdf>

obligations of television operators and on-demand audiovisual services concerning the accessibility of media services.

Moreover, the Centre for Portuguese Sign Language, established by the Order No 15568/2013 of 28 November 2013 (11), has as its core mission to monitor, study and resolve issues raised in the context of Portuguese Sign Language, also taking into account the recommendations issued by the competent national and international bodies.<sup>60</sup>

Lastly, it is important to stress that, despite the progress achieved, further efforts are still required to ensure full accessibility for deaf people. The Portuguese Deaf Association (FPAS) and the wider deaf associative movement continue to work tirelessly to advance this goal. For example, a draft law is currently being prepared to establish the status of Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) as a language in its own right, serving as a reinforcement and complement to the legislation already mentioned.

## Legislation

- (1) Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (*Constituição da República Portuguesa*)
- (2) Constitutional Law n°1/97 of 20 September 1997 (*Lei Constitucional n.º 1/97, de 20 de Setembro 1997*)
- (3) Law N° 46/2006 of 28 August Prohibiting and Punishing Discrimination on Account of Disability and Aggravated Health Risk (*Lei n.º 46/2006, de 28 de agosto — Proíbe e pune a discriminação em razão da deficiência e da existência de risco agravado de saúde*)
- (4) Decree-Law N°3/2008 on Special Support in Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (*Decreto-Lei n.º 3/2008 de 7 de Janeiro - Apoios especializados a prestar na educação pré-escolar e nos ensinos básico e secundário dos sectores público, particular e cooperativo*)
- (5) Decree-Law N° 54/2018 of 6 July Establishing the Legal Framework for Inclusive Education (*Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018, de 6 de julho – Estabelece o regime jurídico da educação inclusiva*)
- (6) Law N° 116/2019 of 13 September making a First Amendment to Decree-Law No. 54/2018, of 6 July Establishing the Legal Framework for Inclusive Education (*Lei n.º 116/2019, de 13 de setembro – Primeira alteração ao Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018, de 6 de julho, que estabelece o regime jurídico da educação inclusiva*)

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60 <https://www.inr.pt/nucleo-para-a-lingua-gestual-portuguesa>

(7) Decree-Law No. 16/2018 Creating the Recruitment Group for Portuguese Sign Language and Approves the Access Conditions for LGP Teachers to the External Selection Contest (*Decreto-Lei n.º 16/2018, de 7 de março — Cria o grupo de recrutamento da Língua Gestual Portuguesa e aprova as condições de acesso dos docentes da LGP ao concurso externo*)

(8) Law N° 89/1999 of 5 July Defining the Conditions of Access to and Exercise of the Activity of Sign Language Interpreter (*Lei n.º 89/99, de 5 de Julho, Define as condições de acesso e exercício da actividade de intérprete de língua gestual*)

(9) Law N° 38/2004 of 18 August on the Legal Regime for the Prevention, Habilitation, Rehabilitation and Participation of Persons with Disabilities (*Lei n.º 38/2004, de 18 de Agosto, Bases Gerais do Regime Jurídico da Prevenção, Habilitação, Reabilitação e Participação da Pessoa com Deficiência*)

(10) Law N° 27/2007 of 30 July on Television Law and On-Demand Audiovisual Services (*Lei n.º 27/2007, de 30 de Julho – Lei da Televisão e dos Serviços Audiovisuais a Pedido*)

(11) Order No 15568/2013 of 28 November 2013 Establishing the Center for Portuguese Sign Language (*Despacho n.º 15568/2013 – Criação do Núcleo para a Língua Gestual Portuguesa*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 74	“In implementing the education policy, the state is charged with (...) h) Protecting and developing Portuguese sign language, as an expression of culture and an instrument for access to education and equal opportunities.”
	Yes	(3) Art. 4 d)	
	No		
	Yes	(5) Art. 15	
	Yes	(5) Art. 15	
	Yes	(9) Art. 43(1) (8)	

	Yes	(9) Art. 43(1) (10) Art. 34-A	<p>The State and other public and private bodies must provide information on services, resources and benefits available for deaf people in an accessible form, particularly in sign language.</p> <p>However, there is no specific provision on accessibility of broadcast emergency information in LGP.</p>
	Yes	(11)	
Final score	7 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
2. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency information in Portuguese Sign Language.

# Romania

Sign Language	Limba Semnelor Româñă
Abbreviation Sign Language	LSR
Date of Recognition	27 March 2020
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Law
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	24,601
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 26 September 2007 Ratification: 31 January 2011
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 25 September 2008 Ratification: N/A

Romanian Sign Language (*Limba Semnelor Româñă*) was ultimately recognised by the Parliament on 27 March 2020 in the Law no. 27/2020 on Romanian Sign Language (1), as the mother tongue specific to deaf and hard of hearing persons (Article 1).

This language was initially mentioned under the former name of “Mimico-Gestural Language” (*Limbaul Mimico-Gestual*) in an Emergency Ordinance No. 102 of 29 June 1999 on Special Protection and Employment Integration of Persons with Disabilities (2) later replaced by Law No. 519/2002 for the Approval of Government Emergency Ordinance No. 102/1999 on Special Protection and Employment Integration of Persons with Disabilities (3). This law amended Article 15 of the Ordinance by recognising the Mimico-Gestural Language, not specifically Romanian Sign Language, as follows: “At the date of entry of this emergency ordinance, the mimico-gestural language is officially recognised”. Additionally, it grants deaf and deafblind people the right to use this language in contact with public institutions.

Following this initial recognition, the Law no. 448/2006 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (4) was amended to include in its Article 69(3) a provision stating that the Mimico-Gestural Language and the specific language of deafblind persons are officially recognised as specific means of communication for people with hearing disabilities and deafblindness. However, despite the adoption of the Law No. 27/2020 (hereafter “Sign Language Law”), the Law No. 519/2002 previously mentioned is still used as a reference in various legal provisions and regulations, creating a confusion between the former term it uses “Mimico-Gestural Language” and the official name of “Romanian Sign Language”. As of today, the National Association of the Deaf in Romania (ANSR) continues to advocate for the repealing of the Law No. 519/2002.

Article 3 of the Sign Language Law states that the community of Romanian Sign Language (LSR) users constitutes a linguistic and cultural minority, with the right to use, preserve, develop, and maintain deaf culture, and to enrich and pass on their

mother tongue. Deaf and hard of hearing people and their families shall have the option to learn LSR as a first language, from kindergarten through to university, with the Romanian state obliged to provide the necessary means to make this possible (Article 6(1) of the Sign Language Law).

Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons have the right to learn, receive training, and sit school examinations in Romanian Sign Language (LSR), a right guaranteed and ensured by the Romanian State (Article 7(1) of the Sign Language Law). Kindergartens and special schools are required to use LSR and bilingual communication methods in their teaching (Article 7(4) of the Sign Language Law). Deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils taking written Romanian language exams, whether in mainstream or special education, must be provided with teachers proficient in LSR (Article 7(3) of the Sign Language Law). Pupils enrolled in mainstream education also have the right to sit examinations in LSR, provided this is requested in advance (Article 7(2) of the Sign Language Law).

Deaf people have the right to be provided sign language interpretation when taking the driving test and in proceedings before investigative and judicial bodies (Article 8 of the Sign Language Law). And they also have the right to use LSR in their relations with central and local authorities and institutions, either public or private, to exercise their civic rights (Article 5(1) of the Sign Language Law). To achieve it, the authorities and institutions are obliged to provide authorised LSR interpreters free of charge upon request or automatically (Article 5(2) of the Sign Language Law). This is in line with Article 61(f) of the Law no. 448/2006 (4) which states that “In order to ensure disabled persons access to the physical environment, information and communication environment, public authorities shall take the following specific measures: (...) f. ensure authorised interpretation into sign language and the language specific to deafblind people”. “Authorised interpretation” refers to interpreters qualified under Ordinance 1640/2007 approving the Methodology for the Authorisation of Interpreters of Sign Language and Interpreters of the Specific Language of Persons with Deafblindness (5), which recognises the profession of sign language interpreters and sets forth the training programmes, as well as the official authorisation of sign language interpreters. The training and certification of interpreters are carried out through official registers managed by the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (*Autoritatea Națională pentru Persoanele cu Dizabilități*).

In recognising sign language and the profession of sign language interpreters, the Romanian National Association of the Deaf (*Asociația Națională a Surzilor din România, ANSR*) played a key role. The shift from a communist approach to a social model of disability was first reflected in Law 53/1992 on the Special Protection of Disabled Persons (6) and is most prominent in current legislation, which separates deaf people from other disabilities by requiring public institutions to provide sign language interpreters. It has yet to be seen, however, what effect the ratification of the UNCRPD will have on the situation of sign language interpreters, considering Romania has the highest interpreter – deaf sign language user ratio.

## Legislation

(1) Law no. 27/2020 on Romanian Sign Language (*Legea nr. 27/2020 privind limba semnelor române*)

(2) Emergency Ordinance No. 102 of 29 June 1999 on Special Protection and Employment Integration of Persons with Disabilities (*Ordonanță de Urgență nr. 102 din 29 iunie 1999 privind protecția specială și încadrarea în muncă a persoanelor cu handicap*)

(3) Law No. 519/2002 for the Approval of Government Emergency Ordinance No. 102/1999 on Special Protection and Employment Integration of Persons with Disabilities (*Legea nr. 519/2002 din 12 iulie 2002 pentru aprobarea Ordonanței de urgență a Guvernului nr. 102/1999 privind protecția specială și încadrarea în muncă a persoanelor cu handicap*)

(4) Law no. 448/2006 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (*Legea nr. 448/2006 privind protecția și promovarea drepturilor persoanelor cu handicap*)

(5) Ordinance 1640/2007 approving the Methodology for the Authorisation of Interpreters of Sign Language and Interpreters of the Specific Language of Persons with Deafblindness (*Ordin nr. 1.640 din 1 august 2007 pentru aprobarea Metodologiei de autorizare a interpreților limbajului mimico-gestual și a interpreților limbajului specific persoanei cu surdocecitate*)

(6) Law 53/1992 on the Special Protection of Disabled Persons (*Legea nr. 53 din 1 iunie 1992 privind protecția specială a persoanelor handicapate*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 1	Romanian Sign Language is recognised as the mother tongue specific to deaf and/or hard of hearing persons.
	Yes	(1) Art. 5(1)	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of LSR.
	No		
	Yes	(1) Art. 7	
	Yes	(1) Art. 6(1)	However, the teaching of LSR is optional.

		(1) Art. 5 and 8
	Yes	(4) Art. 61(f) (5)
		Deaf and/or hard of hearing people have the right to use LSR in relations with central and local authorities and institutions, public or private, to exercise their civil rights. Central and local authorities and institutions, public or private, are obliged to provide deaf and/or hard of hearing persons with interpreters authorized in the LSR, free of charge. Access to an authorized interpreter in the LSR is granted upon request or ex officio.
	Yes	(1) Art. 5
		Even though in practice, LSR interpretation is provided for official press conferences, e.g. during health crises or national emergencies.
	No	
Final score	6 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Romanian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast information, and especially emergency-related information, in Romanian Sign Language.
4. Establishment of a Romanian Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to Romanian Sign Language.

