

From Recognition to Officialisation – A European evolution of sign language rights

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From recognition to officialisation

A European evolution of sign language rights

Editor:

Alexandre Bloxs

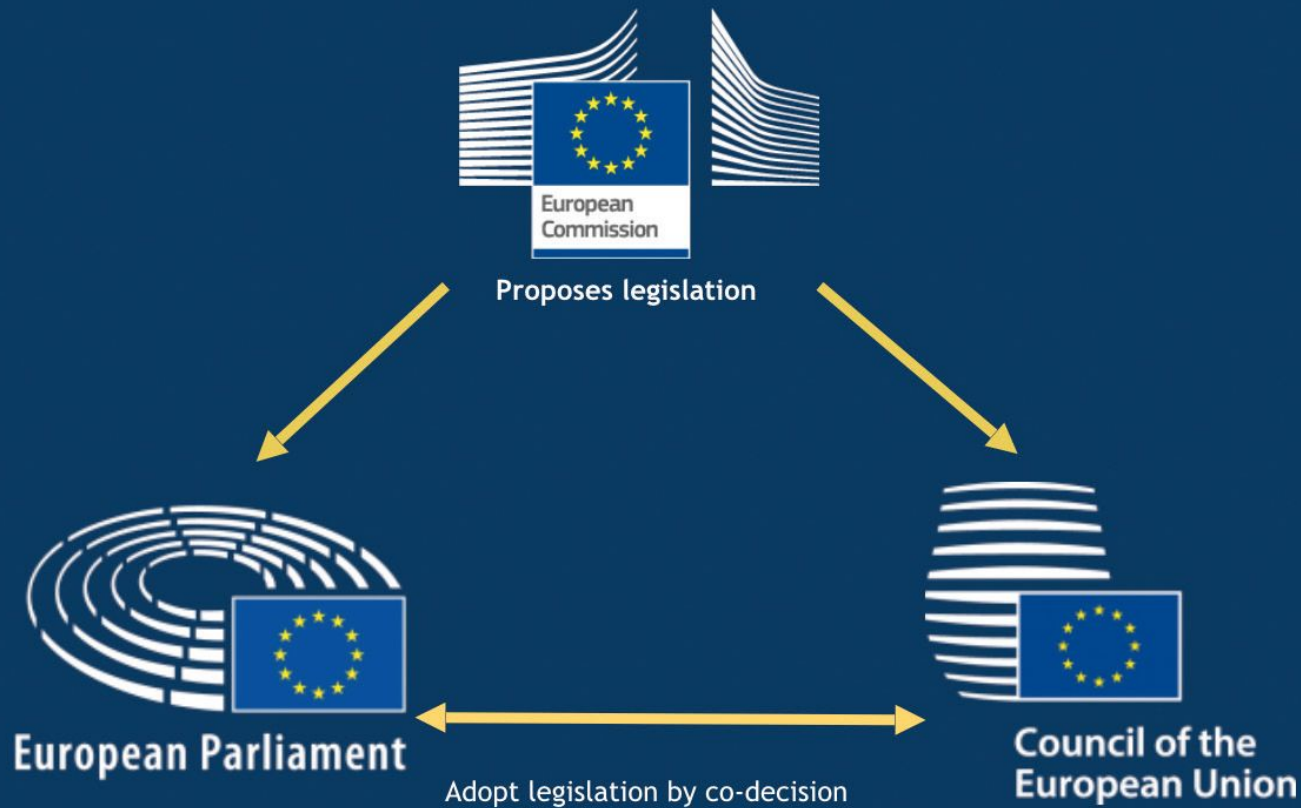
First thing first:

What is the European Union ?

Facts on the European Union

- A political and economic Union of 27 Member States
- Aims to have a single market with no barriers to the free movement of people, capital, services and goods)
- Legislative procedure through 3 main institutions
- Has 452 million citizens
- Has more than a million deaf people
- Has 24 official languages
- 29 national sign languages exist but are not represented before the EU





Ten years of Petition 1056/2016



Submitted in 2016 by EUD, it asks that deaf citizens be able to petition the European Parliament in a national sign language, independently of a written version in one of the 24 official languages.

The petitioner uploads a video to the petitions portal, which already accepts audiovisual files; a translator drawn from a list covering the 29 national sign languages renders it into the written national language; the Parliament's translation service then proceeds as it would with any other petition. No technical obstacle was identified at any point

The issue at stake

► TITLE IX : PETITIONS

Rule 232 : Right of petition

1. In accordance with Article 227 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, any citizen of the European Union and any natural or legal person residing or having its registered office in a Member State shall have the right to address, individually or in association with other citizens or persons, a petition to Parliament on a matter which comes within the European Union's fields of activity and which affects him, her or it directly.

