

EUD Position Paper

National Sign Languages as EU official languages

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary	2
2. Introduction	2
3. History of National Sign Languages in the EU	4
4. Multilingualism in the European Union.....	5
4.1. A Brief History of the EU's Multilingualism:.....	5
4.2 Linguistic competencies of the European Union: yes to officialisation, no to recognition	7
4.2.1. Lack of competency to recognise national sign languages as full languages	7
4.2.2. Full competency in recognising national sign languages as EU official languages	7
4.3. Conclusion of the section	9
5. International legislation and measures relevant to national sign languages.....	10
5.1 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	10
5.2 – Concluding Observations of the CRPD Committee on the EU	10
5.3 – UN Special Procedure Mechanism: The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.....	11
6. EUD's position on the EU's recognition of the national sign languages as official languages of the EU.....	12
7. EUD's recommendations: Reviewing Regulation 1/1958 and amending EU institutions' Rules of Procedure.....	13
8. Annex I: List of National Sign Languages	13
9. Annex II: Revised Regulation 1/1958	16
10. Bibliography.....	18



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

1. Executive Summary

The present position paper addresses the necessity of the official recognition of the 29 national sign languages (NSLs hereafter) within the European Union (EU hereafter) on an equal footing with its 24 spoken official languages. The paper highlights the obligation of the EU to respect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the EU through its multilingualism policy to prevent discrimination based on the grounds of language. Despite these fundamental pieces of EU legislation, combined with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD hereafter), the rights of NSLs users to impart information and interact with the EU institutions in their NSLs remain largely ignored, creating a gap that contradicts the EU's obligations under the CRPD.

The paper advocates for the EU to legally incorporate the EU NSLs as official languages, ensuring equal access to information, services, and communication with EU institutions to deaf people living in the EU. The paper provides a detailed historical account of NSL recognition efforts, outlines the relevant EU and international legislation, and explains the legal grounds necessitating the EU to elevate NSLs to being granted official language status.

To make the officialisation of EU NSLs a reality, this paper recommends revising EU Regulation 1/1958 and amending the respective Rules of Procedure of EU institutions to include NSLs as official and working languages. These changes will align the EU more closely with its principles of equality and non-discrimination, as outlined in the CRPD, and strengthen its position as a Union of Equality that truly includes all linguistic and cultural communities.

2. Introduction

The EU has a rich and diverse multilingualism with 24 spoken languages and 29 national sign languages¹. NSLs are full languages with the same linguistic properties as spoken languages and are used by more than one million deaf people across the EU.² This number does not include other NSL users such as family members of deaf people, professional and accredited NSL interpreters as well as users of NSLs that are not deaf, bringing the total number to more than one million.

The EU has its own multilingualism policy which ensures that linguistic diversity is respected and promoted within the EU while preventing discrimination on the grounds of languages in the functioning of the Union. However, this policy seems to only foster and protect spoken languages while disregarding the status of signed languages as full languages. For instance, the EU official languages

¹ See annex on page 13 for full list of the EU's national sign language laws.

² Maya de Wit, "Sign Language Interpreting in Europe", 2016 edition, p. 57



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

only include 24 spoken languages without any consideration given to the 29 NSLs that co-exist in the EU, bringing an unjustified difference of treatment between spoken and signed languages.

The EU, as a State Party to the CRPD, has a legal obligation to adopt measures to implement the CRPD in the areas where the EU has competencies. Among these obligations, the EU must make it possible for the official interactions between the EU and its citizens to be in EU NSLs, which is consistent with the EU's own multilingualism policies. This possibility has already been achieved among EU Member States since the 27 countries have recognised their NSLs as full languages with various linguistic status.³ The legal recognition of a NSL is a formal acknowledgment by a government that a NSL, like other spoken languages, is a full and complete language with its own grammar, syntax, and lexicon. This recognition typically includes various legal and policy frameworks that lead to practical implications and protections.

