
Recommendation 1598 (2003)¹

Protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls its [Recommendation 1492](#) (2001) on the rights of national minorities, and particularly paragraph 12.xiii concerning sign languages.
2. The Assembly takes note of the reply by the Committee of Ministers to this recommendation, contained in Document 9492. It regrets that the Committee of Ministers did not make a pronouncement on the opinions delivered by the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148) and by the Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with Disabilities (Partial Agreement). This reply warrants, if any justification were needed, the Parliamentary Assembly's concern that the rights of sign language users should be incorporated into a specific legal instrument, or into an additional protocol to the charter, without prejudging the position that may be adopted by the organisations representing deaf people.
3. The Assembly recognises sign languages as the expression of Europe's cultural wealth. They are a feature of Europe's linguistic and cultural heritage.
4. The Assembly also recognises sign languages as a complete and natural means of communication for deaf people.
5. The Assembly takes the view that official recognition of these languages will help deaf people to become integrated into society and gain access to justice, education and employment.
6. The Assembly acknowledges the importance of a detailed study of requirements, necessarily preceding the framing of any policy on sign languages. It stresses the need to involve users of these languages in the process.
7. The Assembly observes that a number of member states have introduced programmes in support of sign languages. Although all experience a shortage of sign language interpreters, this demonstrates the strength of demand and the positive and inclusive social benefits such services provide.

8. The Assembly takes the view that official recognition of sign languages will facilitate the training, recruitment and retention of more interpreters.

9. For the above reasons, and in the knowledge that only action at European level will afford a solution to this problem, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers devise a specific legal instrument on the rights of sign language users, and accordingly:

i. instruct the relevant bodies of the Council of Europe to undertake a preparatory study in consultation with national experts and representatives of the deaf community in order to clarify outstanding issues in regard to the protection of the use of sign languages;

ii. define clear goals to be achieved, exact deadlines to be met, and resources and methods to be used, founded on a full study of requirements with the mandatory participation of associations representing the users of these languages;

iii. consider drafting an additional protocol to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages incorporating sign languages into the charter, among the non-territorial minority languages.

10. The Assembly also recommends that the Committee of Ministers encourage member states:

i. to give the sign languages used in their territory formal recognition;

ii. to train sign language interpreters and sign language tutors;

iii. to give education in sign languages to deaf people;

iv. to train teachers, in preparation for working with deaf and hearing-impaired children, in sign languages;

v. to broadcast television programmes in sign languages, and make sign language subtitling of programmes transmitted in spoken language a general practice;

vi. to inform deaf and hearing-impaired people about the use of sign languages;

vii. to utilise the new technologies and make them available to deaf people;

viii. to include sign languages as a valid academic qualification in mainstream secondary schools with equal status to other taught languages;

ix. to grant deaf people the right to choose freely between oral and bilingual school systems;

x. to subsidise the publication of instructive literature in sign languages.

1. *Assembly debate* on 1 April 2003 (11th Sitting) (see Doc. [9738](#), report of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, rapporteur: Mr Bruce; and Doc. [9765](#), opinion of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Baroness Knight).

Text adopted by the Assembly on 1 April 2003 (11th Sitting).