2. Petitions to Parliament shall show the name and the permanent address of each petitioner.

3. Submissions to Parliament that are clearly not intended to be a petition shall not be registered as petitions; instead, they shall be forwarded without delay to the appropriate service for further treatment.

4. Where a petition is signed by several natural or legal persons, the signatories shall designate a representative and deputy representatives who shall be regarded as the petitioners for the purposes of this Title.

If no such representatives have been designated the first signatory or another appropriate person shall be regarded as the petitioner.

5. Each petitioner may at any time withdraw his, her or its signature from the petition.

If all petitioners withdraw their signatures, the petition shall become null and void.

6. **Petitions must be written in an official language of the European Union.**

Petitions written in any other language will be considered only if the petitioner has attached a translation in an official language. Parliament's correspondence with the petitioner shall employ the official language in which the translation is drawn up.

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.

7. Petitions can be submitted either by post or through the Petitions portal, which shall be made available on Parliament's website and which shall guide the petitioner to formulate the petition in a manner that complies with paragraphs 1 and 2.

8. Where several petitions are received on a similar subject matter, they may be dealt with jointly.

9. Petitions shall be entered in a register in the order in which they are received if they comply with the conditions laid down in paragraph 2. Petitions that do not comply with those conditions shall be filed, and the petitioner shall be informed of the reasons for this.

10. Petitions entered in the register shall be forwarded by the President to the committee responsible for petitions, which shall first establish the admissibility of the petition in accordance with Article 227 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

If the committee fails to reach a consensus on the admissibility of the petition, it shall, at the request of at least one-third of the members of the committee, be declared admissible.

11. Petitions that have been declared inadmissible by the committee shall be filed. The petitioner shall be informed of the decision and the reasons for it. Where possible, alternative means of redress may be recommended.

12. Petitions, once registered, shall become public documents, and the name of the petitioner, possible co-petitioners and possible supporters and the contents of the petition may be published by Parliament for reasons of transparency. The petitioner, co-petitioners and supporters shall be informed accordingly.

13. Notwithstanding paragraph 12, the petitioner, a co-petitioner or a supporter may request that his, her or its name be withheld in order to protect his, her or its privacy, in which case Parliament shall comply with the request.

Where the petitioner's complaint cannot be investigated because of the petitioner's anonymity, the petitioner shall be consulted on the further steps to be taken.

14. In order to protect the rights of third parties, Parliament may, on its own motion or at the request of the third party concerned, anonymise a petition and/or other data contained therein, if it sees fit to do so.

15. Petitions addressed to Parliament by natural or legal persons who are neither citizens of the European Union nor reside in a Member State nor have their registered office in a Member State shall be registered and filed separately. The President shall send a monthly record of such petitions received during the previous month, indicating their subject-matter, to the committee. The committee may ask to see those which it wishes to consider.

What the UN told the European Union

Concluding Observations of the CRPD Committee, 1 April 2025



What the Committee said on national sign languages

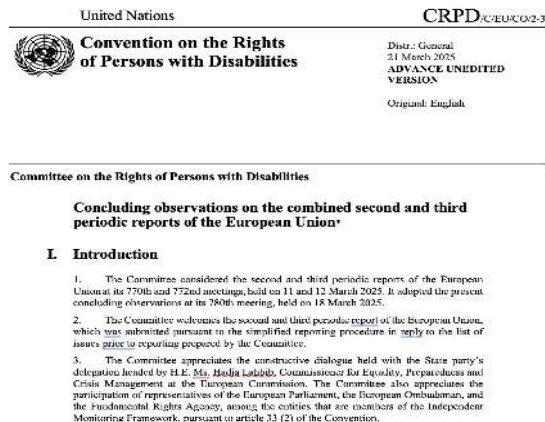
- **Officialisation.** Recognise the 29 national sign languages of the European Union as official EU languages (paras 52(a) and 53(a)).
- **Rules of Procedure.** Amend the Rules of Procedure of the EU institutions so that deaf people can take part in consultations, meetings and democratic processes in their own national sign language.
- **Deaf culture.** Recognise deaf culture as part of the cultural and linguistic landscape of the Union.
- **Audiovisual content.** Provide sign language interpretation for all EU webstreams and audiovisual output, whatever the subject matter.
- **Participation.** Make the Parliament's petitions process and the Conference on the Future of Europe accessible to sign language users.