By highlighting the gap in the EU's approach to its multilingualism, this paper paves the way for the EU to proceed with the officialisation of the EU's 29 NSLs as official EU languages. The paper operates a distinction between *full* languages and *official* languages. The former refers to any natural language having a complete structure, including vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, allowing for comprehensive communication and expression. All 27 EU Member States have recognised their national sign language(s) as full languages. The latter – official languages – are the languages that have been given a special legal status in a particular country, state, or other jurisdiction. Typically, this means that the official language is used in government bodies and in legal matters. Documents, legislation, court proceedings, and public administration tasks are conducted in the official language(s).

The paper is a call for the EU to incorporate the 29 EU NSLs in the corpus of the EU official languages.

First, this paper presents the history of the European deaf community's position towards the protection, valorisation, and legalisation of NSLs through the numerous resolutions of the European Parliament (Section 3). Then, it outlines a brief history of the EU's multilingualism as well as its competencies (and its limits) to regulate on matters pertaining to NSLs (Section 4) before presenting the relevant international legislation and policies fostering the recognition of NSLs (Section 5). Finally, EUD's official position is presented - to proceed with the officialisation of the EU NSLs as EU official languages (Section 6) before concluding with recommendations on the ways forwards (Section 7).

³ For more information about the EU Member States official recognition of their NSLs, please consult EUD's book from 2012 - https://www.eud.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EUD_SL_II.pdf and the World Federation of the Deaf infographic on the legal recognition of NSLs internationally - <https://wfdeaf.org/news/the-legal-recognition-of-national-sign-languages/>



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

3. History of National Sign Languages in the EU

The EU's approach to promoting NSLs has evolved significantly since 1958. In fact, following the creation of the European Union of the Deaf in 1985, the discourse shifted to recognise NSLs as "*language in its own right, is the preferred or only language of most deaf people*" as highlighted in the 1988 Resolution of the European Parliament on Sign Language for the Deaf.⁴ This resolution was subsequently modified in 1998 to further advocate for the rights of NSL users and mark the 10th anniversary of its adoption.

This modification also aimed to highlight the specific requirements of deaf people to their NSL.⁵ At the time of its adoption, the resolution highlighted that only 4 of the 15 EU Member States, had recognised their NSLs as full languages.⁶ Furthermore, it also raised the issue of the lack of awareness of the existing diversity of NSLs rather than the misconception that deaf people share one universal sign language.⁷

The year 2010 was pivotal as the EU ratified the CRPD. The EU was the first regional entity to do so and, therefore, committed to ensuring the linguistic rights of deaf people in the EU. More specifically, Article 2 recognises NSLs as full languages while Article 21(b) grants the right to deaf people to impart official information and interact with their government in their NSL. In addition, Article 21(e) obliges State Parties to recognise and promote the use of NSL.

Further, in 2010, the EU Commission took a more active stance through the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which highlighted that "*The Commission will work to [...] explore ways of facilitating the use of sign language and Braille in dealing with the EU institutions.*"⁸ It should be noted that there is no clarification on which whether this refers to national sign languages or International Sign.

In 2010, the Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the EU was adopted, urging both the EU and its Member States to ensure the rights of deaf people to use their NSLs.⁹ This call was reinforced in 2011 by MEP Adam Kosa's Report on mobility and inclusion of people with disabilities and the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020,¹⁰ which urged the recognition of NSLs as full languages in EU Member States in line with the Brussels Declaration.

⁴ European Parliament Resolution on Sign Language for the Deaf (Doc A2-302/87), Recital C

⁵ European Parliament Resolution on sign languages, Official Journal C 379, 07/12/1998 P. 0066.

⁶ *Ibid*, Recital C

⁷ *Ibid*, Recital I

⁸ European Commission, the European Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2010-2020, page 82, URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9835&langId=en>

⁹ [Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union](#)

¹⁰ European Parliament Report 2010/2272(INI), URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2011-0263_EN.html?redirect



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

The EU Parliament continued to advocate for linguistic diversity and the rights of NSL users with its 2013 resolution on endangered European languages.¹¹ This resolution did not directly highlight NSLs as endangered European languages; however, it served as a momentum for the European deaf community to continue to advocate to ensure the legal recognition of their NSLs.