# Slovakia

Sign Language	Slovenský posunkový jazyk
Abbreviation Sign Language	SPJ
Date of Recognition	26 June 1995
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	3,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 26 September 2007 Ratification: 26 May 2010
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 26 September 2007 Ratification: 26 May 2010

The Slovak Sign Language (SPJ) was recognised on 26 June 1995 by the Act on the Sign Speech of Deaf People (1) although not being specifically named as “Slovak Sign Language”. The term “speech” was understood according to the French meaning of langage. The former Slovak Union of the Hearing Impaired (*Slovenský zväz sluchovo postihnutých*) was mainly involved in drafting this. It took over three years of fighting until the Act was passed in 1995.

Subsequently, in 2017, this Act was amended by the Act amending and supplementing the Act No. 149/1995 on the Sign Language of Deaf Persons and amending and supplementing Act No. 245/2008 on Education and on amending and supplementing certain acts (2), and it included terms such as Slovak Sign Language, Signed Slovak and Sign Speech (Article I(3)). Based on this Act, the right to use sign language was implemented into other legal regulations, such as the Act on Experts, Interpreters, and Translators (382/2004), the Education Act (245/2008), the Social Services Act (448/2008), the Media Services Act (264/2022), among others.

Amended Act No. 149/1995 on the Sign Speech of Deaf Persons (hereafter “Sign Language Act”) states that *“The form of communication by deaf people used in the Slovak Republic is Slovak sign language”* (Section 3(2)) and that deaf persons have the right to use Slovak Sign Language, education in Slovak Sign Language, information using Slovak Sign Language in television broadcasts of public institutions, and access to information of public interest and information relating to the rights of deaf persons (Section 4).

Before the Sign Language Act, sign language was mentioned in the Education Act of 1990. It guaranteed deaf and blind children the right to education in their language, i.e., using sign language or Braille. The current School Act (3) states that “deaf children and pupils are also guaranteed the right to education and training primarily in Slovak Sign Language” (Section 12(4)). Moreover, Section 144(3) of the School Act provides that deaf children and pupils are guaranteed the right to education

in Slovak Sign Language (SPJ) as their natural form of communication. Based on these provisions, the Framework Curriculum for pupils with hearing impairment for primary education and lower secondary education (*Vzdelávací program pre deti a žiakov so sluchovým postihnutím*)<sup>61</sup> foresees that, in the domain of Special Educational Support, among other subjects, Slovak Sign Language is taught for 1–3 hours per week. Other subjects in this domain include Communication Skills and Individual Speech Therapy. Schools may offer a combination of these subjects, up to 3 hours weekly, depending on student needs and parental expectations. Legislative provisions ensure access for deaf children, while such options are not available for hearing children in Slovakia.

Currently, Slovak schools for pupils with hearing impairments mainly use the total communication method, which can include Slovak Sign Language, Signed Slovak, the oral method, and finger signs (one-handed finger alphabet and auxiliary articulatory signs).

Sign language is also enshrined in the Act No. 448/2008 on Social Services (4), which includes a definition of sign language interpretation as “(...) a social service provided to a natural person (...) (who) is dependent on a) sign language interpretation, if they are deaf or have severe bilateral hearing loss and their means of communication is sign language (...)” (Section 44). Furthermore, this Act states that interpretation may be performed by a sign language interpreter, articulatory interpreter or interpreter for deafblind persons according to a special regulation, unless paragraph 11 provides otherwise (Section 84(10)) as follows:

a natural person who is not a sign language interpreter, an articulatory interpreter and an interpreter for the deaf-blind pursuant to a special regulation, may, pursuant to this Act (448/2008), perform (...)

b. interpreting in sign language, if they have at least completed secondary general education or secondary vocational education and have completed an accredited sign language interpreting course of at least 350 hours, of which 280 hours are practical training in this communication, (...)

d. the relevant form of interpretation according to letters a) to c) (...), if they have

1. a first-level or second-level university education in the field of study of special pedagogy focused on the pedagogy of the hearing impaired and has completed an accredited course in the relevant form of interpretation within the scope of practical communication training according to letters a) to c) for the relevant form of interpretation,

2. a first-level university education in the study program Slovak language in communication of the deaf. (Section 84(11))

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<sup>61</sup> [https://www.statpedu.sk/files/sk/svp/statny-vzdelavaci-program/vp-detи-ziakov-so-zdravotnym-znevyhodnenim/vp-detи-ziakov-so-sluchovym-postihnutim/vp\\_sp\\_isced\\_0\\_1\\_2\\_3\\_vp.pdf](https://www.statpedu.sk/files/sk/svp/statny-vzdelavaci-program/vp-detи-ziakov-so-zdravotnym-znevyhodnenim/vp-detи-ziakov-so-sluchovym-postihnutim/vp_sp_isced_0_1_2_3_vp.pdf)

The Act on Slovak Television and Radio (5) states that one of the main responsibilities of the Slovak public broadcaster is to consider the needs of persons with disabilities in its broadcasting (Section 5(1) i)) in line with the Sign Language Act. Although the public broadcaster (RTVS) provides main news broadcasts accessible for deaf people through interpretation in Slovak Sign Language, it does not produce content specifically for the deaf community.

Within the Ministry of Culture, the Department of Living Heritage and Culture of Disadvantaged Population Groups also supports deaf culture.<sup>62</sup>

## Legislation

(1) Act on the Sign Speech of Deaf People (*Zákon Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky č. 149/1995 Z. z. o posunkovej reči nepočujúcich osôb*)

(2) Act amending and supplementing the Act No. 149/1995 on the Sign Language of Deaf Persons and amending and supplementing Act No. 245/2008 on Education and on amending and supplementing certain acts (*Zákon č. 151/2017 Z. z., ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky č. 149/1995 Z. z. o posunkovej reči nepočujúcich osôb a ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní (školský zákon) a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov v znení neskorších predpisov*)

(3) Act on Upbringing and Education (School Act) (*Zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní (školský zákon)*)

(4) Act No. 448/2008 on Social Services (*Zákon č. 448/2008 Z. z. o sociálnych službách*)

(5) Act on Slovak Television and Radio and on the amendment of certain laws (*Zákon č. 157/2024 Z. z. o Slovenskej televízii a rozhlase a o zmene niektorých zákonov*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
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62 <https://www.culture.gov.sk/posobnost-ministerstva/kulturne-dedicstvo/kultura-znevyhodnenych-skupin-obyvatelstva/>

	Yes	(1) §1 and §3	The purpose of the law is to establish the use of sign language as a form of communication for deaf people and thereby ensure the conditions for their application in society.  The form of communication used by deaf people in the Slovak Republic is Slovak Sign Language.
	Yes	(1) §1 and §4	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of SPJ.
	No		However, the Department of Living Heritage and Culture of Disadvantaged Population Groups within the Ministry of Culture also supports deaf culture.
	Yes	(1) §4(b) (3) §12(4) and §144(3)	
	Yes	(1) §4(b) (3) §12(4) and §144(3)	
	Yes	(1) §5	
	Yes	(4) §44 and §84(10) and §84(11)	
	No	(1) §4(c) and §5(1) (5) §5(1) i)	Deaf persons have the right to a sign language interpreter who interprets into or from the state language when solving basic life problems of deaf persons in contact with state authorities, local government authorities and other legal entities and natural persons.  There is no specific provision on accessibility of broadcast emergency information in SPJ.

Final score 6 / 8

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Slovak Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage in a legal or regulatory instrument.
3. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency-related information in Slovak Sign Language.
4. Establishment of a Slovak Sign Language Board or Council, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Slovak Sign Language.

# Slovenia

Sign Language	Slovenski znakovni jezik
Abbreviation Sign Language	SZJ
Dates of Recognition	14 November 2002 and 28 May 2021
Types of Recognition	Sign Language Act and Constitution
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	1,021
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 24 April 2008
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 24 April 2008

Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ) was officially recognised on 14 November 2002 through the Act on the Use of Slovenian Sign Language (1), which states in Article 2: "Slovenian Sign Language is the language of deaf people and their natural means of communication."

Deaf individuals have the right to use Slovenian Sign Language when communicating with public authorities (Article 10). Public authorities are obligated to provide and cover the costs of sign language interpreters (Article 11). Each deaf person is entitled to a maximum of 30 hours of interpretation services per year for their needs. For deaf students requiring additional support, this limit may be extended to up to 100 hours annually (Article 13).

The Act mandates that public authorities provide interpretation services between Slovenian Sign Language and spoken Slovenian. This right also extends to deaf and hearing individuals in areas inhabited by the Italian or Hungarian national communities, ensuring interpretation between spoken and signed Hungarian and Italian languages, as these communities are recognised as autochthonous minorities in Slovenia (Article 4). Article 5 stipulates that sign language interpreters must be certified and registered in the Register of Sign Language Interpreters (further described under Article 6).

The Act establishes the Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Slovenian Sign Language, which is tasked with promoting the development of SZJ, overseeing the training and work of interpreters, and collaborating with authorities in fields such as education, healthcare, social security, justice, pension and disability insurance, employment, sports, culture, and others (Article 24).

On 28 May 2021, the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (2) was amended to include a new Article 62a, which grants constitutional protection to Slovenian Sign Language as well as deafblind language and guarantees the use of Italian and

Hungarian Sign Languages in areas where Italian or Hungarian are also official languages. This article mandates that the use of these languages and the status of their users be regulated by law. As this amendment is relatively recent, its full impact is still unfolding.

A key challenge in implementing both the Act and the constitutional amendment has been the integration of Slovenian Sign Language into education, particularly enabling deaf pupils and students to attend classes in SZJ. Progress has been slow due to lengthy procedures and numerous obstacles, but the constitutional recognition accelerates these efforts. Since an amendment in 2023 in the Elementary School Act (3), primary schools shall provide lessons in sign language and the language of the deafblind to deaf students, students with severe hearing loss and students with deafblindness, in addition to the mandatory subjects in the curriculum (Article 16). Although it provides a legal basis for the use of SZJ in schools for deaf and deafblind students, it does not mandate SZJ as the official language of instruction in all cases. Moreover, the subject of SZJ has been provided as an elective subject since 2019 in elementary schools both for deaf and hearing students as part of the Curriculum for Adapted Basic School Programmes with Equivalent Educational Standard – Slovenian Sign Language (*Učni načrt za prilagojene izobraževalne programe osnovne šole z enakovrednim izobraževalnim standardom – Slovenski znakovni jezik (IZBIRNI PREDMET)*).<sup>63</sup> The first SZJ grammar (2022) supports the educational materials. However, deaf students are still facing barriers in accessing education in SZJ, and further amendments to the Act on the Use of Slovenian Sign Language are needed to mandate its use as a language of instruction.

The Radio and Television Corporation of Slovenia Act (4) and Audiovisual Media Services Act (5) implementing the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2018/1808) require public broadcasters (e.g., RTV Slovenija) to ensure program accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals through subtitles and SZJ interpretation. This is mandatory for at least 70% of content (subtitles) and 2–5% for SZJ interpretation, with annual targets for improvement. The practice has strengthened since 2018, when the EU emphasized greater inclusion. Furthermore, there is no separate legal provision on the access to emergency information in SZJ but the Act on the Use of SZJ and the Regulation on Communications in Emergencies (Office for Civil Protection) mandate SZJ interpretation for state press conferences and alerts (e.g., for health crises like COVID-19 or disasters). The government has provided live SZJ interpretation at all press conferences since 2019, including recordings and online publications (e.g., via the WebTV of the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Slovenia).