Expanding the concept of officialisation

- Petition 1056/2016 of the European Parliament
- EUD Position paper on National Sign languages as official EU languages
- Concluding Observations of the CRPD Committee to the EU
- Next steps: writing a book on sign language rights

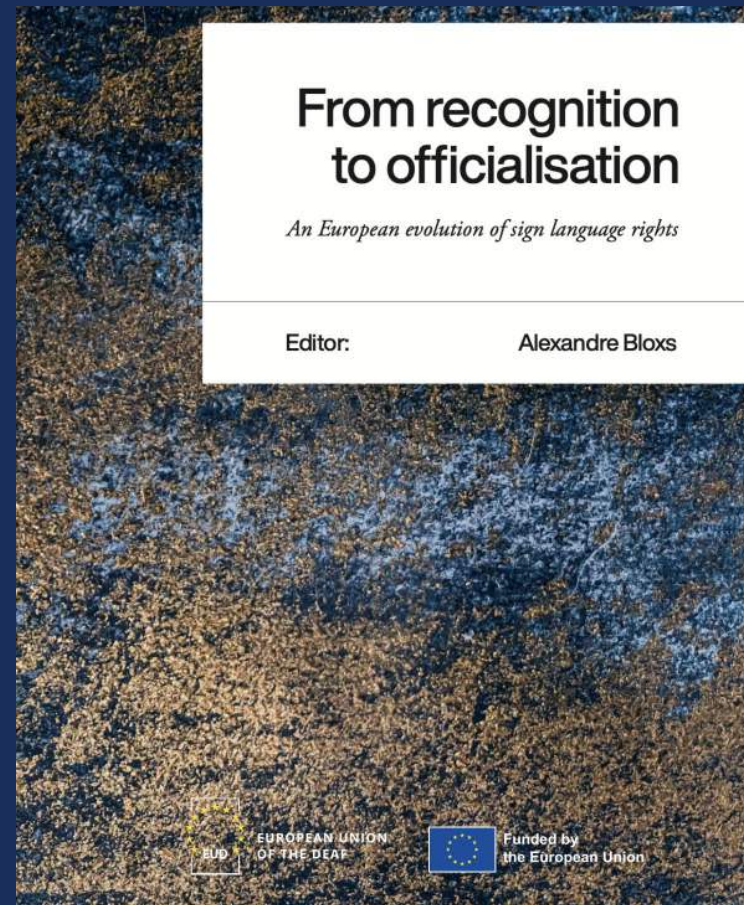


National Sign Languages as EU Official Languages



The concept of sign language rights has traditionally been viewed through the lens of the legal recognition of national sign languages, affirming their existence as full and autonomous languages. Despite increased recognition, access to European Union institutions in national sign languages remains limited: interactions with EU institutions can only take place in official EU languages.

This book proposes a shift in perspective regarding sign language rights: What if the attainment of sign language rights should not be framed in terms of recognition, but rather in terms of officialisation? What if the recognition of national sign languages should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to achieve official status?



The book is structured in two parts:

Part I analyses and dissects the meaning of official status, exploring its challenges and opportunities for national sign languages at the Union's level through multidisciplinary perspectives from some of the most prominent experts in the field.

Each of the authors puts their disciplines – respectively law, linguistics, sociology, communication and statistics – in contribution to the narrative of officialising national sign languages.

Part II assesses the strengths and weaknesses of current legal frameworks surrounding the rights to sign languages at the national level, including the Netherlands, offering tailored recommendations for legal reforms that would facilitate the officialisation of national sign languages.

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Main findings of Part I

1. There is a political evolution that took place in the last decade towards the officialisation of NSLs (*Chapters 1 and 2*)
2. Officialisation of NSLs would allow deaf citizens to reach out to every service and institution of the EU in their NSLs (*Chapter 3*)
3. The current EU legal framework is hearing-centred and indirectly discriminates against deaf communities (*Chapter 4*)
4. The officialisation of NSLs as official EU languages could potentially foster visibility for other linguistic minorities in the union (*Chapter 5*)
5. The officialisation of NSLs is critical for the reinforcement of the legitimacy of the EU through linguistic justice and minority rights (*Chapter 6*)
6. Officialisation can only take place if robust data on Sign Language Peoples exist, yet its design and collections are challenging (*Chapter 7*)
7. However, officialisation should happen at the national level before happening at the EU level due to Article 342 TFEU (*Chapters 2 and 8*)

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Part II of the book: assessment of national sign languages frameworks

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

Main findings of Part II

Out of 31 countries:

1. **29** recognise their NSL as full language;
2. **17** protect discrimination on the grounds of NSLs under equality and non-discrimination provisions;
3. **4** recognise the cultural and linguistic identities of deaf communities as part of the national heritage;
4. **24** recognise the right to be educated in NSL
5. **24** grant the right to NSL as an educational subject
6. **29** recognise the right to professional NSL interpreters
7. **30** safeguard the right to access to information, including in situations of emergencies
8. **14** countries guarantee the involvement of deaf people in decision-making processes

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The status of sign language rights in Europe

The evaluation of the national legal frameworks on sign language rights across 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 sign language rights.