In 2016, a resolution focusing on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters was adopted.¹² Although this resolution focuses on the professionalisation of sign language interpretation, both in NSLs and International Sign, it nevertheless calls for the “*official recognition of national and regional sign language(s) in Member States and within EU institutions*” as one of the necessary preconditions to obtain qualified and professional sign language interpreters (Art. 1(a)). This resolution was unprecedented as, for the first time, it called the EU institutions to officially recognise national and regional sign languages.

In 2018, the European Parliament adopted a further resolution on Language Equality in the Digital Age.¹³ This document reaffirmed that NSLs are an important element of the linguistic diversity existing in the EU (Recital A). Furthermore, the resolution highlighted 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).

The ultimate call to the EU to grant legal recognition to its 29 NSLs as official languages, took place in 2018 when the perspective on NSLs shifted slightly with the EU Parliament resolution on minimum standards for minorities.¹⁴ This resolution recognised NSLs and the right to education through sign language as aspects of linguistic minority rights (Article 50). Furthermore, in Recital U, the resolution highlighted that “*one person in a thousand uses a national sign language as their first language; whereas these languages should be awarded official status*”.

4. Multilingualism in the European Union

4.1. A Brief History of the EU's Multilingualism:

On 1st December 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force and brought a large reform in the institutional landscape of the EU. Of particular importance, Article 3 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) was amended to provide a clearer definition of the EU's objectives and competencies.¹⁵ It emphasized the importance of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the EU and that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced, which directly ties into its multilingualism policies.

¹¹ European Parliament resolution of 11 September 2013 on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union (2013/2007(INI))

¹² European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters (2016/2952(RSP))

¹³ European Parliament resolution of 11 September 2018 on language equality in the digital age (2018/2028(INI))

¹⁴ European Parliament resolution of 13 November 2018 on minimum standards for minorities in the EU (2018/2036(INI))

¹⁵ The Treaty of European Union, URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M%2FTXT>



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

The Treaty of Lisbon also made the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (hereby “the Charter”) legally binding, which means that it has the same legal values as the EU treaties. Within the Charter, two provisions are to be highlighted, namely Articles 21 and 22.

Article 22 of the Charter states that the “*the Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity*” while Article 21 establishes languages as a ground for discrimination that is prohibited. In other words, all EU citizens have the right to use the language of their choice and any discrimination based on this choice and language should be prohibited.

Furthermore, the citizen’s right to communicate with the institutions in any official language is treated as part of the right to good administration as outlined in Article 41(4) of the Charter.

The Treaties do not list official or working EU languages, but rather indicate which language versions of the Treaties are considered original and authentic. More specifically, Article 55 TEU indicates the 24 languages in which the Treaty’s text is considered original.¹⁶ The term “original version” refers to the language texts in which the treaty is officially and legally authentic. From a legal interpretation, each of these language versions is considered equally authoritative, meaning that no single language version is superior to the others. Ensuring equal legal validity across all official languages prevents linguistic discrimination and Member States can engage with the EU’s legal texts in their own languages.

In practical terms, if a treaty states that its text is “equally authentic” in multiple languages, it means that the legal content and implications are exactly the same in each language version, and any of these versions can be used as a reference for legal purposes or interpretation within the EU’s legal framework.

Article 55(1) provides the list of Treaty languages, but not the full list of official languages of the EU or working languages of the institutions, which are determined by Regulation No 1 (see below).

Article 55 only applies to the Treaty of the European Union and not to the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU). However, Article 358 TFEU refers to Article 55 TEU to list the original languages of the Treaty. Furthermore, Articles 20 and 24 TFEU regulate the right of citizens to address the EU institutions and bodies in any of the authentic Treaty languages¹⁷.

In legal terms, the EU’s multilingualism falls into three categories: the original languages of the Treaties, the official languages of the EU and the working languages of the EU. Furthermore, each institution may create its own internal rules on working languages. The main legal act governing the

¹⁶ Official languages are Bulgarian, Spanish, Czech, Danish, German, Estonian, Greek, English, French, Croatian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Maltese, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Finnish and Swedish

¹⁷ Mańko, R., *Legal Aspects of EU Multilingualism*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), January 2017, URL:



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

official and working languages of the Union is Council Regulation No. 1/1958. However, when it comes to language recognition, the EU has limited competency.