Under the scope of the Cultural Heritage Protection Act (6), the Slovenian authorities promote the deaf identity and culture as part of the national cultural heritage and

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<sup>63</sup> [https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MVI/Dokumenti/Osnovna-sola/Ucni-nacrti/izbirni/3-letni-lahko-krajsi/Slovenski\\_znakovni\\_jezik\\_izbirni.pdf](https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MVI/Dokumenti/Osnovna-sola/Ucni-nacrti/izbirni/3-letni-lahko-krajsi/Slovenski_znakovni_jezik_izbirni.pdf)

inscribed SZJ in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia.<sup>64</sup>

Since the adoption of the Act on the Use of Slovenian Sign Language in 2002, the lives of deaf individuals have significantly improved. Society increasingly recognises deaf persons as equal citizens. Access to information across all aspects of life has improved, though further efforts are needed, particularly in adapting television programmes with subtitles and sign language interpreters. While the availability of subtitles and interpretation is increasing, these services are still primarily limited to public television, though they are now gradually expanding to major private broadcasters.

## Legislation

- (1) Act on the Use of Slovenian Sign Language (*Zakon o uporabi slovenskega znakovnega jezika*)
- (2) Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (*Ustava Republike Slovenije*)
- (3) Elementary School Act (*Zakon o osnovni šolni, ZOsn*)
- (4) Radio and Television Corporation of Slovenia Act (*Zakon o Radioteleviziji Slovenija, ZRTVS-1*)
- (5) Audiovisual Media Services Act (*Zakon o audiovizualnih medijskih storitvah, ZAvMS*)
- (6) Cultural Heritage Protection Act (*Zakon o varstvu kulturne dediščine, ZVKD*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 and 2 (2) Art. 62a	Sign language is the language of communication for deaf people, or a natural means of communication for deaf people. The free use and development of Slovenian Sign Language is guaranteed.
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 and 10	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of SZJ.
	No		However, the Slovenian Sign Language is inscribed in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia.

<sup>64</sup> [http://www.nesnovnadediscina.si/sites/default/files/registrnkdd\\_2023\\_web\\_1.pdf](http://www.nesnovnadediscina.si/sites/default/files/registrnkdd_2023_web_1.pdf)

	Yes	(3) Art. 16
	Yes	(3) Art. 16
	Yes	(1) Art. 4 to 9 and 12 to 16
	Yes	(1) Art. 10 (4) Art. 4(1) and 24(3) (5) Art. 14a
		A deaf person has the right to use sign language in procedures before state bodies, local self-government bodies, public authority providers or public service providers.
	Yes	(1) Art. 24 to 27
Final score	7 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Slovenian Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage in a legal or regulatory instrument.
3. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency-related information in Slovenian Sign Language.

# Spain

Sign Languages	Lengua de Signos Española & Lengua de Signos Catalana
Abbreviation Sign Languages	LSE, LSC
Date of Recognition	23 October 2007
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Law
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	100,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 03 December 2007
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 03 December 2007

The Spanish Sign Language and the Catalan Sign Language have been recognised on 23 October 2007 by the Law 27/2007 recognising Spanish sign languages and regulating means of support for the oral communication of deaf persons, persons with hearing disabilities and deafblind persons (1). This Law includes provisions related to these sign languages that have been incorporated into state and regional legislation in different areas such as education, health, employment, lifelong learning, criminal law, civil law, universal accessibility, disability and dependency, gender violence, electoral processes, audiovisual communication, access to public services, etc.

The Law 27/2007 recognises Spanish sign languages in its Article 1 (Objectives of the law) and its Article 2 grants the right to deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind persons to freely choose to learn, to know and to use Spanish sign languages. Its Chapter I regulates the right of deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind pupils to learn Spanish sign languages in education as well as to choose freely for bilingual education models in specifically designed schools by the authorities for this purpose. Moreover, those schools may provide Spanish sign languages as an optional subject for all pupils. Chapter II sets out the specific obligations of public entities and some service providers to ensure accessibility for deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind persons by providing sign language interpretation across key areas of public life, including (higher) education, training and employment, healthcare, culture, transport, justice, and political participation. It also mandates that public information, such as health campaigns, messages of public interest, media broadcasts, public websites, and State alert messages must be made fully accessible to them. Finally, the Law 27/2007 establishes, in its Article 15, the creation of a Centre for the Linguistic Normalisation of the Spanish Sign Language (*Centro de Normalización Lingüística de la Lengua de Signos Española*).

This Article 15 of the Law was updated through Royal Decree 921/2010, of 16 July 2010 which modifies the Statute of the Royal Board on Disability to regulate the

Centre for Linguistic Normalisation of Spanish Sign Language (2), specifying its role in research, awareness raising and the appropriate use of Spanish Sign Language.

Since Spain is organised into 17 Autonomous Communities, there are a number of regional laws that regulate and recognise Spanish and Catalan Sign Languages. For example:

- The Organic Law 6/2006, of 19 July, on the Reform of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (3), which recognises Catalan Sign Language in its Article 50.6, ensuring its protection and promotion.
- The Law 17/2010, of 3 June, on Catalan Sign Language (4), which also recognises Catalan Sign Language, detailing provisions across all areas, including public administration and education (Articles 2 and 4). Article 5 establishes that parents must be provided with information regarding the use of sign language and educational possibilities, ensuring free choice.

Other Autonomous Communities also recognise Spanish Sign Language in their Statutes of Autonomy: a total of eight regional statutes currently include explicit references to it. In addition, the General Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion revised by a Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013, of 29 November (5) expressly includes sign language within the accessibility and non-discrimination framework, recognising its provision as a support service.

The Centre for Linguistic Normalisation of Spanish Sign Language, as a public institution, is already a key and consolidated reference for Public Administrations in all matters relating to Spanish Sign Language. In Catalonia, the Catalan Sign Language Social Council serves as a body for advice, consultation and social participation in the Government's language policy in relation to sign language. Both Spanish Sign Language (LSE) and Catalan Sign Language (LSC) are taken into account in public budgets; society's knowledge of and interest in these languages has increased; and there is a growing willingness, in both the public and private sectors, to guarantee accessibility in sign language. In addition, more autonomous communities wish to have their own sign language law or include it in their Statutes of Autonomy, as others have already done.

Progress in legislation does not always imply improvements in the public budgets allocated to implement the rights recognised in the different laws. There is also a lack of strong sanctions in case of non-compliance. Public tenders to manage interpretation services and to provide sign language courses in the public sphere tend to favour the lowest economic offer, which affects the quality of services. Other challenges include the shortage of university degrees to train sign language professionals in Spain, the disparity in access to sign language across regions, and the difficulty of establishing and consolidating early care and sign language education for deaf children.

In Spain, it is necessary that Spanish and Catalan Sign Languages be included in Article 3 of the Spanish Constitution (on official and co-official languages) and that

universal accessibility be recognised in this norm as a fundamental right.

Furthermore, in Spain, by constitutional mandate, the recognition of rights should be governed by an organic law and not by an ordinary law, as established in Article 81 of the Constitution. Law 27/2007, in its content, concerns fundamental rights such as the right to education and the right of access to information; therefore, the recognition of the law and of the rights to knowledge and use of sign language should have been included in an organic law.

Any legislation in favour of sign languages must be accompanied by adequate public budgets, a sanction system for non-compliance, be part of all public policies carried out, and treat these languages as what they are: languages, with the same consideration as other official languages, as well as from the perspective of universal accessibility.

Recent legislative advances have brought two key milestones:

- Royal Decree 674/2023, of 18 July, which approves the regulation for the development of Law 27/2007 (6). In its preamble, this regulation:
  - o Recognises that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines “language” not only as spoken language but also as sign languages and other non-verbal forms of communication, and that Article 21 enshrines the right of deaf, hard-of-hearing and deafblind people to seek, receive and impart information on an equal basis with others, using the form of communication of their choice.
  - o States that Spanish Sign Language is not only a means of communication but also an identity marker and symbolic capital of the linguistic community that uses it, with biological, cultural, social and historical foundations.
  - o Affirms that the linguistic rights of deaf, hard-of-hearing and deafblind people include the right to learn, know and use Spanish Sign Language as a means of accessibility to information and communication.
  - o Establishes the free choice of language for these persons, between Spanish Sign Language and spoken language with communication support measures, stressing that this choice is not exclusive and that both can be used depending on the situation and context.
  - o Introduces a specific title dedicated to deafblindness, recognising the particular situation of this group, their specific communication systems, and the need for support measures and augmentative and alternative resources.
  - o Reinforces the enforceability of the rights recognised in Law 27/2007 through provisions directly applicable to daily life.

- o Regulates the provision of sign language interpretation, among other communication services, and requires public administrations to promote the training of professionals in Spanish Sign Language.
- Royal Decree 155/2024, of 6 February, which declares deaf culture and Spanish Sign Language as a Representative Manifestation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (7). This recognition elevates the status of LSE as a cultural asset, ensuring its protection, promotion, and intergenerational transmission.

Although there is no national mandatory registry of certified interpreters, the Royal Decree 674/2023 foresees that the competent Ministry will promote a national system of professional accreditation. In the meantime, regional administrations and professional administrations (such as the Spanish National Association of the Deaf - CNSE and the National Network of Sign Language Interpreters and Deafblind Guides) maintain lists of qualified professionals based on official educational requirements.

## Legislation

- (1) Law 27/2007 recognising Spanish sign languages and regulating means of support for the oral communication of deaf persons, persons with hearing disabilities and deafblind persons (*Ley 27/2007, de 23 de octubre, por la que se reconocen las lenguas de signos españolas y se regulan los medios de apoyo a la comunicación oral de las personas sordas, con discapacidad auditiva y sordociegas*)
- (2) Royal Decree 921/2010, of 16 July 2010, which modifies the Statute of the Royal Board on Disability to regulate the Centre for Linguistic Normalisation of Spanish Sign Language (*Real Decreto 921/2010, de 16 de julio, por el que se modifica el Estatuto del Real Patronato sobre Discapacidad aprobado por el Real Decreto 946/2001, de 3 de agosto, para regular el Centro de Normalización Lingüística de la Lengua de Signos Española*)
- (3) Organic Law 6/2006, of 19 July, on the Reform of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (*Llei orgànica 6/2006, de 19 de juliol, de reforma de l'Estatut d'autonomia de Catalunya*)
- (4) Law 17/2010, of 3 June, on Catalan Sign Language (*Llei 17/2010, del 3 de juny, de la llengua de signes catalana*)
- (5) Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013, of 29 November (*Real Decreto Legislativo 1/2013, de 29 de noviembre, por el que se aprueba el Texto Refundido de la Ley General de derechos de las personas con discapacidad y de su inclusión social*)
- (6) Royal Decree 674/2023, of 18 July, which approves the regulation for the development of Law 27/2007 (*Real Decreto 674/2023, de 18 de julio, por el que se*

aprueba el Reglamento de las condiciones de utilización de la lengua de signos española y de los medios de apoyo a la comunicación oral para las personas sordas, con discapacidad auditiva y sordociegas)

(7) Royal Decree 155/2024, of 6 February, which declares Deaf Culture and Spanish Sign Language as a Representative Manifestation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Real Decreto 155/2024, de 6 de febrero, por el que se declaran las expresiones culturales vinculadas a la cultura sorda y la lengua de signos española como Manifestación Representativa del Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Art. 1 (3) Art. 50.6 (4) Art. 1 and 2	The purpose of this Law is to recognise and regulate Spanish Sign Language as well as to recognise Catalan Sign Language as the language of deaf persons who freely choose to use them. The public authorities must guarantee the use of Catalan Sign Language and the conditions that enable equality for deaf persons who choose this language.
	Yes	(1) Art. 2, 3(2) and 9(2) (3) Art. 50.6	Explicit right to use the Spanish sign languages in all public and private spheres and explicit principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of LSE and LSC.
	Yes	(7)	
	Yes	(1) Art. 7 and 10 a) (4) Art. 5 (6) Art. 12 a)	
	Yes	(1) Art. 7 and 8 (3) Art. 50.6 (4) Art. 5 (6) Art. 9 and 10	For deaf learners, any learner in the school where deaf learners are enrolled, and their family members as well as anyone in other social contexts.
	Yes	(1) Art. 4(i), 4(j), 10 to 14, fourth additional provision (4) Art. 4, 7 and 8 (6) Art. 12 to 15	Even though there is no national mandatory registry, the Royal Decree (6) foresees that the competent Ministry will promote a national system of professional accreditation. Including promote public administration personnel to learn Catalan Sign Language to guarantee the right to use it in services it provides.