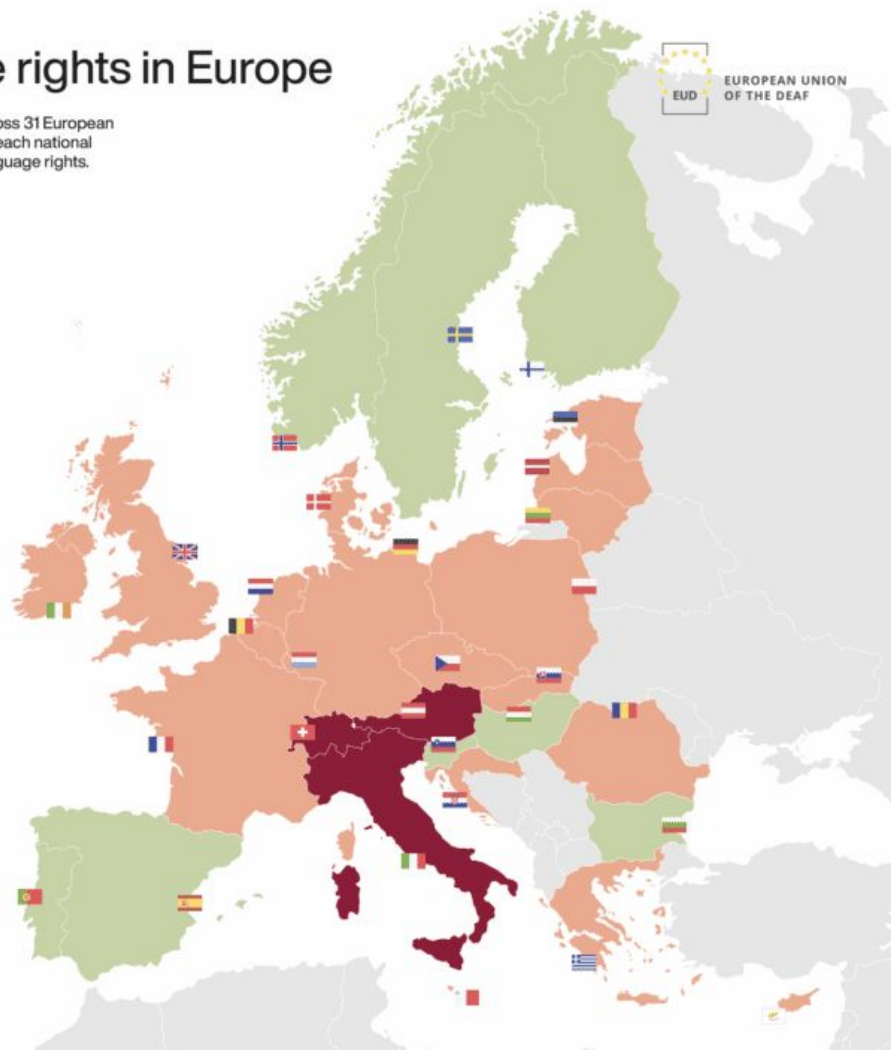
Country	Final score
 Austria	3
 Belgium	6
 Bulgaria	8
 Croatia	5
 Cyprus	4
 Czechia	6
 Denmark	6
 Estonia	4
 Finland	7
 France	4
 Germany	4
 Greece	5
 Hungary	7
 Iceland	7
 Ireland	5
 Italy	3
 Latvia	4
 Lithuania	6
 Luxembourg	4
 Malta	5
 Netherlands	6
 Norway	7
 Poland	6
 Portugal	7
 Romania	6
 Slovakia	6
 Slovenia	7
 Spain	8
 Sweden	7
 Switzerland	2
 United Kingdom	6

Last updated: December 2025



Find all up-to-date data on sign language rights in Europe on our website

	Green	7 - 8
	Orange	3 - 6
	Red	0 - 2



What the future lies ahead

The pathway to the officialisation of NSLs must be undertaken at two levels.

1. The 31 countries should reinforce their own legal framework to elevate their NSLs to the same level of protection as other official languages by using the recommendations from this book
2. Amending the relevant provisions of the Rules of Procedures of the respective EU institutions to pave the way to mainstream the use of NSLs in the work of EU institutions
3. There is a need for research on the impact of these legal frameworks on the actual enjoyment of deaf people of their sign language rights at the national level.

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How can you use the book at the national level?

1. The book offers tailored recommendations to improve the legal framework surrounding national sign languages at the national level.
2. Incorporate those recommendations in your advocacy work at the national level to strengthen your legal framework.
3. Use the sign language recognition map as a comparison point for your country to increase its score.
4. If your country has the highest score, advocate for the meaningful implementation of the legal framework.

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Thank you