4.2 Linguistic competencies of the European Union: yes to officialisation, no to recognition

In this section, a key distinction is highlighted between the lack of competencies of the EU to recognise languages, including NSLs, as full languages, while it has competencies to recognise existing languages as EU official languages.

4.2.1. Lack of competency to recognise national sign languages as full languages

Article 5(3) TFEU and its Protocol (No. 2) establishes 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 a better achievement at the EU level¹⁸.

With regard to NSLs, Article 6 TFEU states that the EU has competencies only to carry out actions supporting, coordinating or supplementing the actions from Member States without substituting their competencies in these areas. Recognition of NSLs as full languages is part of Culture, which falls upon Member states meaning they must recognise their languages, including NSLs.

Thus, the EU does not have the competencies to recognise the EU NSLs as *full* languages as this is a competence of EU Member States. However, the EU does possess full competence to recognise its *official* languages.

4.2.2. Full competency in recognising national sign languages as EU official languages

Although the EU cannot decide which national languages, including NSLs, should be recognised as full languages of their own, the EU can decide which languages existing within its territory can become official languages of the European Union. The existence of EU official languages are regulated both by the EU Regulation 1/1958 and by the existing rules of procedures of each institutions.

4.2.2.1. Regulation No 1/1958

This regulation is the foundational regulation concerning the use of languages in the EU. It has been amended to accommodate new Member States and their languages as official languages and working languages of the EU following the expansion of the Union with EU Enlargement. Currently, it provides for 24 official and working languages of the EU (only spoken). The regulation stipulates that all official

¹⁸ European Parliament, 'The Principle of Subsidiarity', *Factsheets*, accessed 18 June 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/7/the-principle-of-subsidiarity>.



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

languages are equally authentic and shall be used in the institutions of the Union, ensuring documents and proceedings are accessible in all these languages.

Furthermore, this legal instrument stipulates that all official languages of the Member States of the EU are equally authentic and have equal status within the European institutions. It ensures that documents, legislation, and official communications are available in all these languages.

4.2.2.2. The Rules of Procedure of EU Institution

The respective EU Institutions' rules of procedure lay down detailed rules on the EU multilingualism policy. The Rules of Procedure are the equivalent of an internal rule of an institution. For the sake of conciseness, only the relevance of the rules of procedures are outlined in light of the rights to impart official information and interact with the EU institutions in EU NSLs as outlined in the CRPD.

The European Parliament has opted for '*resource efficient full multilingualism*' – meaning that the resources to be devoted to multilingualism are managed on the basis of users' real needs. The measures are adopted to make users more aware of their responsibilities and more effective planning of requests for language facilities. The Council has opted for 'full multilingualism', while the Commission's rule is that any instrument of general application to be adopted by the college must be in all EU official languages¹⁹.

4.2.2.2.1. European Parliament

[Rule 167](#) on Languages/Rules of Procedure outlines the language provisions within the Parliament, ensuring accessibility in its proceedings. Firstly, it mandates that all official documents be prepared in the official languages. Secondly, it grants MEPs the right to speak in their preferred official language, with simultaneous interpretation provided. In committee and delegation meetings, interpretation is facilitated based on the languages used and requested by MEPs.

Furthermore, Rule 226 foresees the right of EU citizens to submit petitions before the Committee of Petition of the European Parliament on a matter that comes within the EU fields of activity and which affect directly the petitioner.

Petitions must be submitted in one of its official languages. If a petition is written in a non-official language, it will only be considered if accompanied by a translation into an official EU language, and all correspondence from the Parliament to the petitioner will use the language of the translation. Additionally, the Parliament's Bureau has the discretion to allow petitions to be tabled and correspondence to be conducted in other languages that hold official status within specific regions or entire Member States, as per their constitutional arrangements.

¹⁹ Mańko, R., (2017), *Legal Aspects of EU Multilingualism*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

4.2.2.2.2. European Commission

The “correspondence” section of the general principles of the [European Commission Rules of Procedure](#), foresees that:

"In accordance with Article 21 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, the Commission shall reply to letters in the language of the initial letter, provided that it was written in one of the official languages of the Community."