			<p>The competent public administrations shall promote the provision of interpreter services in Spanish sign language and/or in the sign languages of the autonomous communities, if any, when requested in advance, for users, in order to facilitate relations of deaf persons with public administrations.</p>
	Yes	(1) Art. 12 to 14 (6) Art. 16	<p>The Spanish Parliament (Cortes Generales), the Legislative Assemblies of the Autonomous Communities, Provincial Councils, and Local Corporations and Entities shall promote interpretation in Spanish sign language and/or in the sign languages of the autonomous communities, if any, at public plenary sessions and at other meetings of general interest determined for this purpose, when there is participation of deaf persons and when requested in advance.</p> <p>Messages relating to the declaration of states of alarm, emergency, or siege, as well as institutional messages, must be fully accessible to them.</p>
	Yes	(1) Art. 15 (2) (4) Art. 11	<p>The Governing Council of the CNLSE is composed of representatives from the General State Administration and the linguistic community of Spanish Sign Language and its purpose is to advise the Spanish Government and public administrations on matters related to the research, use, dissemination and teaching of Spanish Sign Language as well as on the protection of linguistic rights of its users. In Catalonia, the Catalan Sign Language Social Council serves as a body for advice, consultation and social participation in the Government's language policy in relation to sign language.</p>

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Final score 8 / 8

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## Recommendations

Since all minimal requirements have been met in accordance with the assessed legal and regulatory provisions, no specific recommendations are necessary.

# Sweden

Sign Language	Svenskt Teckenspråk
Abbreviation Sign Language	STS
Date of Recognition	1 July 2009
Type of Recognition	Language Act
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	10,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 15 December 2008
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 15 December 2008

On 14 May 1981, the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdagen*) adopted the Bill 1980/81:100 for the State budget for the fiscal year 1981/82 (1). The Bill, containing Annex 12 from the Ministry of Education, recognised that Swedish Sign Language (STS) should be regarded as the first language of the deaf, while Swedish (spoken and written) constitutes their second language, and that deaf pupils should receive bilingual education with sign language as the main medium of communication. This recognition was symbolic and further consolidated through subsequent legislation.

Swedish Sign Language was formally recognised on 1 July 2009 in the Language Act (2), which contains provisions on Swedish, the national minority languages, and Swedish Sign Language (Section 1). The Language Act is subordinate to other laws, which is why they take precedence. Section 9 states: “The public sector has a particular responsibility to protect and promote Swedish Sign Language.” Section 14 states that deaf people have to be given the opportunity to “learn, develop, and use Swedish Sign Language”. Section 15 states that the “public sector is responsible for ensuring that the individual is given access to language in accordance with Section 14”.

Swedish Sign Language is also mentioned in educational legislation. The Education Act (3) for example includes sign language in education as a subject (Chapter 12(4)). Moreover, the Education Act stipulates that teaching for deaf pupils should be conducted in sign language. The regulation requires that teachers are licensed/trained in teaching subjects/grades. As a result, schools often employ hearing teachers without sign language proficiency, relying instead on sign language interpreters. It is a challenge for the Swedish Deaf Association (SDR) to demand sign language skills at the same time as teacher competence.

The Decree on Primary Schools (4) states that pupils with sign language as the language of instruction will be taught Swedish as a second language (Chapter 2(18)). Chapter 3(10) on the Decree on Special Schools (5) requires schools to arrange instruction in the mother tongue (including sign language) if there are at least three pupils in the

school who choose the language. The Decree on Secondary Schools (6) lists Swedish Sign Language as an optional foreign language for hearing students. The Decree on Universities (7), which came into effect on 1 July 2011, states that sign language may be taught in subject teacher training programmes under supplemental material 4 (Chapter 7(18)). The Ordinance 2021:1335 on Education for Teachers and Preschool Teachers (8) mentions sign language as one of the possible subjects in combination with other subjects in teacher education, thus not as a standalone subject, and only as part of the teacher education programme for upper grades. Lastly, the Decree on Municipal Adult Education (9) grants deaf students the right to receive instruction on sign language as a core subject upon decision of the principal (Chapter 2(19)).

Another decree mentioning sign language is the Decree on Governmental Allowance for Instruction in Sign Language for Certain Parents (10), which requires the government to pay for the teaching of sign language to parents whose children require sign language (Section 1). Section 2 further describes the necessity of this provision: “Teaching sign language to parents shall aim at giving parents competence to communicate fluently with their children in sign language and therefore promote the development of the children.” Section 4 requires teachers to be adequately trained, and Section 5 also grants rights to siblings regarding the learning of sign language. Section 6 then states that sign language education needs to be provided before the child reaches school age (i.e. before 7 in Sweden).

Moreover, within the framework of the Education Act (3), Swedish Sign Language is referenced in the Preschool Curriculum 2018 (*Läroplan för förskolan, Lpfö 18*).<sup>65</sup> Although sign language is explicitly mentioned, the curriculum does not guarantee access to it. Instead, it is addressed in terms of ‘promoting’ its use, yet it remains important to ensure its full inclusion in the curriculum. Under Chapter 1 on preschool’s values and assignments, it is stated that “For deaf children, children with hearing loss and children who for other reasons need sign language, language development should be promoted in the Swedish sign language. (...)"

Deaf persons shall be provided access to sign language interpretation and translation when in contact with an authority under the Administrative Procedure Act (11) as follows: “An authority must use an interpreter and ensure that documents are translated if necessary in order for the individual to be able to take advantage of his or her right when the authority is in contact with someone who does not speak Swedish. Under the same conditions, an authority shall use an interpreter and make the content of documents available when it is in contact with someone with a disability that severely restricts the ability to see, hear or speak.” (Section 13)

The profession of sign language interpreters is regulated by a framework of which the Swedish Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (*Kammarkollegiet*) functions as the supervisory authority, under application of the Ordinance on Authorisation of Interpreters and Translators (12), the Regulations on Authorised

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65 <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/forskolan/laroplan-lpfo-18-for-forskolan>

Interpreters (13), and the Good Interpreting Practice Guidelines (*God tolksed*). Since the system for authorisation of interpreters are under review for improvement by the Kammarkollegiet, the Swedish Deaf Association (*Sveriges Dövas Riksförbund*) has been actively contributing through the submission of a consultation response. It notably continues to advocate for Deaf Interpreters to get authorisation as well.

The Value Added Tax Act (14) regulates how much VAT must be paid for material that has been translated into sign language (Chapter 9(12)).

According to the Swedish Radio and Television Act (15) requires media services providers to design the service in such a way that it is accessible to persons with disabilities, including through sign language interpretation (Chapter 5(12)) and when it sends messages of public importance they shall be designed as soon as possible to be accessible to persons with disabilities (Chapter 5(12a)). Messages of public importance include warning messages in times of accidents, serious incidents and disruptions of critical societal functions, and accessibility for persons with disabilities include sign language interpretation according to Government Bill 2019/20:168 revising the Act (16). Furthermore, the Government Inquiry SOU 2024:34 proposes that Sveriges Radio (SR) be given a specific obligation to ensure that public warning messages (VMA) are designed to be accessible to persons with disabilities. Despite these provisions, there is still no clear mechanism in place to guarantee access to public warning messages and crisis information in Swedish Sign Language, even in view of the upcoming public service broadcasting license period from 2026 to 2033.

The Sign Language Department of the Institute for Language and Folklore (*Institutet för språk och folkminnen*) is responsible for language planning and development of Swedish Sign Language. It provides advice and recommendations, conducts research, compiles dictionaries, and disseminates knowledge about the language and its development. Its work is regulated by the Regulation with instructions for the Institute for Language and Folklore (17).<sup>66</sup>

Even though the Swedish Sign Language is recognised by the Language Act as one of Sweden's languages, it is not yet implemented in practice, hence the longstanding demand of the Swedish Deaf Association for an equal status of the Swedish Sign Language as the one accorded to the Sámi language.

## Legislation

(1) Bill 1980/81:100 for the State budget for the fiscal year 1981/82 (*Proposition 1980/81:100 med förslag till statsbudget för budgetåret 1981/82*)

(2) Language Act (Språklag 2009:600)

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66 <https://www.isof.se/svenskt-teckenspråk>

(3) Education Act (*Skollag 2010:800*)

(4) Decree on Primary Schools (*Grundskoleförordning 1994:1194*)

(5) Decree on Special Schools (*Speciaskoleförordning 1995:401*)

(6) Decree on Secondary Schools (*Gymnasieförordning 1992:394*)

(7) Decree on Universities (*Högskoleförordning 1993:100*)

(8) Ordinance 2021:1335 on Education for Teachers and Preschool Teachers (*Förordning (2021:1335) om utbildning till lärare och förskollärare*)

(9) Decree on Municipal Adult Education (*Förordning om kommunal vuxenutbildning 2002:1012*)

(10) Decree on Governmental Allowance for Instruction in Sign Language for Certain Parents (*Förordning om statsbidrag för teckenspråksutbildning för vissa föräldrar 1997:1158*)

(11) Administrative Procedure Act (*Förvaltningslag 2017:900*)

(12) Ordinance on Authorisation of Interpreters and Translators (*Förordning (1986:613) om auktorisation av tolkar och översättare*)

(13) Regulations on Authorised Interpreters (*Kammarkollegiets föreskrifter om auktoriserade tolkar (KAMFS 2021:2)*)

(14) Value Added Tax Act (*Mervärdesskattelag 2023:200*)

(15) Swedish Radio and Television Act (*Radio- och tv-lag 2010:696*)

(16) Government Bill 2019/20:168 revising the Act (*Regeringens proposition 2019/20:168 En moderniserad radio- och tv-lag*)

(17) Regulation (2007:1181) with instructions for the Institute of Language and Folklore (*Förordning (2007:1181) med instruktion för Institutet för språk och folkminnen*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(1) Annex 12 (2) Sections 1 and 9	

	Yes	(2) Sections 14 and 15	However, there is no explicit prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of STS.
	No		
	Yes	(2) Section 14 (4) Chapter 2(18) (5) Chapter 3(10)	
	Yes	(2) Section 14 (3) Chapter 12(4) (6) Chapter 9(1), Chapter 9(6) (7) Chapter 7(18) (8) Chapter 4(2) and (4) (9) Chapter 2(19) (10)	Including Swedish Sign Language lessons for the parents of deaf children.
	Yes	(11) Section 13 (12) Section 1 (13)	
	Yes	(15) Chapter 5(12) and (12a) (16)	
	Yes	(17) Section 2(1)	
Final score		7 / 8	

## Recommendations

1. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of Swedish Sign Language to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as an integral part of the national cultural heritage in a legal or regulatory instrument.