Furthermore, in Article 17, a definition of “authentic language or languages” is given. It refers to the official language of the EU.

4.2.2.2.3. European Council

With regards to the European Council, Article 7 of its Rules of Procedure state that “*The opening to the public of Council meetings relating to the ‘Legislative deliberations’ part of its agenda shall be made through public transmission by audiovisual means, notably in an overflow room and through **broadcasting in all official languages of the institutions of the European Union** using video-streaming. A recorded version shall remain available for at least one month on the Council's Internet site. The outcome of voting shall be indicated by visual means.*”

In addition, [Article 14](#) outlines the language protocol governing deliberations and decisions within the Council. Unless unanimously decided otherwise due to urgency, the Council shall deliberate and make decisions solely based on documents and drafts prepared in the languages designated by the existing language rules.

4.3. Conclusion of the section

The EU Multilingualism is a principle embedded in the Treaty of the European Union and finds ramifications in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union establishing a right to cultural and linguistic diversity within the EU. This linguistic diversity within the EU is set in stone in Regulation 1/1958 which recognises 24 official languages. Multilingualism is mainstreamed in the EU institutions through a set of respective Rules of Procedure regulating the internal work and procedure of the institution.

The principle of multilingualism gives rights to EU citizens as well as EU officials to interact with, impart information, and work in EU official languages.

Yet, to date, NSLs are left out of the scope of the EU Multilingualism policy. There are no possibilities offered to users of EU NSLs to interact with the EU institutions in their native languages (NSLs) despite the existence of directly applicable international legislation and policies relevant to NSLs.



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

5. International legislation and measures relevant to national sign languages

5.1 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

On 23 December 2010, the EU ratified the CRPD, becoming a State Party to the Convention. It was a historic moment as it was unprecedented for the EU to ratify an international Convention, coupled with the EU being the first regional entity to ratify the CRPD. The ratification of the CRPD brought the obligation of the EU to implement the provisions where it has the competencies to do so.

Pertaining to the present topic, the relevant provisions are found in four CRPD articles.²⁰ Firstly, Article 2 outlines “*Definitions*”²¹, and clarifies that languages include NSLs. Therefore, this provision grants full linguistic status to all NSLs.

Secondly, Article 9 on “*Accessibility*”²² states that State Parties to the Convention must take all measures to ensure the full accessibility of persons with disabilities, including deaf people, to information and communication, on an equal basis with others.

Article 21(b) addresses the obligation of state parties to accept and facilitate the use of NSLs in official interactions. Moreover, Article 21(e) obliges State Parties to recognise and promote the use of NSLs.

Finally, Article 30.4 on “*Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport*”²³ recognises the rights of deaf people to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including NSLs, and deaf culture.

The CRPD is supported by two mechanisms: the UN Treaty Bodies mechanism – the CRPD Committee – and the Special Procedure mechanism – The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

5.2 – Concluding Observations of the CRPD Committee on the EU

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) conducts reviews of CRPD State Parties as part of its mandate to monitor the implementation of the CRPD. States Parties

²⁰ We voluntarily removed Article 24 on Inclusive Education since education is a matter of competency of Member States.

²¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), *Article 2 - Definitions*, URL: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-2-definitions.html>

²² Ibid, *Article 9 - Accessibility*, URL: <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-9-accessibility>

²³ Ibid, *Article 30 – Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport*, URL: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-30-participation-in-cultural-life-recreation-leisure-and-sport.html#:~:text=Persons%20with%20disabilities%20shall%20be,sign%20languages%20and%20deaf%20culture.>



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

to the CRPD are required to submit regular reports to the CRPD Committee detailing their progress and compliance with the treaty's provisions.

The EU, having ratified the CRPD in 2010 as a regional integration organization, is subject to these periodic reviews. These reviews assess how well the EU is implementing the CRPD across its policies and legislation to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are upheld within its Member States. The review process involves examining reports submitted by the EU, as well as gathering additional information from disability rights groups, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Based on this evaluation, the CRPD Committee provides Concluding Observations that highlight areas of success and concern, and recommends actions to better align with CRPD obligations.

In the specific instance of 2015, the CRPD Committee's review of the EU's initial report led to the acknowledgment of NSLs as "national and minority languages"²⁴. This is significant as it urges the EU to treat NSLs with the same respect and protective measures as other recognised languages.

5.3 – UN Special Procedure Mechanism: The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The UN Special Procedure mechanism is a component of the Human Rights Council that allows for the monitoring and investigating of specific human rights issues or the situation in particular countries.²⁵ There are two types of special procedures: thematic mandates, which focus on specific human rights issues worldwide, and country mandates, which address human rights situations in specific countries.

The Special Rapporteur on the Rights of persons with disabilities is appointed and tasked with examining, monitoring, advising, and publicly reporting on the situation of the rights of persons with disabilities.

In 2022, Dr Gerard Quinn, then UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in his report on his visit to the EU 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."*²⁶ He has publicly called for the EU to grant EU NSLs official status in the EU.

²⁴ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee, *Concluding Observations on the initial Report of the European Union*, 2015, page 12, URL: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CRPD%2FC%2FEU%2FCO%2F1&Lang=en

²⁵ OHCHR, "Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council," accessed June 18, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council>

²⁶ Quinn, Dr Gerard, Visit to the European Union Report, 28th December 2022, page 4, URL: <https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2023/02/UNSR-Report-on-visit-to-Europe.pdf>



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

6. EUD's position on the EU's recognition of the national sign languages as official languages of the EU

The Treaty of the European Union establishes that multilingualism is one of the EU's core missions by respecting *"its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced"*²⁷. In the same line, Article 22 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights brings the obligation to the Union to respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The lack of respect of linguistic diversity constitutes discrimination on the grounds of languages protected by Article 21 of the Charter.

In this context, in 2016, the European Parliament called for the *"official recognition of national and regional sign language(s) in Member States and within EU institutions"*.²⁸ This call was reiterated in 2022 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which requested that the EU NSLs acquire the status of EU official languages.

These requests are legitimised through a specific interpretation of the CRPD. Article 21(e) CRPD provides the obligation to its States Parties to *"promote and recognise sign language"*. In other words, State Parties must recognise their national sign language(s) as full language(s). However, when read in conjunction with Article 21(b) – which recognises the obligation to facilitate the use of national sign language in official interactions – the interpretation given to Article 21(e) is to be extended towards an obligation to legally recognise national sign languages not only as full languages but also as official languages. This reasoning is applicable to all States Parties to the CRPD, including the EU and its Member States.

The state of play of NSLs within EU Member States is that the 27 EU Member States have partially fulfilled their obligations as State Parties to the CRPD by legally recognising their NSLs, as full languages through various types of legal instruments.²⁹ However, not all EU Member States have granted official status to their national sign language.³⁰

The European Union of the Deaf respects the competencies of EU Member States to legally recognise their NSLs as full languages. However, as a State Party of the CRPD, the EU also has an obligation to *officialise* EU NSLs as official EU languages and should take steps towards its recognition. In that regard, the incorporation of the 29 EU NSLs into the corpus of EU official languages will be a step forward to the full compliance of the EU with the CRPD. This will ensure effective equality between the EU's signed and spoken languages.

²⁷ Treaty of the European Union, Article 3

²⁸ European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters (2016/2952(RSP)), article 1(a)

²⁹ World Federation of the Deaf, the legal recognition of national sign languages: <https://wfdeaf.org/news/the-legal-recognition-of-national-sign-languages/>

³⁰ For more information : De Meulder, Maartje, Joseph J. Murray, and Rachel McKee (2019) [*The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World*](#). Multilingual Matters.



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

7. EUD's Recommendations: Reviewing Regulation 1/1958 and amending EU Institutions' Rules of Procedure

To achieve the officialization of EU National Sign Languages as official EU languages, a comprehensive review and amendment of Regulation 1/1958 is essential. This foundational regulation needs to be revisited to incorporate the recognition of the 29 EU NSLs as official languages alongside the existing 24 spoken languages.

The first step involves drafting amendments to Regulation 1/1958, proposing the inclusion of the NSLs as co-official languages of the EU. This amendment should be backed by a detailed impact assessment to address the logistical, financial, and procedural implications of such inclusion. Following this, extensive consultations with stakeholders, including national sign language users, National Associations of Deaf, linguistic experts, and Member States, are vital to ensure transparency in the process.