# Switzerland

Sign Languages	Gebärdensprache Langue des Signes Francaise Lingua dei Segni Italiana
Abbreviation Sign Languages	DSGS, LSF and LIS
Date of Recognition	N/A
Type of Recognition	N/A
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	Swiss – Italian: 500 Swiss – French (Romande): 2,750 Swiss – German: 6,750
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: N/A Ratification: 15 April 2014
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature: N/A Ratification: N/A

The Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation, in its Article 18, guarantees the freedom to use any language, although sign language is not explicitly mentioned. Among the 26 cantons in Switzerland, at least two have recognised sign languages in their constitutions or through legislation.

On 1 January 2006, an amendment to the Constitution of the Canton of Zürich (1) included sign language in Article 12 stating that “The freedom of languages also includes sign language”. Other languages, apart from German which is the official language of the canton (Art. 48), are not mentioned. Legally, this aligns with the federal constitution, which already protects linguistic freedom in the private sphere, but symbolically, it represented a significant step forward.

During the 2012 referendum on the new Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Geneva (2), the recognition of sign language was included, as noted in the official explanatory document for voters. Since the new Constitution entered into force on 1 June 2013, this provision, as part of the article on the rights of persons with disabilities, has been incorporated as follows: “Sign language is recognised” (Art. 16).

The Federal Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against People with Disabilities (3) provides for sign language interpreters in official contexts. Article 14 mentions sign language explicitly: “The Confederation may support cantonal measures to promote the academic and professional education and training of persons with speech or hearing disabilities in sign and spoken language and to promote the language skills of persons with visual disabilities”. This provision is controversial, as it is part of federal legislation and education falls usually under the responsibility of the cantons. Educational legislation in the individual cantons does not mention sign language at

all and bilingual education/education in sign language is largely not provided for. Originally, it was planned to incorporate sign language in a language law but as the passing of this language law was delayed, it was decided to include provisions for deaf people in disability legislation.

In 2019, four Members of the Swiss Parliament, representing different political parties, instructed the Federal Council to assess the possibilities for the legal recognition of Swiss sign languages and to prepare a report outlining concrete measures to promote equal opportunities for deaf people, particularly in education, employment, and access to public services. The Federal Bureau for the Equality of Persons with Disabilities began work on the report in 2020. The Swiss Federation of the Deaf (SGB-FSS) was consulted at the initial stages of the official process and provided information on the possibilities for legal recognition of sign languages as well as on the everyday challenges faced by deaf people. In autumn 2021, the Federal Council published the final report, which presents the history of deaf people in Switzerland, outlines current governmental measures to improve their situation, and sets out six possible approaches for the legal recognition of the three national sign languages.<sup>67</sup> Following a popular initiative for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, submitted in September 2024 with over 100,000 signatures,<sup>68</sup> the Federal Council presented in June 2025 an indirect counterproposal. This included a draft revision of the Disability Equality Law, addressing the recognition of Swiss sign languages under a proposed new Section 3a.<sup>69</sup> In August 2025, the Committee for Science, Education and Culture of the National Council (CSEC-N) decided to divide the draft revision into two parts: one concerning the general revision of the Disability Equality Law, and another establishing a separate legislative process dedicated to the recognition of Swiss sign languages, for which the Federal Administration was tasked with preparing the preliminary work.<sup>70</sup> The CSEC-N postponed the detailed examination of this matter to the first half of 2026.

The Swiss Federation of the Deaf will actively accompany the process towards the recognition of sign languages and remains in close consultation with the deaf community, political representatives, and partner organisations.

## Legislation

(1) Constitution of the Canton of Zürich (*Verfassung des Kantons Zürich*)

(2) Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Geneva (*Constitution de la*

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67 <https://www.news.admin.ch/fr/nsb?id=85249>

68 <https://www.inklusions-initiative.ch/>

69 <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/fga/2025/301/fr>

70 <https://www.sgb-fss.ch/fr/aktuell/la-commission-parlementaire-reporter-le-debat-sur-la-reconnaissance-des-langues-des-signes/>

*République et canton de Genève du 14 octobre 2012)*

(3) Federal Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against People with Disabilities (*Bundesgesetz über die Beseitigung von Benachteiligungen von Menschen mit Behinderungen, BehiG*)

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	No	(1) Art. 12 (2) Art. 16	Only at the canton level in the Canton of Zürich and in the Canton of Geneva.
	No		
	No		
	No		
	Yes	(3) Art. 14	
	Yes	(3) Art. 14	However, there are no specific measures on sign language provision in broadcasting programmes, especially on emergency information.
	No		
Final score	2 / 8		

## Recommendations

1. Recognising the Swiss sign languages as languages of their own right at the Confederal level.
2. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as a part of the national cultural heritage.
3. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of the Swiss sign Languages to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
4. Establishment of a legal framework recognising the Swiss sign languages as language subjects and languages of instruction for deaf learners.
5. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of Swiss sign languages' interpreters.

6. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency-related information in the Swiss sign languages.
7. Ensuring access to information from public authorities and enabling accessible communication with public services in the Swiss sign languages.
8. Establishment of Swiss sign languages' Boards or Councils, with a diverse composition including deaf sign language users, to advise the government on matters related to the Swiss sign languages.

# United Kingdom

Sign Language	British Sign Language
Abbreviation Sign Language	BSL
Dates of Recognition	17 September 2015 (Scotland) and 27 April 2022 (England, Scotland & Wales)
Type of Recognition	Sign Language Acts
Number of Deaf Sign Language Users	87,000
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Signature: 30 March 2007 Ratification: 8 June 2009
Optional Protocol to the CRPD	Signature 26 February 2009 Ratification: 7 August 2009

British Sign Language (BSL) was first recognised non-legislatively as a language in its own right by the Department for Work and Pension, on behalf of the British Government, in a press release on 18 March 2003. It states: “The Government recognises that British Sign Language (BSL) is a language in its own right regularly used by a significant number of people. For an estimated 70,000 deaf people it is their preferred language for participation in everyday life. BSL is a visual-gestural language with its own vocabulary, grammar and syntax.”<sup>71</sup> This recognition was preceded by a number of BSL marches and a petition, as well as a campaign and workshops to encourage citizens to contact their local MPs for support (UK Council on Deafness 2003). The British Deaf Association (BDA) and the UK Council of Deafness were both involved in the process of getting BSL officially recognised. After consultation with the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) a recommendation was issued in 2001, and finally the aforementioned press release achieved *de facto* but not *de jure* recognition of BSL.

The Equality Act (1) is the main source of anti-discrimination legislation in England, Scotland, and Wales. Although not explicitly mentioning sign language, it *de facto* ensures that services, such as sign language interpretation, are provided for deaf people as part of “reasonable adjustments”. The same applies to the former Disability Discrimination Act (2) and amended in 2005, which was largely repealed by the Equality Act (1) and which remains in force in Northern Ireland.

The British Sign Language has in the meantime been recognised legislatively in Scotland through the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (3) as well as in England, Scotland and Wales through the British Sign Language Act (4).<sup>72</sup>

Following a public consultation on a Proposal for a Bill to make BSL an official

71 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-statements/2003/mar/18/british-sign-language>

72 <https://business.senedd.wales/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Id=46256>

language of Scotland was launched in July 2010, the Bill stated that although there was de facto recognition of BSL in 2003, it was lacking legal protection to ensure full access to information, education, and other areas of life for deaf people. On 17 September 2015, the Scottish Parliament adopted the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (3), which was given Royal Assent on 22 October 2015. This Act enforces public bodies/authorities to produce national plans by consulting with local deaf communities across Scotland. The Scottish Government launched its National Plan 2023-2029 focusing on ten priority areas with emphasis on children, young people and their families, health and wellbeing, celebrating deaf culture and tackling accessibility for BSL users that impacts on a number of areas such as transport, democratic participation and access to justice.<sup>73</sup>

As a result of a successful BSL Act Now! Campaign led by the British Deaf Association (BDA) in close collaboration with other deaf organisations, the British Sign Language Act (4) was adopted on 27 April 2022 in the Parliament and secured Royal Assent on 28 April 2022. This Act recognises British Sign Language as “a language of England, Wales and Scotland” (Section 1(1)). This Act requires the Secretary of State to periodically report on BSL describing what each relevant government department has done to promote or facilitate the use of BSL in its communications with the public (Section 2). Furthermore, it requires guidance on the promotion and facilitation of the use of BSL to be issued (Section 3). In October 2023 the Government Communication Service launched a guidance on delivering BSL content.<sup>74</sup> The latest BSL report has been issued for the period of May 2024 to April 2025 by the British Government and includes a 5-year BSL Plan from each ministerial department setting out how they plan to improve the use of BSL within their departments.<sup>75</sup>

In Northern Ireland, since the British Sign Language Act (4) is not applicable, the Disability Discrimination Act (2) remains the main piece of legislation protecting the rights of deaf people even though it does not recognise or reference BSL as a language. However, the Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) (5) was introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 10 February 2025 and completed its Second Stage, and it is now undergoing scrutiny at the Committee Stage, where evidence is being gathered before it proceeds to the next legislative steps. This Bill, based on the Northern Ireland Sign Language Framework supported by the Government,<sup>76</sup> recognises BSL and Irish Sign Language as languages of Northern Ireland.

Even though the scope of application of the BSL Act (4) covers Wales, the Welsh Parliament is currently progressing its own British Sign Language (Wales) Bill (6) to strengthen the legal status and promotion of British Sign Language within devolved areas such as education, health, and public services. This Bill was introduced on 14 July 2025 and is at the moment at Stage 1 in the Senedd’s legislative process.

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73 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/bsl-national-plan-2023-2029/>

74 <https://www.communications.gov.uk/news/guidance-published-on-delivering-british-sign-language-content/>

75 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-sign-language-bsl-third-report-may-2024-to-april-2025>

76 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/sign-language>

As part of the implementation of the BSL Act 2022, the BSL Advisory Board met for the first time in May 2023 and has continued to meet periodically since. Even though the establishment of the Board is not legally required by the Act, it became a settled entity supported by the Disability Unit (as part of the Cabinet Office). In Scotland, a similar National Advisory Group (NAG) has been established after the BSL (Scotland) Act of 2015 and oversaw the design and implementation of the first National Plan for BSL, but has since ceased to exist. In June 2025, an enquiry run by the Scottish Parliament's Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee recommended that the NAG be re-established.

A number of Acts mention sign language or sign language interpreters as well as specifically British Sign Language.

The Broadcasting Act (7) c. 55 in its section 20(2)(c) on the “assistance” for deaf people mentions “presentation in, or translation into, sign language”. Section 21 requires broadcasters to provide a certain percentage of programmes in sign language. The Communications Act (8) requires in Section 303 that OFCOM (the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries) to draw up and, periodically, to revise a code giving guidance on the access services for deaf and hard of hearing people, among other groups of persons with disabilities. Under this framework, the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT) was set up in 2008 to commission BSL-led TV programming to ensure the inclusion of some BSL programming on TV. Following a 2019 public consultation conducted by OFCOM on the access services (including in-vision sign language interpretation), it launched in 2023 a statement reviewing Ofcom’s Code on Television Access Services and Guidance on BBC Accessibility as well as set out changes to improve the clarity of the Code for all broadcasters.<sup>77</sup> The revised Code strengthened expectations and guidance on how broadcasters should address access services including sign language.