Additionally, the EU institutions' Rules of Procedure need to be amended to ensure the inclusion of NSLs as working languages of the institutions. Thus, NSL users will be able to interact with and impart information from the relevant institutions in their national sign language and not only through the spoken language.

Once these steps are achieved, this will allow the EU to align itself more closely with the principles of a Union of Equality. Furthermore, the implementation of the CRPD, to enable the full inclusion and participation of deaf people in the EU, will be rendered possible.

8. Annex I: List of National Sign Languages

	Name of the national sign language	EU Member State	Year of Recognition
1	Österreichische Gebärdensprache (Austrian Sign Language) (ÖGS)	Austria	2005-05-01
2	Vlaamse Gebarentaal (Flemish Sign Language) (VGT)	Belgium (Flanders)	2006-04-26
3	Langue des Signes de Belgique Francophone Belgian Francophone Sign Language) (LSFB)	Belgium (Wallonia)	2003-10-22
4	Български жестов език (Bulgarian Sign Language)	Bulgaria	2021-01-21
5	Hrvatski Znakovni Jezik	Croatia	07/07/1905 2015



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

	(Croatian Sign Language)(HZJ)		
6	Κυπριακή Νοηματική Γλώσσα (Cypriot Sign Language)(KNT)	Cyprus	2006
7	Český Znakový Jazyk (Czech Sign Language)(CZJ)	Czech Republic	1998
8	Dansk Tegnsprog (Danish Sign Language)	Denmark	2014
9	Eesti Viipekeel (Estonian Sign Language)(EVK)	Estonia	2007
10	Suomalainen Viittomakieli (Finnish Sign Language)(SVK)	Finland	1995
11	Finlandssvenskt Teckenspråk (Finland-Swedish Sign Language) (SRVK)	Finland	1995
12	Langue des Signes Francaise (French Sign Language) (LSF)	France	2005
13	Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German Sign Language) (DGS)	Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium	Germany – 2002; Luxembourg – 2018; Belgium - 2019
14	Ελληνική Νοηματική Γλώσσα (Greek Sign Language)(ENΓ)	Greece	2000 and 2017
15	Magyar Jelnyelv (Hungarian Sign Language)	Hungary	2009
16	Irish Sign Language (ISL)	Ireland	09/10/2013 2017
17	Lingua dei Segni Italiana (Italian Sign Language) (LIS)	Italy	2021
18	Latviešu Zīmju Valoda (Latvian Sign Language) (LZV)	Latvia	2000
19	Lietuvių Gestų Kalba (Lithuanian Sign Language) (LGK)	Lithuania	1995
20	Lingwa tas-Sinjali Maltija	Malta	16-Mar-16



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

	(Maltese Sign Language) (LSM)		
21	Nederlandse Gebarentaal (Dutch Sign Language) (NGT)	The Netherlands	13-Oct-20
22	Polski Jezyk Migowy (Polish Sign Language) (PJM)	Poland	2011
23	Lingua Gestual Portuguesa (Portuguese Sign Language) (LGP)	Portugal	1997
24	Limba Semnelor Române (Romanian Sign Language) (LSR)	Romania	2002
25	Slovník Posunkovej Reci (Slovak Sign Language) (SPR)	Slovakia	1995
26	Slovenski Znakovni Jezik (Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ)	Slovenia	28/05/2020 and 2002
27	Lengua de Signos Española (LSE)	Spain	2007
28	Lengua de Signos Catalana (LSC)	Spain	2010
29	Svenskt Teckenspråk (SSL)	Sweden	1981, 2006 and 2009