The Mental Capacity Act (9) explains that a person is unable to make a decision for himself “if he is unable to communicate his decision [...] using sign language” (Chapter 9, Section 3(1)(d) and (2)).

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (10) grants the right to deaf people to sit as jurors with the provision of BSL interpreters (Part 13) thereby amending the Juries Act 1974. This achievement followed 23 years of lobbying by the BDA and judicial review pre-action submitted to the Ministry of Justice. Regarding the rights of deaf persons in police custody, in criminal procedures, different legal instruments and frameworks exist among the different nations of the United Kingdom but none of them refer explicitly to their specific linguistic rights (Equality Act 2010, Human Rights Act 1998, Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016). However, in England and Wales, the ‘PACE Code C: Code of Practice for the Detention, Treatment and Questioning of Persons by Police Officers’ provides the operational rules for police.

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-2-6-weeks/178126-review-of-access-services-code/associated-documents/tv-access-services-code-revisions.pdf?v=325913>

The Code states that a person must not be interviewed in a police station unless an interpreter is present if they are deaf and the officer considers an interpreter is necessary for them to communicate properly with their legal representative. Deaf detainees must be visited in their cell by a senior officer at regular intervals to check on their treatment and conditions. The use of an interpreter must be noted in the custody record. In Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) Code of Practice for the Welfare of Persons in Police Custody, which explicitly includes deafness and the need for a BSL/English interpreter as part of underlining that the police must “ensure that appropriate arrangements are made to assist communication” with any person who has communication difficulties. Like PACE, it requires this to be recorded in the custody record. Moreover, the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) developed comprehensive BSL plans for 2018-2024<sup>78</sup> and 2024-2030,<sup>79</sup> which set out objectives and actions to enhance access to justice for BSL users and align with the goals of the National BSL Plan.

Under the framework of the Equality Act (1) and the Care Act (11), the National Health Service (NHS) Accessible Information Standard (AIS) was developed to guarantee equitable access to health information for persons with disabilities, including deaf persons, in BSL.<sup>80</sup> It provides definition of deaf persons, describes the British Sign Language, and clarifies that deaf persons shall be provided with qualified registered BSL interpreters. There are also other legal developments that explicitly mention sign language and aim at ensuring access to it, such as the current Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill which requires using interpreters to ensure effective communication with persons seeking assistance, including deaf persons.<sup>81</sup>

Although the right of deaf persons to sign language interpretation is ensured in several legal instruments, there is no statutory recognition yet governing access to the profession of BSL/English interpreting and translation even though the National Registers of Communication Professionals with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) pressed for it for many years.

Regarding the provision of BSL as a language of instruction for deaf children, there is no legal act or regulation stipulating this obligation. In Scotland, following the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015, the recent Education (Scotland) Act (12) focused largely on reforming schools’ inspectorate and examinations systems and included a number of BSL amendments designed to underline parallels between BSL and Scottish Gaelic. It encompasses both the teaching of BSL to, and learning of the language by, pupils to whom education is provided primarily by means of English language (under “BSL learner education”) and the teaching and learning by means of BSL (under “BSL medium education”) (Section 63 (1)).

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78 <https://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/media/zykiil0rn/scts-bsl-plan.pdf>

79 <https://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/media/ccjc4ajk/bsl-plan-2024-2030.pdf>

80 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/accessible-information-standard-requirements-dapb1605/>

81 <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/61635/documents/6735>

Regarding the provision of BSL as a subject, it is offered as a subject for formal teaching, assessment and certification equivalent to other languages only in a limited number of primary and secondary schools in Scotland. Elsewhere, a process is underway to offer a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in BSL in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In the meantime, taster sessions of BSL are common in schools across the UK at all levels, often as part of personal and social education, although rarely taught by deaf persons or subject specialists. On the other hand, a five-year project (2018-2023) led by a school for deaf children in North London<sup>82</sup> has produced and delivers a model BSL curriculum aimed at deaf learners.

Regarding the BSL learning opportunities to the families of deaf children, its provision is highly inconsistent across the UK, and rarely sustained, fully accessible to families, or of reliably high quality. The British Deaf Association's ongoing campaign 'BSL In Our Hands' is designed to challenge this lack of automatic provision.<sup>83</sup>

## Legislation

- (1) Equality Act (2010)
- (2) Disability Discrimination Act (1995)
- (3) British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015
- (4) British Sign Language Act 2022
- (5) Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025
- (6) British Sign Language (Wales) Bill 2025
- (7) Broadcasting Act 1996
- (8) Communications Act 2003
- (9) Mental Capacity Act 2005
- (10) Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022
- (11) Care Act 2014
- (12) Education (Scotland) Act 2025

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82 <https://www.fbarnes.camden.sch.uk/bsl-curriculum-1>

83 <https://bda.org.uk/bsl-in-our-hands/>

## Evaluation

Criteria	Yes / No	Legal Reference	Comment
	Yes	(3) Section 1(1) (4) Sections 1(1) and 3(1)	
	No		
	No		Actions to celebrate BSL culture and heritage as part of the BSL (Scotland) National Plan 2023-2029.
	Yes	(12) Sections 7(1)(c), 11(4)(e), 30(c), 43(1)(b) (iv), 58(c) and 63(1)	Only in Scotland.
	Yes	(12) Sections 7(1)(c), 11(4)(e), 30(c), 43(1)(b) (iv), 58(c) and 63(1)	Only in Scotland. Moreover, actions are planned to explore access to BSL and teaching of BSL as well as to support the development of opportunities for deaf and deafblind children and their families about the heritage and culture of BSL (BSL (Scotland) National Plan 2023-2029).
	Yes	4) Sections 2 and 3 (9) Chapter 9, Section 3(1)(d)	Actions are also planned to facilitate BSL support in elections, public authorities' inclusive communication, and online interpretation services in the BSL (Scotland) National Plan 2023-2029.
	Yes	(7) Section 20 (8) Section 303	
	Yes	(3) and (4)	Since May 2023, the BSL Advisory Board meets regularly in the United Kingdom. In Scotland, the National Advisory Group has been constituted and contributed to the first National Plan for BSL.
Final score	6 / 8		Some criteria are achieved for a nation within the United Kingdom, for example in Scotland, while not achieved in other nations.

## Recommendations

1. Promotion of the identity and culture of deaf people as a part of the national cultural heritage, and among the nations of the United Kingdom.
2. Inclusion of explicit legal provisions on equality and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of the BSL to ensure that deaf persons can use it in both private and public spheres.
3. Establishment of a legal or regulatory framework recognising BSL as a language subject and a language of instruction for deaf learners throughout the United Kingdom.

4. Establishment of rules governing access to the profession of BSL/English interpreters.
5. Establishment of provisions ensuring the availability and accessibility of broadcast emergency-related information in BSL.

# Conclusion

The evaluation of the 31 European countries results in the following total scores, reflecting the extent to which each national framework fulfils the eight criteria for comprehensive and effective recognition of national sign languages.

The total scores for each of the 31 countries are presented below showing different levels of achievement in the recognition and implementation of national sign language frameworks. These scores reflect each country's cumulative results across the eight assessment criteria, providing a comparative overview of their progress and remaining gaps.

Country	Final score	Country	Final score
Austria	3	Latvia	4
Belgium	6	Lithuania	6
Bulgaria	8	Luxembourg	4
Croatia	5	Malta	5
Cyprus	4	Netherlands	6
Czechia	6	Norway	7
Denmark	6	Poland	6
Estonia	4	Portugal	7
Finland	7	Romania	6
France	4	Slovakia	6
Germany	4	Slovenia	7
Greece	5	Spain	8
Hungary	7	Sweden	7
Iceland	7	Switzerland	2
Ireland	5	United Kingdom	6
Italy	3		

The next chapter, Chapter 12, provides an in-depth analysis of these results, examining how the 31 countries perform under each of the eight criteria. It identifies trends, highlights good practices, and discusses the main challenges that remain in achieving comprehensive recognition and protection of national sign languages and the rights of their users across Europe.

## Chapter 12:

# Conclusion of Part II – main findings on the national legal frameworks in 31 European countries regarding the recognition of national sign languages

***Delphine le Maire, European Union of the Deaf***

Part II of this volume presented information on the national legal frameworks of 31 European countries constituting the EUD membership on the recognition of NSLs. It also offered an overview of the legal instruments and regulatory measures identified as meeting each of the eight criteria and, drawing on the scoring results, set out recommendations to strengthen the legal framework in each of the analysed countries.

Based on this analysis, we identified main findings on the common achievements, common shortcomings, areas of progress that need to be addressed in future legal and regulatory developments in each country to achieve stronger legal frameworks on the NSL and the rights of deaf sign language users.

## Status of the national sign language as a full language

29 out of 31 countries have achieved recognition of their National Sign Languages (NSL) through a legal instrument adopted by their legislature (i.e. Parliament), with the exceptions of France and Switzerland, for which further description will be addressed at the end of this subchapter.

While most countries that recognise an NSL explicitly name the language(s), affirm official recognition, and identify it as a language in its own right, the content of recognition provisions varies considerably. In some jurisdictions, NSL is framed as the language of the deaf community, and sometimes the deafblind community; elsewhere it is treated as a minority language used by signers regardless of hearing status, or as a language of the country without specifying its user community. Several legal texts also describe NSLs by reference to modality and linguistic features such as grammar, morphology and syntax. In addition, some provisions accompany NSL recognition with references to other forms of communication, including tactile signing, deafblind communication methods, and supported sign speech.

Regarding the format of the instrument recognising the NSL(s), the 29 countries have done so through different types of legal instruments, following the categorisation of

De Meulder (2015) and De Meulder, Murray & McKee (2019): (i) constitutional recognition (5 countries); (ii) specific sign language legislation (13 countries); (iii) broader legislation on sign language and other means of communication (4 countries); (iv) disability-related legislation (1 country); (v) linguistic legislation (6 countries); and (vi) an act establishing a language council (1 country). However, two countries (Greece and Italy) have recognised their NSL through legal instruments addressing different areas of legislation than those related to language and/or disability, creating a seventh category as “Other legislative instrument”. Several of those countries have done so in more than one instrument, with some achieving initial recognition in a non-binding legal instrument and/or regulation before the adoption of a legal instrument such as a Law or an Act.

While the classification of instruments does not, in itself, mean that some instruments’ categories are inherently “stronger” than in other categories, our analysis shows that the countries scoring highest against our eight assessment criteria are those where recognition appears in multiple legal instruments and/or has been implemented across several areas in the legal framework of the country. For example, Spain and Bulgaria are currently the only countries meeting all eight criteria. Spain has recognised both Spanish Sign Language and Catalan Sign Language in a national law, complemented by royal (legislative) decrees, with additional recognition and statutes adopted by several autonomous communities, including Catalonia. Bulgaria, on the contrary, has adopted a comprehensive Sign Language Act and implemented some provisions into regulatory instruments to strengthen the legal obligations.

Among the five European countries with constitutional recognition of their NSL (Austria, Finland, Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia), four also score highly, largely because constitutional provisions are followed by detailed legislation and policy measures that give practical effect to rights and obligations. This does not, however, mean that constitutional recognition is inherently stronger than recognition in a dedicated Sign Language Act. Notably, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden each meet seven of the eight criteria, with comprehensive legal instruments, (Sign) Language Acts for the majority of them, covering most criteria and establishing or cross-referencing rights across key areas of deaf people’s lives, such as justice, education and interpreting, often by amending existing area-specific laws.

Regarding the two countries that have not yet achieved NSL recognition, France and Switzerland, both have taken steps towards recognition at national or subnational level. In France, French Sign Language is recognised in the Education Code by the national parliament. However, this is confined to the area of education, where it is offered as part of one of the two educational pathways for deaf learners. Due to this limitation, the National Association of the Deaf in France (FNSF) considers that French Sign Language is not yet fully recognised and is advocating for comprehensive recognition across all areas of life. In Switzerland, while at least two cantons out of the 26 have recognised sign language in their legal framework (i.e. Constitution), there is not yet an explicit, nationwide legal recognition of the Swiss National Sign Languages. Steps at both federal and cantonal levels indicate progress, but full national

recognition remains to be achieved.

Furthermore, unlike the 28 countries that recognise their NSL at the national level, recognition of Belgium's three NSLs exists only at subnational (Community) level. Owing to Belgium's federal structure, where competences such as early childhood, education, culture and media are devolved to the Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities, this Community-level recognition operates, in practice, with effects comparable to national recognition for most of the eight criteria. Federal competences remain outside this subnational framework.

## ⌚ Equality and non-discrimination

Across the 31 countries examined, 17 include provisions that safeguard the use of NSLs under equality and non-discrimination principles. In several countries, recognition instruments explicitly confer a right to use the NSL. However, this right is most commonly circumscribed to interactions with public authorities and other official settings (for example, courts, police, notarial services and similar administrative contexts), while it should be granted for all spheres of lives of the NSL users.

Two main legal approaches emerge. In some countries, deaf people, framed from a disability law perspective, are guaranteed the right to use their NSL as part of broader accessibility and reasonable accommodation duties, mostly through the right to be provided sign language interpretation. In others, NSL users are treated as a linguistic minority, with rights grounded in language and cultural protection regimes that apply irrespective of hearing status. Although, in principle, a right to use a NSL implies that refusing or prohibiting its use constitutes discrimination, our review assessed whether legal frameworks also contain explicit bans on discrimination based on the use of NSL. Only Spain and Portugal include such express prohibitions and can serve as examples of good practice for the development of explicit anti-discrimination provisions on the use of NSL in other countries' legal frameworks.

It is important to note that, as this analysis is limited to identifying the presence of the criteria within each country's legal framework, it does not examine in depth the scope or practical impact of the provisions on equality and non-discrimination. A comprehensive assessment of these aspects would require a comparative analysis of the respective national legislations and their implementation.

## ⚐ Promotion of the identity of deaf people

4 countries out of 31 have expressly recognised in their respective legal frameworks, that the NSL and/or the deaf culture and/or the cultural and linguistic identity of the deaf community should be preserved as part of the national cultural heritage.

In Hungary, Hungarian Sign Language shall be protected as part of the Hungarian culture. In Bulgaria, the Act recognises the cultural and linguistic identity of the Bulgarian deaf community, requiring the characteristic features of the Bulgarian Sign Language and the culture and identity of its deaf community to be respected and preserved. In Norway, the public bodies must protect and promote the Norwegian Sign Language as an expression of both language and culture as part of the Norwegian language culture. In Spain, deaf culture and Spanish Sign Languages are recognised as representative manifestation of intangible cultural heritage.

However, several other countries safeguard their NSL as part of national cultural heritage through non-legislative routes. The National Commissions for UNESCO in Austria, Germany and Slovenia have secured the inscription of their NSLs on the intangible cultural heritage lists; in Finland, the Deaf Culture Festival is similarly inscribed. Elsewhere, research and development of NSLs are promoted via language institutes (notably in Slovakia and Sweden) or directly by government authorities (such as in Malta).

## ■ The right to be educated in the national sign language

In 24 of the 31 countries, legal provisions in NSL recognition instruments or in education codes/acts, among other instruments, enshrine the right of deaf learners to be educated in their NSL. In several other countries, this right is not set out in their legislation but is addressed through regulatory measures, curricula, and/or regional or subnational rules and school systems.

Across the 24 countries, the right is framed in most cases within disability education law, as part of adaptations to the learning environment or as specific measures for deaf learners. In a smaller number of countries, such as Finland, it is instead embedded within minority-language education frameworks.

This right to be educated in the national sign language is most commonly realised at primary level and often within specialised settings or deaf school systems. However, in some countries, this right extends from early childhood education, beginning in kindergarten, and continues through to upper secondary education level. Moreover, in some countries, the right is also upheld within mainstream education for deaf learners, through bilingual or language-immersive education models that integrate the NSL alongside the national written language. The content of the provisions enshrining this right varies widely in each country in line with their respective national education framework. Where “education in NSL” is used, it is frequently interpreted broadly to include both NSL as a language of instruction and NSL as a language subject.

The responses of NADs to their factsheet (Chapter 11 of this book) also referenced

curricula and teachers' training or qualification requirements for delivering education in the NSL, with some reporting gaps in teacher preparation/training that hinder the effective realisation of the right of deaf learners to be educated in NSL.

## ⌚ National sign language as a school subject

In 24 of the 31 countries, national sign language is offered as a subject for deaf learners, often within special education settings. However increasingly, and particularly in recent reforms, national sign language education is also offered within mainstream education for deaf learners, as part of their right to learn their language recognised by the country. Its status varies between jurisdictions: in some it is mandatory, in others optional, and most often contingent on parental choice. The teaching of NSL as a school subject is typically addressed through national curricula recognised by the Ministry of Education, which promotes and supports its implementation across the education system.

Although we did not have the intent to assess this aspect in-depth, we have collected information on the provision of the NSL as a subject for hearing learners: it is less systematic but does exist, either as an optional subject embedded in legislation (for example, Austria and Bulgaria) or more typically through projects and curricular initiatives rather than statutory schemes, as seen in the United Kingdom.

Even though this aspect was not purposefully assessed, information provided to us revealed that in several countries, the right of families of deaf children or deaf persons to learn the national sign language is recognised, and authorities are obligated to provide for it. These include the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain and Sweden. This list is indicative and non-exhaustive, as many more countries, particularly the Nordic countries, also present such provisions supporting early communication and involvement of the family in learning the NSL.

## ⌚ Professional national sign language interpreters

In 29 of the 31 countries, the provision of sign language interpretation is ensured through legal and/or regulatory frameworks. In most cases, these frameworks establish the right of deaf people to access sign language interpretation, particularly in their interactions with public authorities, as part of the obligations of these authorities to uphold the right of deaf sign language users to access information and communicate in their NSL. In some countries, they also regulate access to the interpreting profession itself, setting standards for qualifications, certification, and professional conduct.

Across Europe, the right to sign language interpretation is most commonly guaranteed for communication with public authorities, such as in courts, with the police, in

healthcare, and within public administration. In several countries, it is also extended to education, particularly at secondary and higher levels, ensuring that deaf learners can access teaching and examinations on an equal basis. A smaller number of countries further provide for interpretation in private or social contexts, such as employment, cultural events, or community activities, although such access is often more limited and dependent on specific funding or support schemes.

Access to the sign language interpreting profession is a continuously evolving framework across Europe, with several countries revising existing rules and others establishing frameworks where none previously existed. Regulating access to sign language interpretation ensures high-quality communication and upholds the right of deaf sign language users to communicate and receive information on an equal basis with others.

## **Access to information, including in situations of emergencies**

In 30 of the 31 countries, national laws and/or regulations contain provisions on accessibility of the information and services provided by public authorities as well as in the audiovisual media sector relating to National Sign Languages. However, the right to access broadcast information through sign language remains insufficiently addressed. Some of the countries address this obligation as either a right of deaf persons to use their NSL in interactions with the public authorities, other require public authorities to provide information in the NSL and/or to ensure the services are provided in the NSL. A few of them (Cyprus, Iceland, Poland, Spain, among others) encourage the recruitment, or even enforce, personnel of the public services to be proficient in the NSL.

Despite the obligations in the Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive, transposed by all EU Member States and applied in Iceland and Norway, with Switzerland voluntarily incorporating some of its elements, most national frameworks still lack specific, enforceable requirements for access in NSLs. Implementing measures often refer broadly to “accessibility for persons with disabilities” or list subtitling and sign language interpretation as examples, without mandating concrete sign language quotas or defining the scope of programmes that must be covered. As a result, sign language provision is frequently treated as optional or as a substitute for subtitling, which does not meet the linguistic and cultural needs of deaf sign language users. Unfortunately, very few countries address the obligation of the public broadcasters to provide programmes produced directly in NSL (thus not with sign language interpretation).

This gap is particularly evident in relation to the legal and/or regulatory frameworks on accessibility of broadcast information of public importance or national urgency, such as live emergency communication, public safety announcements, and crisis

briefings. In this area, only a small number of countries have introduced explicit obligations ensuring that emergency broadcasts and live public announcements are interpreted into the NSL: the Netherlands, Greece, Hungary (specifically for public service announcements), Iceland, and Spain. Elsewhere, no provisions have been found to ensure accessibility of emergency communication in NSL. Although in practice, many countries provide sign language interpretation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and for some countries afterwards, such provision is difficult to enforce and largely contingent upon the decisions of broadcasters or public authorities, as it is not formally enshrined or guaranteed in legislation.

## Involvement of deaf people in decision-making processes

Only 14 of the 31 countries have a dedicated national sign language council or board, most commonly established by the country's NSL Act or an implementing instrument under it. By a "sign language council/board" we mean a body with the dual mandate of monitoring implementation and advising on policy, with a balanced composition that brings together representatives of deaf organisations and the relevant public authorities. The absence of such a body does not mean the deaf community is excluded from decision-making; however, it can make consultation less systematic when authorities develop or issue measures affecting sign language rights and the protection and promotion of the NSL.

In many countries lacking a formal council or board, similar functions are performed through strong working relationships between the National Association of the Deaf and governments. Greece and Austria exemplify such situations, or via ad hoc advisory groups convened by ministries, as in Ireland and Norway. Elsewhere, national sign languages are protected, developed, promoted, and disseminated through sign language institutes such as in Cyprus. In several countries without a formal sign language council or board, NADs are advocating for its establishment to ensure consistent recognition of NSL and the effective realisation of deaf sign language users' rights through clear monitoring, coordination, and advisory functions with public authorities.

## Conclusion

This analysis sets out clearly both the advances and the remaining shortcomings in recognising national sign languages and embedding the rights of sign language users across Europe. While most countries have recognised national sign languages and ensured access to sign language interpretation, often via disability and equality frameworks, many still fall short on core language rights, including the right to be

educated in the national sign language, the availability of that language as a subject, and the right to receive information through audiovisual media in the national sign language. In only a small number of countries, the national sign language and, in some cases, deaf culture and the linguistic and cultural identity of the deaf community are formally recognised as part of the countries' cultural heritage. Yet these elements are foundational to the linguistic and cultural minority rights of deaf communities.