**EUROPEAN UNION
OF THE DEAF**

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

9. Annex II: Revised Regulation 1/1958

REGULATION No 1

determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community

Article 1

The official languages and the working languages of the institutions of the Union are: Austrian Sign Language, Belgian Francophone Sign Language, Bulgarian, Bulgarian Sign Language, Catalan Sign Language, Croatian, Croatian Sign Language, Cypriot Sign Language, Czech, Czech Sign Language, Danish, Danish Sign Language, Dutch, Dutch Sign Language, English, Estonian, Estonian Sign Language, Finnish, Finnish Sign Language, Finland-Swedish Sign Language, Flemish Sign Language, French, French Sign Language, German, German Sign Language, Greek, Greek Sign Language, Hungarian, Hungarian Sign Language, Irish, Irish Sign Language, Italian, Italian Sign Language, Latvian, Latvian Sign Language, Lithuanian, Lithuanian Sign Language, Maltese, Maltese Sign Language, Polish, Polish Sign Language, Portuguese, Portuguese Sign Language, Romanian, Romanian Sign Language, Slovak, Slovak Sign Language, Slovenian, Slovenian Sign Language, Spanish, Spanish Sign Language, Swedish, and Swedish Sign Language.

Article 2

Documents which a Member State or a person subject to the jurisdiction of a Member State sends to institutions of the Community may be drafted in any one of the official languages selected by the sender. The reply shall be drafted in the same language.

Article 3

Documents which an institution of the Community sends to a Member State or to a person subject to the jurisdiction of a Member State shall be drafted in the language of such State.

Article 4

Regulations and other documents of general application shall be drafted in the **non-signed** official languages.

Article 5

The *Official Journal of the European Union* shall be published in the **non-signed** official languages.



**EUROPEAN UNION
OF THE DEAF**

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

Article 6

The institutions of the Community may stipulate in their rules of procedure which of the languages are to be used in specific cases.

Article 7

The languages to be used in the proceedings of the Court of Justice shall be laid down in its rules of procedure.

Article 8

If a Member State has more than one official language, the language to be used shall, at the request of such State, be governed by the general rules of its law.

This Regulation shall be binding in its entirety and directly applicable in all Member States.



EUROPEAN UNION OF THE DEAF

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

10. Bibliography

- Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union
- De Meulder, Maartje, Joseph J. Murray, and Rachel McKee (2019) The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World. Multilingual Matters
- European Commission, European Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2010-2020, URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9835&langId=en>
- European Parliament Resolution on Sign Language for the Deaf (Doc A2-302/87), Recital C
- European Parliament Resolution on sign languages, Official Journal C 379, 07/12/1998 P. 0066.
- 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 2018 on language equality in the digital age (2018/2028(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 13 November 2018 on minimum standards for minorities in the EU (2018/2036(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters (2016/2952(RSP))
- European Parliament Report 2010/2272(INI), URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2011-0263_EN.html?redirect
- European Parliament, 'The Principle of Subsidiarity', Factsheets, URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/7/the-principle-of-subsidiarity>.
- European Union of the Deaf, Sign Language Legislation in the European Union Edition II (2012), URL: https://www.eud.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EUD_SL_II.pdf
- Mańko, R., Legal Aspects of EU Multilingualism, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), January 2017
- Maya de Wit, "Sign Language Interpreting in Europe", 2016 edition
- OHCHR, "Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council," accessed June 18, 2024, URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council>
- Quinn, Dr Gerard, Visit to the European Union Report, 28th December 2022, page 4, URL: <https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2023/02/UNSR-Report-on-visit-to-Europe.pdf>
- Treaty of the European Union (TEU), URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M%2FTXT>
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), URL: <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee, Concluding Observations on the initial Report of the European Union, 2015, page 12, URL:



**EUROPEAN UNION
OF THE DEAF**

A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=C
RPD%2FC%2FEU%2FCO%2F1&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=C
RPD%2FC%2FEU%2FCO%2F1&Lang=en)

- Sousa, F. V. de. (2022). Essential framework of the legal status of sign language: recognition and officiality. *Revista de Lenguaje y Derecho*, (78), Article 3843. <https://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/40163>
- Venade de Sousa, F. (2024). Decoding sign language legal status: Exploring a distinct category (or tertium genus) between recognition and officiality. *Comparative Law and Language*, 3(1). Retrieved from <https://teseo.unitn.it/cil/article/view/2932>
- World Federation of the Deaf, chart on the legal recognition of NSLs internationally, URL: <https://wfdeaf.org/news/the-legal-recognition-of-national-sign-languages/>