Significant gaps also remain within equality and non-discrimination frameworks, particularly in explicitly safeguarding the right to use the NSL and prohibiting discrimination on that basis. Moreover, decision-making processes are not consistently guaranteed, especially regarding implementation of recognition and the protection and promotion of the rights of NSL users. Further work is needed to ensure effective equality and the full realisation of sign language rights for every deaf people, and their family members, within Europe.

While the areas of improvement and main recommendations must be addressed in each country following their legal framework and systems, it is important to underline that there is a need for harmonisation across the EU and stronger reinforcement mechanisms and to emphasise the role that the European Union can play in supporting its Member States and promoting good practice examples and progress in the recognition of NSL and the protection of the rights of deaf sign language users.

As this volume demonstrates, legal frameworks for the recognition and protection of National Sign Languages are not static; they continue to evolve through legislative reforms, new regulations, and the growing influence of deaf communities and their allies. In response to this evolving landscape, and to preserve the accuracy and relevance of the country evaluations and criteria-based ratings over time, we have established a digital extension to this publication. The following QR code directs readers to a dedicated section of the EUD website, where all country scores and comparative visualisations will be kept up to date. This online platform will reflect changes in legal instruments, implementation efforts, and policy developments. By anchoring a printed work in an evolving online resource, we aim to ensure that this research remains a reliable tool for advocacy, policymaking and monitoring, both now and in the future:



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## Chapter 13:

# Conclusion – The past, present and future: From recognition to officialisation

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## The past

In his latest book, Paddy Ladd brought a necessary reminder that the marginalisation of deaf people and national sign languages in our societies is the direct consequence of Audism and Oralism (Ladd, 2022, p.23). These two neologisms, carrying the suffix “ism”, respectively refer to the conscious or unconscious discrimination of hearing people towards deaf people due to their auditory status (Humphries, 1977), and to the educational philosophy teaching deaf people to primarily or exclusively communicate through spoken language, lip-reading, and training their residual hearing while discouraging national sign languages (Watson, 2012).

Oralism finds its earliest traces in the early nineteenth century before arriving at its climax in 1880 during the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, in Milan, Italy (Murray & Greenwald, 2010). The 1880 Milan Congress officially banned sign languages in education in favour of oralism, believing that sign languages are detrimental to the cognitive, academic, psychological and emotional development of deaf people (Hutchinson, 2007). For a century, deaf people were linguistically deprived of their natural languages. Ladd emphasises that “Oralism was not simply about removing those languages. Rather, it was the removal of a century’s worth of Deaf pedagogical ideas, cultural traditions, wisdom, folklore and Deaf history, including knowledge of how to best navigate majority cultures” (Ladd, 2022, p.30). For over a century, deaf communities in Europe were oppressed, and the thriving of their languages and cultures was repressed.

It wasn’t until the period of history that Ladd (2003) called “the Deaf Resurgence”, a historical period of transformation of deaf communities that took place in the United States of America and Western Europe in the seventies and eighties, that the right to sign languages and Deaf culture came back in the narrative of deaf communities. Ladd established five developments encapsulating the Deaf Resurgence movement: (1) the recognition of sign languages by linguists as full languages; (2) the reintroduction of sign languages into deaf education and broader public life; (3) the emergence of sign language television; (4) the acknowledgement of “Deaf history” and “Deaf culture” as important concepts; and (5) the establishment of Deaf Studies in academia. It is under this historical evolution that the European Community Regional Secretariat (ECRS)

was created in 1985 in London, before renaming itself as the European Union of the Deaf in 1994. National Associations of the Deaf (NADs) from 9 countries established a pan-European organisation representing their position before the EU institutions.<sup>84</sup> The first resolution of the European Parliament of 1988 addressed the main concern of the European deaf community: the recognition of their NSLs in each of the EU Member States (European Parliament, 1988, Article 2). This has kick-started the advocacy work of the EUD and the NADs in ensuring the human rights of deaf people to their NSLs.

## The present

This volume has traced the journey from the recognition of NSLs within the Member States of the European Union (EU), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and the United Kingdom (UK) to the emerging call for their officialisation as EU official languages. Taken together, the findings from both Parts I and II of the book reveal that the recognition of sign languages in the EU and members of the EFTA – encompassing the UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland – has reached a level of legal and political maturity that now requires a new paradigm shift: moving from the purely symbolic recognition of an NSL as a language of its own to give way to a more meaningful status, the status of official language. This new structural phase is to take place at both the EU and national levels.

The first part of this book demonstrated how the growing number of political commitments and instruments of soft law in favor of NSLs – most notably the 2016 European Parliament Resolution on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters, and the 2025 Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to the European Union – are creating momentum to shift from recognition to officialisation. Granting NSLs official status is no longer a symbolic aspiration but a political, legal and moral imperative to distance ourselves from the heritages of Oralism and the 1880 Milan Congress. These soft law instruments provide specific guidance for interpreting several European and International hard law provisions, namely the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (the Charter), and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Respectively, these legal instruments recognise the rights to sign language and deaf culture, the right to equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of disability and language, and an obligation to respect multilingualism and cultural diversity.

The dual identity of deaf communities as both persons with disabilities and members of cultural and linguistic minorities grants NSLs a particular significance: they are so much more than mere accessibility features. NSLs are the preferred language of

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<sup>84</sup> These countries were Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

deaf people and the vehicle of their very own culture, deaf culture, and the rights they grant to their users, the Sign Language Peoples (SLPs). With their full linguistic component and the respective cultural values stemming from them, NSLs are the new cornerstone in the European multilingualism and multiculturalism architecture. Their officialisation would render the invisible visible and the implicit explicit.

The second part of the present volume provides an unprecedented overview of the national legal frameworks of 31 European countries. During the course of our research, I realised that the linguistic rights of deaf people cannot be encapsulated in a single legal instrument, namely the legislation recognising the NSL. Rather, the rights are dispersed in arrays of implementing legislation or regulations stemming either from the NSL recognition legal instrument or distinct, standalone ones. Thus, I adopted the approach of analysing legal frameworks, rather than individual legislations, surrounding the linguistic rights of deaf people within the EU, the EFTA, and the UK.

The outcome of this analysis revealed interesting findings. Almost all EUD member countries have recognised their NSL through a legal instrument, and most have established frameworks for interpretation, education, and public service access. Yet the findings also exposed persistent disparities and gaps. In too many jurisdictions, recognition remains declaratory rather than operational. Education in the national sign language is not systematically guaranteed; access to information, particularly in audiovisual and emergency communication, remains fragmented; and only a handful of countries explicitly prohibit discrimination based on the use of their national sign language. The protection of deaf culture and linguistic identity as part of national heritage is equally rare. Decision-making structures on NSLs involving representation of deaf people, such as national sign language councils, exist in only a third of countries, limiting the influence of deaf communities over the implementation of their linguistic rights.

Taken together, these findings reasserted our initial hypothesis: recognition, while necessary, is insufficient. The recognitions were a historical necessity, at times when European societies were still facing the aftermath of the infamous 2nd Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, 1880, and a means for deaf communities to retake ownership of their languages, culture and rights. However, at the dawn of the fortieth anniversary of EUD, it is time to take a step forward and jump into a new paradigm: NSLs as official languages.

This is underpinned by the realities of the current European legal framework, preventing deaf people from using their NSLs when interacting with the EU. Currently, the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament only allow the submission of petitions in one of the 24 official European languages, the only exception given to languages having official status at the national level. Only languages having an official status within an EU Member State can be brought, upon prior approval of the European Parliament Bureau, as a language to submit a petition (Rule 226.6). Moreover, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides that any modification of the

official languages of the European Union requires the unanimity of the Council of the European Union (Article 342 TFEU), which is constituted of representatives of its Member States. In the scenario where the Council has to vote to render the 29 NSLs official languages of the EU, one can easily imagine the hesitation of EU Member States to grant official status to NSLs if these languages do not already have official status within their national jurisdiction.

## The future

The pathway forward to ensuring NSLs rights is twofold and must be undertaken at two levels. Firstly, EU, the EFTA Member States, and the UK should reinforce their own legal framework to elevate their NSLs to the same level of protection as other official languages. To do so, they should take into consideration the recommendations given at the end of each country analysis of legal frameworks. This involves embedding NSLs within constitutional or legislative provisions guaranteeing their use in public life, education, justice, culture, political participation, and administration, in close cooperation with the National Associations of the Deaf. This would safeguard every deaf citizen to their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights. That first course of action would uphold the necessary legal and political commitments to bring a top-down change at the European level through the Council of the European Union, either by amending Regulation 1/1958 determining the languages to be used within the European Union, or by creating a distinct regulation covering the specific status of NSLs.

This leads us to our second point: the reforms to take place at the level of the EU institutions. Besides the main legislation recognising the official status of NSLs, it is necessary to amend the relevant provisions of the Rules of Procedures of the respective EU institutions. These amendments will pave the way for mainstreaming the use of NSLs by deaf people within EU institutions and will be a practical example of what implementing the CRPD, the Charter, and the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2020-2030 looks like.

As final remarks, I would like to highlight that no research is complete without calling for further research. The initial studies of legal frameworks established a snapshot of the current rights of deaf people at the national level, from a legal standpoint. Due to limited time and resource constraints, I was not able to undertake an analysis of the level of officialisation of each NSL from the constitutional/legal perspective of the respective countries. Moreover, I could not assess the impact of the recognition of NSLs on the daily life of deaf people. I do not know whether deaf people from a country with an 8/8 score actually benefit from better rights in their daily lives than a country with a 5/8 score. In the same vein, I do not know whether there is a correlation between the country score and the respect of the linguistic human rights of deaf people, or whether a high score equates to strong implementations of its frameworks. Furthermore, I would like to recommend expanding the scope of

our action to not only the remit of the European Union, but also to the Council of Europe (CoE). Whereas the EU is limited to 27 Member States, the CoE has 46. I believe that deaf communities from these 46 Member States will benefit greatly from having their NSLs officialised. In addition, subsequent research on the use of NSLs in the work of the CoE, mirroring the one made with the EU, must be carried out.

## The past, present, and future: From recognition to officialisation

At the twilight of the fortieth anniversary of the European Union of the Deaf, it is time to gather the past, a recognition and acceptance of the adverse consequences of Oralism in the development of the rights of deaf people to their NSLs, with the Present and the Future. The Present is the observation that the political and legal framework is mature enough to undertake a new paradigm shift. This leads us to the final part, the Future: more research needs to be done on the impact of legal frameworks on their implementation in the daily lives of deaf people in Europe, both in the EU and CoE remits. Only then can we seize the magnitude of the relationships between deaf communities, national governments and national sign languages, and only then can we move from recognition to officialisation.

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## Future updates

In light of the evolving nature of national legal frameworks, it became evident during this research that any printed analysis is bound to become partially outdated over time. National Sign Language frameworks are living structures subject to amendments, implementation progress, and even reversals. In response to this reality, and in alignment with our goal of providing an evidence-based yet adaptable overview, we have embedded QR codes throughout this volume. These QR codes lead readers to a dedicated section of the EUD website, which will be regularly updated with the latest evaluations, comparative maps, and legal references for each country. This digital extension ensures that the rating system introduced in Chapters 9 and 10, and analysed in Chapter 11, remains alive and responsive, preserving the relevance and usability of this work beyond its date of publication. It also strengthens transparency and accountability by allowing readers to follow legal developments in real time and to critically assess changes in each country's approach to the rights of deaf people and their national sign languages:





