

Report

**A comparative analysis of the status of sign languages in Europe**

©Nina Timmermans, consultant  
Strasbourg, France  
December 2003

# Table of contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 2 European Union</b> .....	<b>5</b>
2.1 European Parliament Resolution on Sign Languages for Deaf People (1988).	5
2.2 European Parliament Resolution on Sign Languages (1998) .....	6
2.3 European Commission Action Plan promoting language learning and linguistic diversity (2003) .....	6
2.4 European Parliament Report on the position of regional and minority languages in the European Union (2003) .....	7
2.5 Council and representatives of the governments of the member states Resolution on equality of opportunity for people with disabilities (1996) .....	8
2.6 Council Resolution on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training (2003) .....	9
2.7 EU funded project in Finland: virtual study and career counselling centre in sign language .....	10
<b>Chapter 3 Council of Europe</b> .....	<b>11</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	11
3.2 The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992) .....	12
3.3 Flensburg Recommendations on the Implementation of Policy Measures for Regional or Minority Languages (2000) .....	13
3.4 Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1492 (2001) on the rights of national minorities .....	13
3.5 Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights report on protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe (2003) .....	15
3.6 Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1598 (2003) on the protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe .....	15
<b>Chapter 4 Constitution and legislation</b> .....	<b>17</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	17
4.2 Constitutional recognition of sign language .....	17
4.3 Recognition of sign language (users) in legislation .....	19
4.4 Regulations concerning the Finnish Sign Language .....	22

<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Use of sign language in education .....</b>	<b>24</b>
5.1	Introduction .....	24
5.2	Special needs education .....	24
5.3	Bilingual education .....	26
5.4	Training of teachers .....	30
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Sign language interpretation .....</b>	<b>32</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	32
6.2	Sign language interpreter .....	32
6.3	Interpretation services and financing .....	34
6.4	Sign language courses .....	37
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Use of sign language in media, politics, cultural expressions and religion .....</b>	<b>39</b>
7.1	Media .....	39
7.2	Parliament .....	41
7.3	Culture .....	42
7.4	Religion .....	43



# Executive summary

## The status of sign language and cultural diversity

Article 22 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000) stipulates that “The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.” In Article 3 of the *Declaration on Cultural Diversity* adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 7 December 2000 “the member states are called upon to examine ways of sustaining and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in the new global environment, at all levels.”

The use, promotion and protection of sign language as the language of the deaf community could be regarded from a cultural point of view, as the different sign languages in Europe constitute an important element of Europe’s linguistic cultural heritage. The actual question in Europe is how to protect and promote sign languages as a common cultural wealth, now and for future generations to come. On national and European level the deaf community strives for an additional protocol on sign languages in the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*.<sup>1</sup> In their aim to have sign languages recognised as minority languages, the deaf non-governmental organisations (NGOs) find support from the European Parliament of the European Union, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and some national delegations<sup>2</sup> of the Council of Europe’s political steering committee on integration and rehabilitation of people with disabilities. Since 1988 the European Parliament campaigns for official recognition of sign languages by the member states of the Union and this year the European Parliament called on the Commission to include sign languages as minority languages in the Union’s language programmes and other (future) instruments protecting minority languages in the (enlarged) European Union.

More and more states in Europe recognise sign language, in one way or another, as the language of the deaf and grant sign language the same status as the national spoken language of the country. Governments and NGOs join efforts to protect, develop and promote their national sign languages, notably in Finland and Sweden. Examples are Sign Language Dictionaries, research projects, national awareness raising campaigns, sign languages courses for hearing people, bilingual education, etc.

## The position of people with a hearing impairment and human rights

Article 20 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000) stipulates that “Everyone is equal before the law.” Article 21.1 of the Charter continues to say that “Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic

---

<sup>1</sup> In the Netherlands, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages entered into force on 1 March 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The national delegations in favour of an additional protocol are not specified. Source: Opinion of the Council of Europe’s Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with disabilities (CD-P-RR) on Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1492 (2001) on the Rights of National Minorities.

features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.” Furthermore, Article 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union stipulates that “The Union recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community.” On 12 May 2000 the European Commission published the communication “Towards a Barrier Free Europe for People with Disabilities” focusing on the improvement of access for people with disabilities. Particular emphasis was placed upon the achievement of a greater synergy between selected issues in the fields of employment, education and vocational training, transport, the internal market, information society, new technology and consumer policy.

The Council of Europe, the European Commission and member states promote a barrier-free society. But barriers to participation are not just physical. Often they are about attitudes, about seeing the disabled person as a medical ‘problem’. This leads to stereotyping and exclusion. An improved status of sign languages, meaning the recognition followed by legal anchoring of sign languages should result in better social integration of people with a hearing impairment. According to Council of Europe’s political steering committee on integration and rehabilitation of people with disabilities, deaf and hearing-impaired persons should have the right to accessible and suitable communication, by means of reasonable adjustment, particularly in the fields of education (including higher education); cultural activities, religion and media; economic/vocational integration; social integration (e.g. transport, political participation); and legal/judicial or other public authorities, administrations or public services (e.g. health care, social and welfare services).<sup>3</sup>

Article 15 of the *Revised European Social Charter* (1996)<sup>4</sup> stipulates that “With a view to ensuring to persons with disabilities, irrespective of age and the nature and origin of their disabilities, the effective exercise of the right to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community, the Parties undertake, in particular: (...) to promote their full social integration and participation in the life of the community in particular through measures, including technical aids, aiming to overcome barriers to communication and mobility and enabling access to transport, housing, cultural activities and leisure.”

Pursuant to the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003, the Scottish Parliament organised in September 2003 its own Disability Awareness Week to raise awareness of disability access issues. Presiding officer George Reid said “Accessibility is one of our fundamental principles, but we should not forget what underpins that, essentially that disability is a matter of human rights. We should always remember Article I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: ‘All human beings are born equal in rights and dignity.’ I want the Scottish Parliament to be fully open and welcoming to the 12 per cent of our population who have a disability.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Source: Opinion of the Council of Europe’s Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with disabilities (CD-P-RR) on Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1492 (2001) on the Rights of National Minorities.

<sup>4</sup> To date the Netherlands has not signed the Revised European Social Charter.

## Challenges

The question for governments is not anymore *whether* to recognise sign languages or not, but *when* and *how* to recognise sign languages. Finland and Portugal have recognised sign language (users) by amending their constitutions and enacting corresponding legalisation. The French-speaking Community of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have recognised sign language in acts and laws, often in relation to education or the profession of sign language interpreter. Spain is currently in a 'transition phase' and investigates ways to recognise sign language (like the Netherlands).

One can ask what official recognition will mean in the everyday life of a person with a hearing impairment. Well, not much at first sight, but recognition of sign language as the preferred language of the deaf community is the first required step towards integration and full citizenship. The next step is the amendment of existing laws or the proposal of new laws in order to implement the political commitment in legislation and policies. Recognition should therefore be followed up by corresponding rights for the users of sign language, i.e. the right to free choice between oral or bilingual school systems, the introduction of sign languages as a communication channel in general and vocational education, and the adoption of practical measures for ensuring full participation by the minority of deaf people in the community. This will make it possible to achieve an increase in the number of interpreters and ease of access to public and private services, education, recreation and social activity, thereby making for significant enhancement of the quality of life and human rights for the deaf.<sup>5</sup>

**DISCLAIMER:** It was my goal to give an overview, as complete as possible, of the status of sign languages in Europe. The information on the countries mentioned in the present report serve as *examples* of existing legislation, policies and developments in Europe, whereby it is not guaranteed that all information is up-to-date. When a country is *not* mentioned, this means that there was no information available in English on a specific subject. Up-to-date information in English on the status of sign language in Austria could not be found. Only limited information on the situation in France could be found.

Nina Timmermans  
Strasbourg, 8 December 2003

---

<sup>5</sup> See also the report on protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe published by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly on 17 March 2003.

# 1

## Introduction

Sign languages are considered to be the preferred or only language of large numbers of deaf people. **Sign language users** are a cultural and linguistic minority. It has been estimated that the ratio of pre-lingually deaf persons is approximately 1 in 1000.<sup>6</sup> However, since also post-lingually deaf persons, families of deaf children, teachers, social workers, etc. need to use sign languages, the number of sign language users is considerably larger than the number of deaf persons. Sign language users are a minority, since they are a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, possessing linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population. Both Finland and Portugal have already enshrined the rights of sign language users in their Constitutions.

In Europe, sign languages are typically used throughout the country that they are native to: British Sign Language in Great Britain, French Sign Language in France, German Sign Language in Germany, Italian Sign Language in Italy, etc. However, it is worth noting that in some countries more than one sign language may exist. These sign languages are used in certain geographical areas only and thus meet the definition of regional minority languages. For example: In Spain, Catalan Sign Language is used in Catalonia, and Galician Sign Language in Galicia; in Belgium, Flemish-Belgian Sign Language, Belgian-French Sign Language, and German Sign Language are used; in Switzerland, Swiss-German, Swiss-French and Swiss-Italian Sign Language(s) are used; in Finland, Finnish Sign Language and Finnish-Swedish Sign Language are used.

The present report gives an overview of the status of sign languages in Europe and serves to support the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and other ministries involved in the decision making process concerning the recognition of Dutch Sign Language. The information in this report is based on official government positions, contributions from national non-governmental organisations protecting and promoting the rights of the deaf and hearing-impaired (equivalents of *Dovenschap* in the Netherlands), as well as press releases on the official website of the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003. In a smaller or larger extent the following countries in Europe are referred to in the comparative analysis: Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

---

<sup>6</sup> Source: Opinion of the Council of Europe's Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with disabilities (CD-P-RR) on Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1492 (2001) on the Rights of National Minorities.

## 2

# European Union

### **2.1 European Parliament Resolution on Sign Languages for Deaf People (1988)**

In its Resolution on Sign Languages for Deaf People of 1988, the European Parliament 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. The European Parliament called upon the member states to abolish any remaining obstacles to the use of sign language.

The European Parliament stressed the importance of recognising sign language interpreting as a profession and of establishing full-time sign language interpreter training and employment programmes in each member state under the responsibility of the national associations for the deaf. It urged member states, in consultation with the European Regional Secretariat of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), to submit projects for the training of sufficient numbers of sign language tutors, assessors and interpreters, as well as for support under the European Social Fund. The European Parliament called upon Community institutions to set an example by making provision, as a matter of principle for sign language interpretation at meetings organised under their auspices and attended by deaf people.

The European Parliament called upon broadcasting authorities to include translation into sign language, or at least subtitles, of television news programmes, those of political interest and, to the extent possible, of a selection of cultural and general interest programmes and also urged broadcasting authorities, in consultation with the European Regional Secretariat for the Deaf and the European Broadcasting Union, to determine minimum levels of provision of sign language interpretation or subtitling for programmes aimed at adults and children respectively, as well as teletext provision. The European Parliament urged member states to ensure that all relevant government circulars on welfare benefits, health and employment are produced using sign languages on video for the use of the deaf community. It called upon the Commission to support research in the area of television services for the deaf.

The European Parliament called upon member states, in co-operation with the Commission, to support pilot projects aimed at teaching sign languages to hearing children and adults, using deaf people trained for the purpose and to back research in this area.

It urged member states to support research into and publication of up-to-date dictionaries of their respective national sign languages and invited the Commission to foster such activities, and to promote development of multilingual dictionaries of the sign languages in use within the Community in due course.

It invited the Commission to consider how, at a suitable juncture, Community-level exchanges might best be brought about between those proficient in their respective countries' sign languages and cultures. Finally, the European Parliament considered it essential that the deaf be fully involved in determining policy for the non-hearing at national and Community level, notably through the European Regional Secretariat of the WFD, and called for more generous funding under the Community budget for development of devices for deaf people in the member states.

## **2.2 European Parliament Resolution on Sign Languages (1998)**

In its Resolution on Sign Languages of 1998, the European Parliament 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, and to ensure EU funding programmes in the field of education and employment training including training of sign language tutors and interpreters.

It called on the Commission to ensure all EU programmes are accessible to deaf people and recognition is given to the need for sign language interpretation and to introduce measures on deaf awareness training for officials working in EU institutions. It called on the Commission and the member states to ensure that public meetings organised by EU institutions are accessible to deaf people by providing sign language interpretation service on request.

The European Parliament called on the Commission to examine, in the context of public service television, the possibility of introducing legislation, enabling the translation into sign language, or at least the subtitling of news broadcasts, programmes of political interest - especially during election campaigns - and, as far as possible, of cultural and general interest programmes.

Finally, the European Parliament called on the Commission to introduce a proposal for framework legislation to ensure compatibility of telecommunications text and videophone equipment for deaf people across Europe, and to introduce measures to ensure universal design in multimedia applications so that deaf people are not excluded from new applications, and, in addition, to undertake studies concerning other audio-visual services for deaf people.

## **2.3 European Commission Action Plan promoting language learning and linguistic diversity (2003)**

After the success of the European Year of Languages 2001, the Commission published on 24 July 2003 the Action Plan promoting language learning and linguistic diversity. The Action Plan sets out three broad areas in which action should be taken: extending the benefits of life-long language learning to all citizens, improving language teaching, and creating a more language-friendly environment. It proposes a series of actions to be taken at European level in 2004 – 2006 with the aim of supporting actions taken by local, regional and national authorities. Taken together, actions proposed, and those taken by member states, can secure a major step change in promoting language learning and linguistic diversity.

The Commission believes that linguistic diversity is one of the European Union's defining features. Respect for the diversity of the Union's languages is a founding principle of the European Union. The mainstream European education, training and culture programmes are already accessible to speakers of all languages, whether 'official' languages or regional languages, minority languages, languages spoken by migrant communities, or sign languages.

The Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes, and their successors, can play a greater part in promoting linguistic diversity by funding projects to raise awareness about and encourage the learning of so-called 'regional', 'minority' and migrant languages, to improve the quality of the teaching of these languages, to improve access to learning opportunities in them; to encourage the production, adaptation and exchange of learning materials in them and to encourage the exchange of information and best practice in this field.

## **2.4 European Parliament Report on the position of regional and minority languages in the European Union (2003)**

The European Parliament regards the Commission's Action Plan as an important step towards a global approach to encouraging language learning and creating greater awareness of the European Union's linguistic and cultural heritage. On 4 September 2003 the European Parliament adopted a report written by the Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport on the position of regional and minority languages in the European Union. In this report the European Parliament calls the Commission for more measures in the area of the European Union's linguistic and cultural heritage.

Following the same approach used for the European Year against Racism 1997, which led to the setting-up of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia and the launching of an action programme to combat discrimination, the European Parliament calls for the setting-up of a European Agency on Linguistic Diversity and Language Learning and a multi-annual programme on linguistic diversity and language learning, building on the success of the European Year of Languages 2001.

The Agency on Linguistic Diversity and Language Learning should keep constant track of developments in this area and the implementation of the action plan and also introduce concrete measures, *inter alia* to help promote a multilingual Europe and a language-friendly environment, and develop a network to promote linguistic diversity, to include European regional and minority languages. At the same time, suitable arrangements should be made to ensure that part of the financial appropriations are specifically earmarked for concrete measures and for regional and less widely used languages. The aim of these measures is to reinforce the European dimension with a view to promoting and protecting regional and minority languages and cultures.

As proposed by Maria Martens, MEP for the Netherlands, sign language will also be covered by the action plan. Maria Martens, MEP: "About 1 out of 1000 people are born deaf or became deaf before age 3. For the Netherlands alone there are already about 15.000 deaf people. Sign language is essential for them for their communication. Therefore sign language deserves to be recognised as minority language and sign language should be treated in the same way as spoken minority languages. This means for example that grants should be made available."

## **2.5 Council and representatives of the governments of the member states Resolution on equality of opportunity for people with disabilities (1996)**

The Council and representatives of the governments of the member states Resolution on equality of opportunity for people with disabilities of 20 December 1996 reaffirmed the commitment of equality in the development of comprehensive policies in the field of disability and to avoiding any form of negative discrimination. The Council and representatives of the governments of the member states affirmed that the principle of equality of opportunity for all, including people with disabilities, represents a core value shared by all member states. This implies the elimination of negative discrimination against people with disabilities and improving their quality of life. Access to mainstream education and training, where appropriate, can play an important role in successful integration in economic and social life.

The Council and representatives of the governments of the member states called on the member states to consider if relevant national policies take into account, in particular, the following orientations:

- empowering people with disabilities for participation in society, including the severely disabled, while paying due attention to the needs and interests of their families and carers;
- mainstreaming the disability perspective into all relevant sectors of policy formulation;
- enabling people with disabilities to participate fully in society by removing barriers;
- nurturing public opinion to be receptive to the abilities of people with disabilities and toward strategies based on equal opportunities.

The Council and representatives of the governments of the member states invited the European Commission to:

- take account, where appropriate, and within the provisions of the Treaty of the principles set out in this Resolution in any relevant proposal it submits on Community legislation, programmes or initiatives;
- promote – in collaboration with the member states and with non governmental organisations of and for people with disabilities – the exchange of useful information and experience especially concerning innovative policies and good practice;
- submit periodic reports to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the basis of information supplied by the member states, describing the progress made and the obstacles encountered in implementing this Resolution;
- take account of the results of the evaluation of the HELIOS II programme when considering whether it would be appropriate to bring forward proposals for follow up.

## **2.6 Council Resolution on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training (2003)**

In its Resolution on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training of 5 May 2003, the Council stresses that a significant number of people with disabilities face difficulties of different kinds in their daily life. The Council notes that the Treaty establishing the European Community gives the Community the opportunity to take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

The Council refers explicitly to Rule 6 on Education of the United Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for People with Disabilities and notes the increased involvement of governments, support groups, teachers and parents groups, and in particular organisations of people with disabilities and their families in seeking to improve access to education for those with special needs.

Although there are initiatives in the member states and at Community level to ensure that people with disabilities have better access to education and training, there exists still the need for further, appropriate practicable measures to improve access of people with disabilities to education and training.

The Council's resolution is directed to the member states and the European Commission with their respective competencies and invites the member states and the European Commission to:

- encourage and support the full integration of children and young people with special needs in society through their appropriate education and training, and their insertion in a school system which is [...]adapted to their needs;
- pursue efforts to make lifelong learning more accessible to people with disabilities and, within this context, give particular attention to the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration (e - learning);
- encourage the accessibility of all public websites covering guidance, education and vocational training [...] to persons with disabilities by respecting the web accessibilities guidelines;
- increase, where appropriate, adequate support of services and technical assistance to pupils and students with special education and training needs;
- facilitate further proper information and guidance in order to allow disabled people themselves or, if necessary, their parents or other responsible persons involved in choosing the appropriate type of education;
- continue and, if necessary, increase the efforts aiming at the initial and in-service training of teachers in the area of special needs, with a view, in particular, to the provision of appropriate pedagogical techniques and materials;
- promote European co-operation between the relevant actors professionally involved in the education and training of children and young people with disabilities, in order to improve the integration of pupils and students with special needs in ordinary or specialised establishments;
- enhance sharing information and experiences on these matters at European level, involving, as appropriate, the European organisations and networks with relevant experience in this field such as the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education;

- provide, where appropriate, facilities, training opportunities and resources regarding the transition from school to employment.

## **2.7 EU funded project in Finland: virtual study and career counselling centre in sign language**

Virtuopo is a national virtual study and career counselling centre in **Finland** that operates in information networks. The project was commenced in November 2000 and concluded in the summer of 2003. The funding came from the European Union (ESF Objective 3) and it was directed to the Finnish Association of the Deaf via the National Board of Education. The purpose of the project is to produce, collect and offer information, services and individual guidance and assistance for studies, as well as vocational counselling and assistance in job seeking in sign language. In the course of the project, existing career services will be utilised and supplemented. The website of the project can be found at [www.virtuopo.net](http://www.virtuopo.net).

The objective of the Virtuopo Project is to build a network-based data bank that includes descriptions of different occupations, information on training and educational institutions, information on social benefits during studies, information related to employment and career, study material, and network-based courses. The material is provided both in sign language and in a written text. All users have access to the data network. The Virtual Career Counselling Centre provides personal career counselling. The virtual career counsellor can be contacted by text or graphic telephone, e-mail, fax, short messages or ordinary telephone. The Centre also organises adjustment courses to support the career choices of young people on completion of their basic education, offers training, consulting and expert services for the study and career counselling of special groups.

The target groups of Virtuopo are persons who use sign language, because they are deaf or hard of hearing, have impaired hearing or vision or dysphasia: students in their final year of comprehensive school or in the upper secondary school, and young people studying at vocational institutes and folk high schools. Furthermore, Virtuopo provides tools for tutors, teachers and student welfare groups in educational institutions, professionals working with the target groups, such as employment advisors and employees of the Social Insurance Institution and social welfare office, special employees working for the deaf and deaf-blind, such as employment counsellors and rehabilitation secretaries, as well as parents of the young.

# 3

## Council of Europe

### 3.1 Introduction

The Council of Europe is the continent's oldest political organisation, founded in 1949 and based in Strasbourg, France. It groups together 45 countries, including 21 countries from Central and Eastern Europe. The Council of Europe was set up to defend human rights, parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, develop continent-wide agreements to standardise member countries' social and legal practices, promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures.

The main component parts of the Council of Europe are:

- The Committee of Ministers, composed of the 45 Foreign ministers or their Strasbourg-based deputies (ambassadors/permanent representatives), which is the Organisation's decision-making body. The Netherlands currently chairs the Committee of Ministers.
- The Parliamentary Assembly, grouping 626 members (313 representatives and 313 substitutes) from the 45 national parliaments.
- The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, composed of a Chamber of Local Authorities and a Chamber of Regions.
- The 1800-strong secretariat headed since 1999 by Secretary General Walter Schwimmer. The multinational European secretariat serves the bodies and the intergovernmental committees of the Council of Europe.

Where a lesser number of member states of the Council of Europe wish to engage in some action in which not all their European partners desire to join, they can conclude a 'Partial Agreement' which is binding on themselves alone. The Partial Agreement in the social and public health field was concluded on this basis in 1959. The areas of activity of the Partial Agreement in the social and public health field include two sectors: protection of public health and rehabilitation and integration of people with disabilities.

At present, the Partial Agreement in the public health field has 18 member states.<sup>7</sup> The activities are entrusted to committees of experts, which are responsible to a steering committee for each area. The Council of Europe offers a coherent policy for people with disabilities, with particular emphasis on functional rehabilitation, social integration and full participation in the life of the community. The responsible steering committee is called Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with disabilities (Partial Agreement) (CD-P-RR).

---

<sup>7</sup> Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

### 3.2 The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992)

According to the Explanatory Report to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, for many years various bodies within the Council of Europe have been expressing concern over the situation of regional or minority languages. Article 14 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)<sup>8</sup> lays down the principle of non-discrimination, in particular outlawing, at least with respect to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention, any discrimination based on such grounds as language or association with a national minority.

Important though this is, however, it creates only a right for individuals not to be subjected to discrimination, but not a system of positive protection for minority languages and the communities using them, as was pointed out by the Consultative Assembly as long ago as 1957 in its Resolution 136. In 1961, in Recommendation 285, the Parliamentary Assembly called for a protection measure to supplement the European Convention to be devised in order to safeguard the rights of minorities to enjoy their own culture, to use their own language, to establish their own schools and so on.

For the purposes of the Charter:

- a “regional or minority languages” means languages that are:
  - i. traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population; and
  - ii. different from the official language(s) of that State;it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants;
- b “territory in which the regional or minority language is used” means the geographical area in which the said language is the mode of expression of a number of people justifying the adoption of the various protective and promotional measures provided for in this Charter;
- c “non-territorial languages” means languages used by nationals of the State which differ from the language or languages used by the rest of the State’s population but which, although traditionally used within the territory of the State, cannot be identified with a particular area thereof.

As is made clear in the preamble, the Charter’s overriding purpose is cultural. It is designed to protect and promote regional or minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe’s cultural heritage. For this reason it not only contains a non-discrimination clause concerning the use of these languages but also provides for measures offering active support for them: the aim is to ensure, as far as reasonably possible, the use of regional or minority languages in education and the media and to permit their use in judicial and administrative settings, economic and social life and cultural activities. Only in this way can such languages be compensated, where necessary, for unfavourable conditions in the past and preserved and developed as a living facet of Europe’s cultural identity.

The charter sets out to protect and promote regional or minority languages, not linguistic minorities. For this reason emphasis is placed on the cultural dimension and the use of a

---

<sup>8</sup> Article 14 – Prohibition of discrimination “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with national minority, property, birth or other status.

regional or minority language in all the aspects of the life of its speakers. The charter does not establish any individual or collective rights for the speakers of regional or minority languages. Nevertheless, the obligations of the parties with regard to the status of these languages and the domestic legislation which will have to be introduced in compliance with the charter will have an obvious effect on the situation of the communities concerned and their individual members.

### **3.3 Flensburg Recommendations on the Implementation of Policy Measures for Regional or Minority Languages (2000)**

With support from the European Commission, and in close co-operation with the Council of Europe and the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), Flensburg, Germany, organised, on 23 and 24 June 2000, an international conference on “Evaluating policy measures for minority languages in Europe: Towards effective, cost-effective and democratic implementation”. Participants included noted scholars in minority issues, representatives from major international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and member countries of the Council of Europe. The conference was an important element in a larger project on the analysis of policies adopted in favour of minority languages, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Owing to the extreme degree of variability of situations between different regional or minority languages (and, of course, between the states in which these regional or minority languages are traditionally used), the purpose of the conference was not to make general recommendations regarding the set of specific measures that should be adopted in order to protect or revitalise these languages. Accordingly, the conference focused not on the specific measures that should be adopted by states (whether such measures are adopted explicitly in order to comply with Charter obligations or not), but on how authorities at various levels choose policy measures in favour of regional or minority languages, because some very practical issues of decision-making arise in all cases. More precisely, emphasis was placed on how can states meet principles of good public policy, in particular: (i) aiming at effective policies; (ii) aiming at cost-effective policies; (iii) aiming at democratic policies.

The ECMI has formulated the following Recommendation with regard to sign languages: “Due recognition should also be given to Sign Languages. The Council of Europe and other international organisations should consider the desirability and feasibility of preparing a legal instrument to safeguard these languages and the rights of their users. Likewise, the European Commission is requested to sympathetically consider the inclusion of actions to support Sign Languages in their language programmes.”

### **3.4 Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1492 (2001) on the rights of national minorities**

On 23 January 2001 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 1492 (2001) on the rights of national minorities. In paragraph 12. xiii of the Recommendation, the Parliamentary Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers

gives the various sign languages utilised in Europe a protection similar to that afforded by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, possibly by means of the adoption of a recommendation to member states.

The text of Recommendation 1492 (2001) was examined by the Committee of Ministers (Ministers' Deputies) on 15 February 2001, who decided to assign ad hoc terms of reference to the Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with disabilities (Partial Agreement) (CD-P-RR) to draw up an opinion on that Recommendation, in particular on paragraph 12. xiii concerning sign languages.

The Committee on the Rehabilitation and Integration of People with disabilities (Partial Agreement) (CD-P-RR) submitted its Opinion to the Committee of Ministers on 28 February 2002. In line with the European Parliament Resolution on sign languages for the deaf of 17 June 1988, the CD-P-RR considers that sign languages are languages in their own right, and that they are the preferred or only language of large numbers of deaf people.

The CD-P-RR welcomes the Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation as a further substantial step in securing human rights and dignity, full citizenship and active participation in the life of the community for all people with disabilities. Sign languages can, in principle, be regarded as non-territorial languages. It is pertinent to note that sign languages meet the definition criteria of non-territorial languages as set out in the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, i.e. "Languages used by nationals of the state which differ from the language or languages used by the rest of the state's population but which, although traditionally used within the territory of the state, cannot be identified with a particular area thereof." (Part I, Article 1c.).

The CD-P-RR considers that every one of the different sign languages used in Europe has its specific cultural identity. In accordance with the Council of Europe Declaration on cultural diversity, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 7 December 2000, member states should develop and/or maintain measures to sustain, protect and promote linguistic and cultural diversity, in order to enhance pluralism and multicultural societies in Europe. Also sign languages should be recognised as an expression of cultural wealth.

Concerning the official recognition of sign languages at national level the CD-P-RR could consider drafting a report for the attention of the Parliamentary Assembly on the status of sign languages in member states. The CD-P-RR recommends that the Council of Europe should prepare a legal instrument to safeguard sign languages and the rights of their users and in particular to promote the individual right to the general use of sign languages and facilitating that use by a co-ordinated set of measures deemed most appropriate, reflecting the variety of instruments, policies and practices in member states. In this connection, some delegations expressed themselves in favour of recommending the elaboration of an additional protocol on sign languages to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

### **3.5 Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights report on protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe (2003)**

According to the report on protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe published by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly on 17 March 2003, the progress achieved in the recognition of sign language remains slow. There are two types of obstacle to official recognition. The first is due to ignorance on the part of governments and legislators as to the role performed by sign language. The second stems from the mistaken view of the non-hearing impaired that a hearing aid is the solution to all problems of deafness, and that sign languages are universal. Recognition of these languages receives very little support from the public. Another reason often invoked by many countries is purportedly linked with the cost that official recognition of these languages would incur. State institutions controlled by the public sector should really afford access to these languages. In the United Kingdom, the government recently introduced an additional study grant for deaf students in higher education.

However, according to the Committee successes are recorded in Europe. In Finland, many public service employees have been trained in the basics of sign language. Ireland and Denmark, the United Kingdom and Greece have sign language training programmes for teachers, and Portugal, France, Spain and Greece too have programmes aimed at professional staff wishing to work with the deaf, and these include sign language. In Greece, the first university department specialising in sign language for the education of deaf children has been set up. Sign language has been introduced into some schools in Portugal. In France, sign language interpretation is recognised as an occupational activity. Lastly, a movement in support of bilingual education is afoot in Denmark and the Netherlands. It is important that all these efforts should be acknowledged and carried over to the European context.

### **3.6 Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1598 (2003) on the protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe**

On 1 April 2003, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 1598 (2003) on the protection of sign languages in the member states of the Council of Europe. The Assembly recognises sign languages as the expression of Europe's cultural wealth. They are a feature of Europe's linguistic and cultural heritage. The Assembly also recognises sign languages as a complete and natural means of communication for deaf people. The Assembly takes the view that official recognition of these languages will help deaf people to become integrated into society and gain access to education, employment and justice.

The Assembly recommends the Committee of Ministers to devise a specific legal instrument on the rights of sign language users, and accordingly:

- to 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;

- to 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;
- to 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.

On 16 April 2003, the Committee of Ministers (Ministers' Deputies) examined Recommendation 1598 (2003) of the Parliamentary Assembly and decided to communicate it to the CD-P-RR for information and possible comments. The CD-P-RR has finalised its opinion during the 26th session of the CD-P-RR in October 2003, but the Committee of Ministers has not officially replied yet to the Parliamentary Assembly's Recommendation 1598 (2003).

# 4

## Constitution and legislation

### 4.1 Introduction

In many countries the official sign languages are recognised to some extent, but sign languages are rarely officially recognised as such in national constitutions as the preferred language of the deaf community living in the country. However, more and more sign language is referred to in legislation and this direct or indirect recognition of sign language as a complete and natural means of communication for deaf people will help deaf people to become integrated into society and gain access to justice, education and employment. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe instructed the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation of April 2003 to encourage the 45 member states to give the sign languages used in their territory formal recognition.

The European Union of the Deaf (EUD) strives for full and legal recognition of sign languages by the European Union, the Council of Europe and all EU national governments as a minority language, just like they have recognised certain spoken languages as minority and regional languages. According to the EUD, there is no ground for excluding sign languages, especially not on linguistic grounds, since research have since long shown that sign languages are languages.

### 4.2 Constitutional recognition of sign language

The British Member of the European Parliament Liz Lynne, as well as the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) state that five countries have recognised sign language in their constitution: Finland, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. To my knowledge, Finland and Portugal are the only two European countries who have *constitutional* reference to sign languages.<sup>9</sup> However, Greece, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic do recognise sign language in legislation (but so have other European countries).

#### Finland

There are about 8.000 deaf people in Finland, 5.000 of which use sign language as their first language. It is estimated that the number of sign language users in Finland amounts to about 15.000. The corner stone of the Finnish sign language status was laid in 1995, when the section regarding language rights of the renewed provisions of the fundamental law of the Finnish constitution gave the protection of the law for those using the sign language.

---

<sup>9</sup> Note that some countries have no constitution, so constitutional recognition of their sign language(s) is not possible (e.g. United Kingdom).

Recognising the status of the sign language in the constitution was a big step towards achieving linguistic equality, and it had a significance of principle for the sign language using community. The people using sign language were conceived now for the first as a linguistic and cultural group. An international comparison shows that Finland was the second country in the world, after Uganda, where the national sign language was recognised on a constitutional level.

The modified constitution obliges the public authorities to take active measures in order to ensure that the sign language users have the opportunity to use their own language and to develop their own culture. The obligation of making sure means first and foremost enacting laws, and some steps forward have already been taken in that respect after 1995. In these new legal provisions, an analogy has usually been drawn between the sign language and the two minority languages spoken in Finland; the Sami and the Romany languages.

Section 17 *Right to one's language and culture* of the Constitution of Finland says "The national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish. The right of everyone to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts of law and other authorities, and to receive official documents in that language, shall be guaranteed by an Act. The public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an equal basis. The Sami, as an indigenous people, as well as the Roma and other groups, have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Provisions on the right of the Sami to use the Sami language before the authorities are laid down by an Act. 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."

### **Portugal**

Article 74 *Education* of the Constitution of **Portugal** (as amended in 1997) says in paragraph 2 g) "In the implementation of its policy for education, it is the duty of the State to promote and support access by citizens with disabilities to education and support special education where necessary." Paragraph 2 h) says "In the implementation of its policy for education, it is the duty of the State to protect and develop Portuguese sign language, as a cultural expression and instrument of access to education and equality of opportunity."

In **the Netherlands**, the position of the Dutch language has hardly been provided for in the Netherlands. The lack of a constitutional provision on language forms an obstacle for the Government to recognise Dutch Sign Language in the Constitution. Contrary to the Dutch Constitution, **Finland's** Constitution stipulates the national languages of Finland in Section 17 and amended this section to include Finnish Sign Language.

However, the Constitution of **Portugal** has, like the Netherlands, no such provision on language in its Constitution. Portugal has recognised Portuguese Sign Language in Article 74 *Education* of the Constitution.

### 4.3 Recognition of sign language (users) in legislation

The schematic overview mentioned below shows a list of countries within Europe who have passed laws that refer to sign languages and/or sign language users in a direct or indirect way (reference to ‘barrier-free’ communication is an example of an indirect way of recognising sign language). The scope and practical implications of the legislation for the users of sign languages in everyday life are mentioned in chapters 5, 6 and 7. In this chapter special attention is paid to the regulations concerning the Finnish Sign Language.

Country	Legislation referring to sign language (users)
<b>Belgium</b> <sup>10</sup>	Decree on Basic Education 1998, Decree of the Recognition of Sign Language 2003
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Law n° 155 of 11 June 1998
<b>Denmark</b>	Education Act 1991
<b>Finland</b>	See paragraph below on Regulations concerning Finnish Sign Language
<b>Germany</b>	Code of Social Law No IX 2001, Act on Equal Opportunities for Disabled Persons 2002
<b>Greece</b>	Law of Special Education 2817/14-3-2000
<b>Ireland</b>	Education Act 1998
<b>Italy</b>	Law No. 104/92, Law No. 17/99
<b>Lithuania</b>	Law of Social Integration of the disabled 1991, 1995 Act concerning the proclamation of 1996 as the year of the disabled
<b>Norway</b>	Primary Education Act 1997, Education Act 1998 as amended in 1999
<b>Poland</b>	Act of 27 August 1997 on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons
<b>Portugal</b>	Act No. 31-A/98 as amended by Act No 8/20002, Law 380, May 1999
<b>Slovak Republic</b>	Act 149/1995 on Sign Language for the Deaf Law
<b>Slovenia</b>	Use of Slovenian Sign Language Act 2002
<b>Spain</b>	Royal Decree 20/60/1995, Royal Decree 696/1995
<b>Sweden</b>	Education Act 1998; 1100, amendment November 1999, Health and Medical Service Act 1982 as amended
<b>Switzerland</b>	Federal law of 19 June 1959 on invalidity insurance as amended
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984), Justice of the Peace Act (1979), NHS and Community Care Act (1990), Broadcasting Act (1996), Disability Discrimination Act (1995), Representation of the People Act (2000)

**Sweden** has officially recognised sign language since 1981: “The Government Commission on Integration points out that the profoundly deaf have to be bilingual to function among themselves and in society. Bilingualism on their part, according to the commission, means that they have to be fluent in their visual/gestural sign language, and in the language that society surrounds them with, Swedish.” (Government Bill 1980/1981:100)

In **Denmark**, Danish Sign Language is recognised as a language by the government and the public authorities since 1991. It is considered as the primary language of deaf children. Sign language is recommended as the primary language for instruction and communication on the education of deaf children.

The constitution of the **Republic of Slovenia** regulates human rights and fundamental liberties and ensures equality before the law, which represents, together with the Declaration of the rights of disabled people, the fundamental legal basis for the preparation of the statute on sign language. In 2002 Slovenia adopted the Use of Slovenian Sign Language Act, thereby

<sup>10</sup> The French-speaking community of Belgium.

becoming the 25th country in the world to have adopted sign language as an equal language. The act recognises the right of deaf people to use Slovenian Sign Language and the right to a sign language interpreter. This removes the basic communication barrier between hearing people and hearing impaired people and will improve the prospects for deaf people to acquire appropriate education and appropriate social and political involvement in society.

In **Poland**, although the Constitution does not contain any special provision recognising sign language, it provides however that “public authorities shall provide, in accordance with statute, aid to disabled persons to ensure their subsistence, adaptation to work and social communication” (Article 69). In the Resolution passed on 1 August 1997 the Polish Sejm (the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament) recognised that persons with disabilities have the right, *inter alia*, to life in an environment free from functional barriers, including e.g. possibility of interpersonal communication.

In the **Czech Republic**, the equality of sign language with other languages is proclaimed by law n° 155 of 11 June 1998. The law provides that sign language shall be the means of communication for the deaf in the Czech Republic. It further provides that the deaf are entitled to the use of sign language, to be educated by means of sign language, and to be taught it. The law also stipulates that in visits to medical practitioners, dealings with the administration and judicial procedure, deaf people are entitled to the provision of an interpreter without payment. Deaf students engaged in tertiary studies are also entitled to a non-paying interpretation service.

In the **Slovak Republic**, Slovak Sign Language, though protected by law n°149 of 26 June 1995, which secures the right to use, receive instruction and be informed in it, is not recognised as a minority language. Its recognition as such was to be discussed this summer by cabinet.

The **United Kingdom** has no written Constitution. The United Kingdom regulated the use of sign language in several legislative acts (the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984), the Justice of the Peace Act (1979), the NHS and Community Care Act (1990), the Broadcasting Act (1996), the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Representation of the People Act (2000)). For an estimated 70,000 deaf people it is their preferred language for participation in everyday life. British Sign Language is a visual-gestural language with its own vocabulary, grammar and syntax. On 18 March 2003 the British Government recognised British Sign Language as a language in its own right. Deaf people recently won formal government recognition of British sign language as a language in its own right, requiring education authorities to provide better opportunities for deaf children to learn communication skills. Andrew Smith, the work and pensions secretary, promised more resources for training teachers and interpreters in the language.

As per 3 July 2003 Belgian-French Sign Language has been recognised as the language of the deaf by the Health Minister of the French community in **Belgium**. This recognition implies that Belgian-French Sign Language can be used to train Deaf teachers and interpreters and to use Belgian-French Sign Language in mainstream education next to French. In addition Belgian-French Sign Language is referred to in certain legal texts – such as the Decree on Basic Education. On 21 October 2003, the Decree of the Recognition of Sign Language was voted at unanimity by the Parliament of the French-speaking Community of Belgium. It is a great political victory of the deaf society because all political parties (majority and opposition) promised their commitment to the issue and to work together for the recognition of a minority

language. Sign Language will therefore become the fourth national language, along with French, Flemish-Dutch and German. Now that Sign Language has its own Decree and that it has been recognised as a language on its own, much still needs to be done make amendment proposals in the field of Education, Training, Employment, Culture, Information, and Health.

In **Germany**, with the Act on Equal Opportunities for Disabled Persons, which entered into force on 1 May 2002, the ban on discrimination contained in the Basic Law over and above social law is implemented across the whole public law area in Germany. Following the Act on Combating Unemployment among People with Severe Disabilities and Book IX of the Social Code on Integration and Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities, it represents the third significant act in the field of disability policy adopted in the years 2000-2002. The Act serves to ensure the equal rights of disabled persons in all fields of life and to put them into practice in everyday life. It is a matter of eliminating the obstacles standing in the way of equal opportunities.

The core of the Act on Equal Opportunities for Disabled Persons is the creation of comprehensively understood barrier-free environments. Barrier-free environments are conditional on comprehensive access and unrestricted use of all designed environments. The goal of general barrier-free environments includes the development of barrier-free communication such as using sign language interpreters or barrier-free electronic media. In addition three ordinances entered into force in July 2002 which obliged Federal authorities to ensure barrier-free environments in the broadest sense of the word. Hearing- or speech-impaired persons have the right when defending their own rights in administrative procedures with all Federal authorities to communicate in German Sign Language with signs supporting spoken language or via other suitable communication aids. The authorities are to meet the cost of this.

The Parliament of the **Republic of Lithuania** passed the Law of Social Integration of the Disabled in 1991. In this law it is stated that sign language is a native speech of the deaf. The 1995 Act concerning the proclamation of 1996 as the year of the disabled led to the official recognition of sign language as the official language of the deaf people.

The question of the status of sign languages has come up only recently in **Switzerland**. It was not until 1994 that the subject was broached in Parliament, through a proposal of the Committee on science, education and culture on the recognition of sign language: "The Federal Council (Government) is invited to recognise sign language for the integration of the deaf and hard-of-hearing and to encourage its use in education, training, research and communication alongside spoken language". The Federal Council accepted this proposal, the point of which was not to give sign languages the status of an official language in Switzerland but to accord them greater importance in integration policies and above all to lay down legal provisions to foster their use. This has resulted in sign languages being taken into account in the preparation of new laws or the revision of existing legislation.

In **the Netherlands**, although the Constitution does not regulate the national language(s), various laws contain stipulations concerning the use of the Dutch language and the Friesian language. Since 1995 the General Administrative Law Act regulates that administrative bodies must use the Dutch language and more recently legislation on education stipulates the language in which education is to be provided.

In **Spain**, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs prepared a comprehensive report on the repercussion that the progressive recognition of sign language would have in its area, undertaking its study in the fields of non-regular training, employment and social services. The document establishes that the main fields of action for the Government to progressively implement the recognition of sign language would be the following:

- Implantation of sign language in the Public Administration by means of interpretation services offered progressively for deaf users who demand this form of communication, and by fostering widespread sign language training for the general information service staff.
- Gradual implantation of a policy encouraging bilingualism among the deaf.

As priority steps, the Government undertakes to carry out:

- An analysis of the social and labour situation of the deaf in Spain.
- Steps leading to the training of sign language interpreters.
- Training action for sign language interpretation aimed at civil servants of the Government's General Administration.

The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2001-2003) includes measures to support the use of sign language as a communication tool for the deaf, fundamentally in their dealings with public administrations.

#### **4.4 Regulations concerning the Finnish Sign Language**

Finland has recognised Finnish Sign Language as well as the rights of its users in several laws and decrees which may serve as a role model for countries in transition towards the recognition of sign language (for example Estonia and some African countries). Besides this, information in the English language is well documented and can be easily accessed on the internet.

- *Law on the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (591/96) § 1, Sect. 2* Among the duties of the Research Institute is also to take care of research and the preservation of the purity of the Sign Language and the Romany language.
- *Decree on the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (758/96) § 1* The duties of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland include: 1) studying Finnish and Swedish, Sami (Lappish) and other related languages as well as the Finnish Sign Language and the Romany language; 2) developing and preserving the purity of Finnish, Swedish, Sami (Lappish) and the Finnish Sign Language and the Romany language; § 9 The expertise organs for the Research Institute are the Boards for the Finnish, Swedish and Sami languages and the Boards for the Sign Language and the Romany language. The Board of Directors invites to each Board for a period of three years at a time at least four and at most seven members, one of which belongs to the personnel of the Research Institute. The Board of Directors appoints each Board a President and a Vice-President from among the members of the Board. The task of the Board is to decide upon recommendations of principal or general nature in its field.
- *Law on Basic Education (628/98) § 10 Sect. 1* The language of instruction of the school is either Finnish or Swedish. The Sami, Romany or the Sign Language can also be used as languages of instruction. *Sect. 2* Those with an impaired hearing must be taught also in

Sign Language, when necessary. § 12, Sect. 2 On the basis of the guardian's choice, also the Romany language, the Sign Language or other mother tongue of the student can be taught as a mother tongue.

- *Law on Upper Secondary School (629/98)* § 6, Sect. 1 The language of instruction in the upper secondary school is either Finnish or Swedish. The Sami, Romany or the Sign Language can also be used as a language of instruction. § 8, Sect 2 On the basis of the student's choice, also the Romany language, the Sign Language or other mother tongue of the student can be taught as a mother tongue.
- *Law on Vocational Education (630/98)* § 11, Sect. 1 In vocational education, the language of instruction is either Finnish or Swedish. The Sami, Romany or the Sign Language can also be used as languages of instruction. § 12, Sect. 3 On the basis of the student's choice, also the Romany language, the Sign Language or other mother tongue of the student can be taught as a mother tongue.
- *Act on Yleisradio Oy (746/98)* Sect. 7 4) ...to treat in its broadcasting Finnish and Swedish speaking citizens on equal grounds and to produce services in the Same and Romany languages and in Sign Language as well as, where applicable, also for other language groups in the country.
- *Services and Assistance for the Disabled Act (380/87)* Sect. 8 The municipality shall provide severely disabled persons with reasonable... interpretation services... if, because of his disability or illness, he must of necessity have assistance in order to manage his everyday affairs. Sect. 14 No charge shall be made for... the interpretation services.
- *Support and Assistance for the Disabled Decree (759/87)* Sect. 7 Interpretation services comprise all interpretation in Sign Language or other methods for clarifying communication needed for work, studies, social participation, recreation or any other corresponding purposes. Sect. 8 In agreement of interpretation services, a person shall be considered severely disabled if he is severely disabled aurally, aurally and visually, or he has a severe speech defect. Sect. 9 Interpretation services shall be arranged so that a severely aurally and visually disabled person has the possibility of receiving at least 240 and any other person referred to in section 8 at least 120 hours of interpretation services during a calendar year. However, as an exception to the provision of paragraph 1, interpretation services related to studies shall be arranged to the extent needed by the person concerned for coping with his studies.
- *Law on Administrative Procedure (598/82)* § 22, Sect. 1 The authorities must take care of interpretation in a case that can be instituted by initiative of the authorities, if the party involved does not speak the language used by the authority, as defined in the language act (148/22) or due to a deficiency in the person's senses or speech, the person cannot be understood.
- *Law on the Position and Rights of the Social Welfare Client (812/00)* § 4 When executing social welfare, the wishes, opinions, interests and individual needs as well as the mother tongue and cultural background of the client must be taken into account.

## 5

# Use of sign language in education

### 5.1 Introduction

Education is one of the main routes to personal development and self-fulfilment as well as to the labour market, self-support and integration into society. Effective efforts to include people with disabilities in the education system can prevent many of the exclusion mechanisms that people with disabilities would otherwise encounter later on in life. All people with disabilities, regardless of the nature or degree of their disability, have the right to appropriate free education adapted to meet their needs and wishes.<sup>11</sup> The right to education for all has been incorporated in several instruments of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe instructed the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation of April 2003 to encourage the 45 member states to give education to deaf people in sign languages and to train teachers, in preparation for working with deaf and hearing-impaired children, in sign languages. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Assembly recommends to include sign languages as a valid academic qualification in mainstream secondary schools with equal status to other taught languages. Finally, it recommends to grant deaf people the right to choose freely between oral and bilingual school systems.

### 5.2 Special needs education

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education published a document produced in co-operation with Eurydice, the information network on education in Europe. This thematic publication examines current practice across Europe in 5 key areas: Inclusive Education Policies and Practices, Funding of Special Needs Education, Teachers and Special Needs Education, Information and Communication Technology in Special Needs Education and Early Intervention. Information has been collected through the provision of national reports per topic, prepared by the European Agency members via questionnaires and, in some cases, practical examples.

According to the publication, the current tendency in the European Union and the acceding countries is to develop a policy towards inclusion of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools, providing teachers with varying degrees of support in terms of supplementary staff, materials, in-service training and equipment. Countries can be grouped

---

<sup>11</sup> Article 1.1 of Chapter V. Education of the Appendix to the Recommendation No. R (92) 6 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 9 April 1992 called “A coherent policy for the rehabilitation of people with disabilities”.

into three categories according to their policy on including pupils with special educational needs:

The first category (*one-track* approach) includes countries that develop policy and practices geared towards the inclusion of almost all pupils within mainstream education. This is supported by a wide range of services focusing on the mainstream school. This approach can be found in Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Cyprus.

The countries belonging to the second category (*multi-track* approach) have a multiplicity of approaches to inclusion. They offer a variety of services between the two systems (i.e. mainstream and special needs education systems). Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland, the United Kingdom, Latvia, Liechtenstein, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia belong to this category.

In the third category (*two-track* approach), there are two distinct education systems. Pupils with special educational needs are usually placed in special schools or special classes. Generally, a vast majority of pupils officially registered as having special educational needs do not follow the mainstream curriculum among their non-disabled peers. These systems are (or at least were until very recently) under separate legislation, with different laws for mainstream and special needs education. In Switzerland and Belgium, special needs education is fairly well developed. In Switzerland, the situation is rather complicated: mainly, different legislation exists for special schools and special classes (including special services within mainstream classes). At the same time, there is a fairly well developed system of services for special services within mainstream classes – of course depending upon the canton.

At times it can be difficult to classify a country according to the type of inclusion policy, because of recent policy changes. For instance, Germany and the Netherlands were recently positioned within the two-track system but are now moving towards the multi-track system. The developmental stage of countries with regards to inclusion varies a lot. In Sweden, Denmark, Italy and Norway, clear inclusive policies have been developed and implemented at an earlier stage. In these countries, major legislative choices have already been made years ago.

In most of the other countries huge legislative changes can be recognised, some of which are pointed out below:

- Already in the 1980s, some countries defined their special needs education system as a resource for mainstream schools. More countries follow this approach today, such as Germany, Finland, Greece, Portugal, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic.
- Parental choice has become a topic for legislative changes in Austria, the Netherlands, the UK and Lithuania.
- Decentralisation of the responsibilities for meeting special educational needs is a topic of the legislation in Finland (municipalities), the UK, the Netherlands (school clusters), the Czech Republic and Lithuania. In the UK, schools are increasingly being resourced by their local education authority in such a way that they can make their own decisions about the best way to allocate their overall budget to meet the educational needs of all pupils on roll, including pupils with severe special educational needs.
- The change in funding special needs education is an important innovation in the Netherlands.

- In Switzerland the funding of special needs education is discussed at a political level: it is proposed to put special needs education entirely in the responsibility of the cantons (up until now confederation).
- Legislation concerning special needs education at the secondary school level is now being developed or has recently been developed in the Netherlands, Austria and Spain.

### 5.3 Bilingual education<sup>12</sup>

The legislation in **Norway** secures the right of every deaf pre-school child, and every deaf child in primary or secondary school, to receive their education through Norwegian Sign Language if that is their first language. No matter if they attend a Deaf school, partially hearing units or are mainstreamed. Nobody can force a family to choose education in Norwegian Sign Language for their child. The National Curricula, which are passed by the Government and compulsory for all children states the intended outcome for deaf children is functional bilingualism.

In Norway the right of deaf children to access education in Norwegian Sign Language was stated in the form of the Ministry's provision to the Primary Education Act in 1997. In 1998, a new Education Act, covering both primary education (10 years) and secondary education (3 years) and certain aspects of pre-school education (up to age 6 years), was passed in the Norwegian Parliament. The new Act states, among other things, the following: Education Act, § 2-6: "Pupils having Norwegian Sign Language as their first language have the right to primary education in Norwegian Sign Language and in the subject Norwegian Sign Language as a first language. Instruction in Sign Language is to be given according to the National Curriculum passed by the Government. Pre-school children with special requirements for Norwegian Sign Language have the right to such education." The municipality may decide that tuition through the medium of sign language and in the use of sign language shall be provided at a different location than the pupil's local school. Children under compulsory school age who have a special need for sign language tuition, have the right to such tuition. The Ministry issues further regulations. Before a municipality makes any decision pursuant to the first and third paragraph, an expert assessment shall be made.

On 17 of September 1999, the parliament passed certain changes to the act. Of special interest is the addition of a statement concerning secondary education: Education Act, § 3-9: "Youngsters entitled to secondary education and who have Norwegian Sign Language as their first language, or who are, according to an expert judgement, in need of such education, have the right to choose secondary education in Norwegian Sign Language and in the subject Norwegian Sign Language as first language in a signing environment, or the right to choose to use an interpreter in regular secondary schools. The same applies to adults who are admitted to secondary education. A signing environment represents the schools that offer suitable education done in Norwegian Sign Language and in the subject Norwegian Sign Language as first language for hearing impaired pupils. The right to education done in Norwegian Sign Language and in the subject Norwegian Sign Language as first language is limited to the courses offered by these schools. Parts of this education can be offered by using an

---

<sup>12</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

interpreter.” The Ministry may issue further regulations, concerning admissions among other matters.

In **Sweden**, deaf and hard-of-hearing children with Swedish Sign Language as their first language are taught at one of the five regional state-run special schools. There is also one national special school for deaf and hearing-impaired pupils who also have a severe learning disability. The emphasis on teaching in sign language, and thus the need for contact with other deaf children with the same method of communication, has meant that the special school has been retained. The special schools are organised in The National Agency for the special schools. The agency has the responsibility to develop the special schools and to guarantee a good educational quality in the special schools.

In 1999, the Swedish Parliament agreed that a Swedish Sign Language environment is necessary for pupils who, because of deafness or impaired hearing, cannot attend a comprehensive school. That is, they accepted the principal that education should be provided via Swedish Sign Language. Indeed, the Education Act (1998; 1100, amendment November 1999) says that the goals to be attained by schools with respect to school-leavers who are deaf or hearing impaired include:

- Bilingualism: i.e. can use Swedish Sign Language and read Swedish as well as express thoughts in Swedish Sign Language and through written Swedish;
- Ability to communicate in writing in English.

In **Portugal**, the right to free compulsory education for all is guaranteed under the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, as is the right to special education, and to the protection and valuing of the Portuguese sign language, as cultural expression and instrument of access to education and to the equalisation of opportunities (Article No.74, paragraphs g) and h)). The State Bureau of Education and Innovation defined the conditions for the creation, operation and support of units for the education of deaf children and young people attending state primary and secondary schools (II Series, No. 104, 06/05/1998), p.6094 – Dispatch No. 7520/98 (2nd series).

In **Finland** the language used for teaching in a school can be Finnish Sign Language. The guardian can also choose a second language, which is taught as a mother tongue (section 10 of the law on basic education (628/1998)). In the law on upper secondary school (629/1998) it is ruled that the language used in teaching can be Finnish Sign Language. The student can choose the language in which he/she is taught. If the student so chooses, a sign language can also be taught as a mother tongue. For high school, vocational and university education sign language interpretation services are provided according to the legislation in force.

In **Denmark**, the education of deaf children is based on the concept of bilingualism. This means that Danish Sign Language is the base language for pupils and teachers. Education, conversations and explanations must be in Danish Sign Language. The deaf children learn Danish as a foreign language. Since 1991 Danish Sign Language has been an independent subject at deaf children’s school timetable. The purpose of the subject is to improve deaf children’s understanding of Danish Sign Language and their ability to use it well and in all its aspects. Most teachers of deaf children are hearing and have to learn Danish Sign Language from the beginning.

In **Germany**, there is now more and more use of German Sign Language and bilingual projects and students of special education for the deaf are now obliged to take classes in

German Sign Language, whereas during the early 1990's education was exclusively oral with some use of signed German.

In **Ireland**, the Education Act 1998 (in full force since the end of 2000) includes a clause recognising that deaf children should be taught through Irish Sign Language. The government through the Department of Education has agreed to fund the setting up of pre-school provision for deaf children. The project emphasises the philosophy of bilingualism where children are expected to be taught through both languages – Irish Sign Language and written English. The project enjoys a growing volume of support and more parents have enrolled. The government has agreed to finance the scheme aiming to give grants to parents of deaf pre-school children to hire Irish Sign Language tutors to maximise the language acquisition for the child. This was a result of a campaign by parents themselves and the Irish Deaf Society fully supported this campaign. It is understood that the scheme will be extended to primary level education. Each child is entitled to have 7 and a half hours each week of Irish Sign Language tuition.

In **Italy**, increasing numbers of families are choosing a bilingual education for their deaf child (LIS and Italian), and they are calling on their governments and local agencies (municipal or provincial) to provide classroom assistants in their children's classrooms. At nursery school and elementary school, the assistant is often a deaf person. In addition, the committee's suggestion to place more than one deaf child in each classroom has been implemented by many schools throughout Italy. At university, Law 104/92 provides for the presence of Italian Sign Language interpreters. Law No. 17 of 28/01/1999 guarantees funding for tutors, though each university may act autonomously.

In the **Slovak Republic**, the Act No. 29/1984 of the Law Code on the system of primary and secondary schools (Education Law) as amended by subsequent regulations, guarantees pupils with special education needs the right to education in correspondence to their individual abilities through special methods also in correspondence to their handicap. The deaf are guaranteed the right to education in their mother tongue using sign language (§ 4 letter b of Act No. 149/1995 of the Law Code of the National Council of the SR on sign language of the deaf).

In **Estonia**, there has been a bilingual teaching approach (bilingual curriculum and Deaf teachers) at Tallinn Deaf School since 1994, starting from pre-school, and continuing to high-school level. The cornerstone for bilingual teaching was put in place thanks to financial aid from Sweden and thanks to initiative of a Parents Association. Both courses and materials have been developed and managed by the Centre of Estonian Sign Language as from September 2000. Before this work was led by the Tallinn Deaf School and the Parents Association.

In **Slovenia**, before the Use of Slovenian Sign Language Act of 2002, the use of the Sign Language in the school system was not binding. With the introduction of a nine-year system in primary school education and a modified curriculum the use of sign language in the school system will become binding. The Centre for Rehabilitation of the Deaf in Ljubljana and the National Union of the Deaf and Partially Deaf of Slovenia are laying great stress upon the importance of the learning of sign language.

In the French-speaking community of **Belgium**, the Decree on Basic Education, adopted in July 1998, redefines the aims of ordinary and special nursery and primary education, and

specifies the resources to be mobilised for these levels. Through a whole series of measures relating to the organisation of schools (changes in annual teaching days, in the calculation of the pupil/teacher ratio and the resultant allocation, and in the timetable of teachers and pupils), as well as by means of language learning through immersion, the Decree aims to enable schools that so wish to provide certain courses and teaching activities in the timetable, in sign language.

In Belgium Flanders, Flemish Sign Language is seen as a valuable means for teaching deaf children. Parents can choose an oral education or an education delivered through Flemish Sign Language.

In **France** schools for the deaf are encouraged to promote the use of French Sign Language in their teaching.

In **Iceland**, the Ministry of Education stated in 1999 in the Icelandic basic curriculum that Icelandic Sign Language is the first language of deaf people, and Icelandic, the national language, is a second language for deaf Icelanders. As such, deaf Icelanders should learn Icelandic Sign Language as their first language and Icelandic as their second language. This basic curriculum does not apply to children under six years. The basic curriculum also states that sign language has basic meaning for linguistic, cognitive and personality development for the deaf child. Today, children aged 6-12 years can attend “after-school service” with hearing students of the same age. There have been some changes regarding provision at Kindergarten (pre-school) level since the Reykjavik Community took over. Today, the Kindergarten school for deaf children is at Sólborg. This school also caters for hearing children.

In **Poland**, deaf children have the right to education in sign language and to use this language on the school ground. But teaching of sign language is not obligatory and each school may choose the methods of communication with deaf children. So deaf children have been taught in the following methods: oral, oral with the use of phono-gestures, oral and sign, sign or total communication. The total communication, which uses all the methods mentioned before, has become very popular in Poland recently as giving a child with hearing impairment better opportunities for integration into society. Regulations of the Minister of National Education in the field of the educational system cover provisions concerning the adjustment of school and examination requirements to the needs and abilities of children and youth with hearing impairments, including using of sign language.

In **Cyprus**, the Ministry of Education and Culture adopted the policy of inclusion of children with special needs in regular education, a practice that was legislated in 1999. As a result, the vast majority of hearing impaired students are mainstreamed, attending regular schools, from pre-school to tertiary education, and only a small number of them still attend the School for the Deaf. Sign language is not used in the mainstream, which is a pure auditory-oral school setting. However, specialised teachers who support hearing impaired students in the mainstream may employ natural gestures and body language for more effective communication with their students. At the School for the Deaf, the oral method is still in use but it has become more flexible by using more free and open modes of communication based on the philosophy of Total Communication, a method that includes sign language.

In **Luxembourg** there is only one school for the Deaf, *the Centre de Logopédie*. Given the particular geographic situation of Luxembourg, hearing children receive intensive language teaching during their education. Deaf pupils are taught German as their primary language

from the first school year. French is an option that can be taken from the second school year on, but the teaching French is limited. The consequence is that deaf students apply only German as the principal language and are not able to apply French for communication, despite the fact that French is more widely spoken in the environment. Because most teachers working at the Centre de Logopédie have studied Deaf Education at German universities, a strong oral approach is applied, as opposed to a sign language-based approach. Since the 1980s, sign language was introduced incrementally, especially for deaf pupils with learning difficulties. Deaf students who do not have a learning difficulty are expected to participate in an oral education. Sign language is only permitted for use with deaf persons who have learning difficulties. Deaf people who do not have an intellectual disability continue to learn the spoken language. Moreover there exists a certain number of deaf and hard of hearing pupils who are educated beyond the Centre de Logopédie, at mainstream schools. These pupils are usually not familiar with sign languages.

#### 5.4 Training of teachers<sup>13</sup>

In **Norway**, all teachers of the deaf (no matter if they teach at a school for the deaf or at a local school with only one deaf pupil) need knowledge and skills in Norwegian Sign Language. The Ministry of Education ran a project in 1996-1997 where 250 teachers of the deaf were offered a full term course in Norwegian Sign Language at the university and at the Teachers Training College with all expenses paid by the government. Now teachers among others can attend a one-year full-time course in Norwegian Sign Language (but it is not free of charge). The Ministry of Education states that the minimum qualification in Norwegian Sign Language for teachers is the one term course.

In **Sweden**, training for teachers of the deaf is offered alongside the training programme for teachers who will teach in comprehensive schools. Candidates wishing to become teachers of the deaf must demonstrate knowledge of Swedish Sign Language. For several years, the Swedish Association for the Deaf, SDR, have maintained that not all teachers for the deaf need to be trained as special education teachers, although these are also needed in schools for the deaf. Special attention has been paid to the need for teachers of the deaf with the skills to teach the curriculum for schools for the disabled to deaf children who have slight learning disabilities.

In **Finland**, there are only a few teachers who know the sign language well enough, and didactic material available in sign language is scarce. In order to alleviate the shortage of teachers, a training of school teachers who use the sign language was started in Finland at the University of Jyväskylä in 1997.

In **Denmark**, there is a working group focusing on Deaf teacher education. It proposed the Association of County Councils in Denmark that more and better education be made available to Deaf teachers.

In **Italy**, a number of hours in Italian Sign Language training must be completed in order to qualify for the qualification awarded by the Ministry for Public Instruction for Support Teachers. Throughout Italy, deaf and hearing communication assistants are now working.

---

<sup>13</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

Their role is to facilitate communication between deaf students, their classmates and teachers through Italian Sign Language. Among many European projects that have taken place, one focused on offering training to deaf people to become communication assistants. Besides possessing certain teaching skills, these professionals must be skilled in communication strategies for use with deaf people and have a certain degree of knowledge of Italian Sign Language (as set down in Law No. 104/92).

In **Greece**, the development of the Greek special education system started in 1969, with the first special schools for mentally handicapped children. In 1985, an integration policy was implemented by the foundation of special classes in mainstream primary schools. The outcomes are described in the bulletin of the Directorate of Special Education within the Ministry of Education. Integration has been supported by European programmes such as HELIOS I and HELIOS II. Teachers' qualifications are considered to be of a good standard. Teachers' education lasts 4 years and takes place at the Education Departments of the Greek Universities. It includes courses on special education. The Athens University Maraslion Institute retrains primary school teachers for 2 years, preparing them to be specialists in teaching pupils with special needs. The Law 2817 (14/3/2000) on Special Education promotes the inclusion of secondary schools teachers, including specialists in sign language, in these post-graduate courses, so that students will have the appropriate support at any stage of their education.

In **Estonia** there is basic teaching in Estonian Sign Language for the staff of Tallinn Deaf School. Courses and materials have been developed and managed by the Centre of Estonian Sign Language as from September 2000. Before this work was led by the Tallinn Deaf School. Estonian Sign Language training courses for teachers of the deaf are financed by the local community.

In **Poland**, the teachers of deaf children have the right to make use of sign language during the teaching process. To help them to achieve these skills, the Ministry of National Education has financed or co-financed their training and study materials for many years. Over 400 teachers from special schools took courses in Polish Sign Language run by the Polish Association of the Deaf.

# 6

## Sign language interpretation

### 6.1 Introduction

Although a number of countries in Europe experience a shortage of sign language interpreters, this demonstrates the strength of demand and the positive and inclusive social benefits such services provide. The European Parliament of the European Union noted in its Resolution of 1998 that the results of the European Sign Language Project (1996-1997) highlighted the significant lack of qualified sign language interpreters in the European Union. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe instructed the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation of April 2003 to encourage the 45 member states to train sign language interpreters and sign language tutors. According to the Parliamentary Assembly, official recognition of sign languages will facilitate the training, recruitment and retention of more interpreters.

### 6.2 Sign language interpreter<sup>14</sup>

In **Portugal**, the profession of “Interpreter of Sign Language” had existed for many years, but hitherto had not been statutorily recognised before 1999. Since 1999 the professional profile has been defined, and subsequently, a profile of the Portuguese Sign Language interpreter has been developed (Law 380/VII, May 1999).

In **Sweden**, since 1994, the county councils have had responsibility for offering interpreter services. State subsidies allow for expansion of these services. The number of interpreters has subsequently increased, and there are now seven institutes offering Swedish Sign Language/Swedish interpreter training in Sweden. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare is responsible for monitoring this issue. As more interpreters have become available, demand for interpreter services has increased.

In **Finland**, training of Finnish Sign Language interpreters moved from a second level college to a polytechnic institute of higher learning. The training consists of 140 credit weeks.

In **Denmark**, the Danish Sign Language interpreter training was in 1998 extended to three and a half years. The first year focuses on providing basic Danish Sign Language input. In principle, this is open to everybody.

---

<sup>14</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

In **Ireland**, the government established a Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College, Dublin which opened in November 2001 and finances the centre for the next five years through the Higher Education Authority. The centre focuses on training Irish Sign Language tutors and Irish Sign Language/English interpreters. It is envisaged that the centre is to be a place of research on Irish Sign Language. There are fewer than 20 professional Irish Sign Language/English interpreters who serve a deaf community of approx. 4,500 in Ireland.

In **Spain** Royal Decree 20/60/1995, of December 22nd, gives the title of High Technician in Sign Language Interpretation and its corresponding minimum required qualifications (BOE 23-02-96). This decree officially recognises Spanish Sign Language/Spanish interpretation as a full profession. These advanced studies began in 1998 as part of the Horizon-Pradez project. As a part of this project, 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 saw the first cohort of Spanish Sign Language/Spanish Interpreters receive an official degree in the various national territories. These programmes of training continue, with demand for training outstripping the supply of places available for students. These studies are carried out in 2000 class hours, over two academic years and include a requirement to undertake some practical placement in work centres.

In **Belgium** Flanders, training for Flemish Sign Language Interpreters is improving, but the problem remains that interpreter training is still only available in “evening-class” format. With the aim of providing a high-level education for the Flemish Sign Language Interpreters, Fevlado has been in contact with the Antwerp High School for Social Studies to set up a specific training programme for Flemish Sign Language Interpreters. This will be a full-time, daytime programme.

In the Belgium’s French Community, interpretation is still managed by the Ministry of Health – who specifies speech therapy as a pre-requisite condition – and not by the Ministry of Education. At the present time, LPC (*Langue Parlée Complétée*, or Complete Spoken Language) and AKA are the most widely used systems, to the detriment of Sign Language. In certain public institutions the personnel learn Sign Language, but the numbers are still very small. At present, interpreters come mainly from the *Promotion Sociale* courses organised by the administrators of Belgium’s French Community. The recent recognition of Belgian-French Sign Language by the Health Minister implies that Belgian-French Sign Language can now be used to train sign language interpreters.

Since 1983 the training of sign language interpreters in **Slovenia** has been organised by the national organisation of the deaf and since 1984 by the Association of interpreters of sign language. There are 43 interpreters in this union and 23 are active.

In **Germany** the number of sign language interpreters is very small. According to a recent survey, most interpreters are working part-time and there are only about 50 full-time interpreters available. This means that each deaf person could book an interpreter for an average of two hours a year. In 1999 the “Bavarian Institute for the Promotion of Communication of the Deaf and the hearing impaired” was founded to do more research into the education and certification of German Sign Language/English interpreters and German Sign Language teachers.

In **Luxembourg** there are no sign language courses running. However, sign languages courses are offered in neighbouring regions of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg. For the moment Luxembourgers attend sign languages courses in the German city, Trier, thanks to the

geographic proximity. German Sign Language and “Sign supported German” are offered in an evening course programme. Moreover certain Luxembourgers are interested in taking courses in French and Wallonian Sign Languages, but they have difficulty in finding appropriate sign language courses in French regions like Lorraine and in Belgian regions like the province of Luxembourg.

In **Estonia**, interpreter educational training is carried out by the Union of Sign Language Interpreters in the form of short-term projects and is dependent on different funding sources. During 1996-1998 financial aid was received from Finland. “Interpretation” (transliteration) is still carried out into signed exact Estonian. There are approximately 30 interpreters in Estonia, most of them are free-lance interpreters. There is a lack of educated (Bachelor, MA) sign language interpreters available for deaf students at universities. Interpretation service amounts to 36 hours per deaf person per year. This is free of charge to the deaf person and is offered and guided by the Sign Language Interpreters Union. Finance comes from local governments. Interpretation service for studies at universities and vocational schools is covered by special funding sources.

In **Poland**, the public authorities appreciate the importance of sign language interpreters and of the Polish Association of the Deaf, which has run the training courses for sign language interpreters, preparing study materials and dictionaries based on unified signs of Polish sign language and participating in their publication. Since 1967 this Association has trained about 2800 people and these days 835 people have been registered by the Association as sign language interpreters, but they do not have certificates of their professional skills. At the end of 1998, sign language interpreter was recognised as a profession in Poland and included in the occupational classification. It constitutes the basis for the establishment and enforcement of the schema for professional education of sign language interpreters within the general system of education of various professions. The Polish Association of the Deaf plans to create a new educational centre for the training of sign language interpreters, which will issue the appropriate certificates enabling to practice this profession.

### **6.3 Interpretation services and financing<sup>15</sup>**

In **Finland** (according to the Act on Services and Assistance for the Disabled (380/1987), section 8) the municipality shall provide severely disabled persons with reasonable interpretation services and service accommodation if, because of his disability or illness, he/she must of necessity have assistance in order to manage his/her everyday affairs. In section 7 of the Degree on Support and Assistance for the Disabled (759/1987) it is stated that interpretation services comprise all interpretation in sign language or other methods for clarifying communication needed for work, studies, social participation, recreation or any other corresponding purpose. According to section 8, in the arrangement of interpretation services, a person shall be considered severely disabled aurally, aurally and visually, or if he has a severe speech defect. According to section 9, interpretation services shall be arranged so that a severely aurally and visually disabled (deafblind) person has the possibility of receiving at least 240, and any other person referred to in section 8 at least 120, hours of interpretation services during a calendar year.

---

<sup>15</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

There are, however, still problems in practice in offering the interpretation services, and the differences between the municipalities in the availability of the services are great. The main problem seems to be financing. About one tenth of deaf students a year are left without interpretation services for various reasons. An important problem is also the lack of interpreters, which makes the availability of the services even more difficult. The municipalities also often misinterpret the law so that the 120 or 240 yearly interpretation hours are considered in effect as a maximum amount instead of a minimum.

The Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) carried out a study on the present status and functionality of Finnish Sign Language interpretation. The report was published, and it stated that there is room for improvement. According to the research, there are shortcomings in the services and their provision, especially the following: inadequate number of sign language interpreters, differences in the availability of services between different groups of disabled people, regional differences and quality questions.

The Humanities Polytechnic Human Connections (HUMAK) research project aims to ease the working situation of sign language interpreters.

In a three and a half year project from 2000-2003 in **Denmark**, deaf people have gained the right to sign language interpretation free of charge in situations where they previously had to pay themselves. Danish Sign Language interpretation is now free:

- when visiting the doctor, dentist, chiropractor, physiotherapist, etc.
- when having conversations with a “home-help”, lawyer, insurance company, etc.
- in education (evening classes, open university, etc.)
- when receiving treatments in private hospitals
- at cultural events
- at meetings with unions and others within the labour market
- at private events, leisure activities, lectures, etc.

In special cases the health care reimbursement scheme will pay the cost of interpreter assistance. If the individual doctor finds it necessary to use the assistance of an interpreter to be able to finish a treatment/examination the doctor may request such assistance without any expense for the citizen. This may be necessary both in the case of deaf/hard-of-hearing patients and patients who do not understand Danish.

In **Sweden**, the Health and Medical Service Act (1982) was amended, and now there is an obligation on the Swedish County Councils to provide sign language interpretation to deaf, deafened, deaf-blind and hearing-impaired persons for “everyday interpreting”. This means providing interpretation in the working life of the deaf person, in in-service training environments and in relation to leisure and club activities. County Councils are subsidised by the state.

In **Portugal**, the Portuguese Federation of Deaf Associations (FPAS) has an agreement with the Ministry of Justice whereby any deaf person requiring access to judicial, notary or police matters will be provided with Portuguese Sign Language interpretation at no cost to the deaf person (2000). The Association of Portuguese Sign Language Interpreters has agreements with the City of Lisbon and with the SNRIPD to facilitate deaf people’s access to information conveyed at meetings, conferences, seminars and workshops.

As regards the French Community Commission of the Region of Brussels-Capital in **Belgium**, by decree of 27 April 1995 the deaf have the right to signed interpretation. In the Brussels Capital region, the SISB (*Service d’Interprétation pour Sourds de Bruxelles*, or Brussels Interpretation Service for the Deaf) has been recognised since 1 July 2000 as a

service. In this way, every deaf or hearing-impaired person entitled to benefit from the regulations of the Brussels French-speaking Service for the Disabled can make an annual request to the non-profit organisation Info-sourds (which has French Community Commission accreditation as an interpretation service for the deaf) for a maximum of 30 non-transferable index-linked tickets. Info-sourds undertakes to distribute tickets, each valid for an hour's interpretation, to those concerned and provides them with an up-to-date list of approved interpreters, with information about each interpreter's fields of competence. The interpreter returns the tickets received to the organisation, which reimburses him/her for their value.

In the region of Wallonia, the SISW (*Service d'Interprétation pour Sourds de Wallonie*, or Wallonia Interpretation Service for the Deaf), a non-profit organisation established in 1995 and based in Namur, is still not officially recognised, but is financed entirely by the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Region of Wallonia. The delay in recognition is due to the fact that the parties concerned are still looking for a better system that will give more flexibility in the number of hours granted. As needs differ so much from one deaf person to another, the FFSB insists on preserving a demand-based system. In addition to administrative staff responsible for its daily running and the processing of requests for interpretation, the SISW team consists of staff interpreters and contracted freelance interpreters. The SISW handles requests for interpretation in all areas of social and professional life. Access to the service costs a fee of 12.39 euros every six months. Interpretation is provided free to private individuals, but a charge is made for business users. In an average year the SISW receives some 1,200 requests, to roughly 80% of which it is able to respond.

In the Belgium's German-speaking Community, hearing-impaired individuals with an adequate understanding of sign language can benefit from French signed interpretation provided by the SISW under the terms described in connection with the French Community. For interpretation in German Sign Language, those concerned are eligible to between 15 and 30 hours per year with trained freelance interpreters or services for the deaf and hearing-impaired in Germany. The Office for the Disabled subsidises this service to the tune of 80%. Little use is made of this arrangement. Subsidies for special materials contribute to the integration of those concerned. Services on offer in the areas of personal assistance, training, employment and leisure complement efforts to encourage self-sufficiency and improve beneficiaries' quality of life.

In **Switzerland**, the Federal law of 19 June 1959 on invalidity insurance is being amended to cater more for the needs of people using sign language. For the time being, the invalidity insurance provision concerning sign language covers the teaching of sign language to people with disabilities, their entourage and specialists (interpreters). The law is now being revised, and it is proposed to introduce a new benefit, the assistance allowance which would enable disabled persons *inter alia* to pay for the services of a sign language interpreter themselves.

In **Poland**, regulations of the Act of 27 August 1997 on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons enable practical implementation of this right providing that resources of the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON in the Polish acronym) may be allocated to co-financing of removing barriers e.g. in communication. Thanks to the regulations of this Act it is possible to work out various target programmes enabling deaf persons for example to take advantage of electronic equipment for wireless communication in education process or of services of sign language interpreters. One of the target programmes, which has been implemented for a few years, provides necessary aid for

people with impaired hearing who study at a university or want to study and have to pass the entrance exams.

It is also possible for a deaf person to get financial support from the PFRON resources for the service of a sign language interpreter in case this service is payable. The Polish legislation provides that a deaf person has the right to assistance of a sign language interpreter during the judicial proceedings. And it is for the court or other competent body running the criminal or civil proceedings to call a sign language interpreter, if they need to examine a deaf or deaf-mute person and it is not sufficient to communicate with him or her in writing.

In **Estonia** Estonian Sign Language interpretation costs are covered by local communities.

## 6.4 Sign language courses<sup>16</sup>

In **Norway** Norwegian Sign Language is a subject at university for both deaf and hearing people who have Norwegian Sign Language as first language and for people who does not have Norwegian Sign Language as first language. Since 1996, parents are offered 40 weeks of sign language courses with all expenses paid. These classes are on offer from the moment their child's deafness is discovered until the child is 16 years old.

In **Finland**, a training programme for class teachers of Finnish Sign Language users started in the autumn of 1998, and 10 students began their studies. In autumn 2001 another group commenced studies. University level studies in sign language are popular subjects both at Turku and Jyväskylä Universities. In autumn 1998 a study program regarding sign languages was started at the University of Jyväskylä. The basic diploma in Finnish Sign language instruction started in the autumn of 2001. The professional title is "Sign Language Instructor" and it consists of 120 credit weeks. It is a completely new profession in Finland.

In **Sweden**, the Parliament voted in 1997 that parents of deaf children and children with impaired hearing should have the right to learn Swedish Sign Language. The state provides for a total of 240 hours of Swedish Sign Language tuition over a period of four years for parents. This training is offered free of charge to parents, and parents receive compensation for loss of income from employment. The National Agency for Education has developed a curriculum for this programme (SKOLFS 1998:7).

In Sweden it is possible to have Swedish Sign Language as first language education provided where a minimum of five pupils are involved (Comprehensive Schools Act SFS 1997:599). This has happened, though not very frequently. The state also provides for weekly courses, most of which are delivered at schools for the deaf. This allows an opportunity for students who have deaf siblings or deaf parents to learn more Swedish Sign Language and to interact and share experiences amongst themselves.

Since 1995, non-deaf students have had the opportunity to choose Swedish Sign Language as their third language at comprehensive school and at upper secondary school. The curriculum was last changed in 2000 with more hours being added to the programme of study, and more advanced level courses being made available. In the south of Sweden, in Vänersborg, there is

---

<sup>16</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

an upper secondary school for non-deaf students, which offers the Swedish Sign Language option. As a result, students are taking Swedish Sign Language classes that are as advanced as introductory courses for interpreting students. Indeed, several graduates of the school have been offered places to train as interpreters.

A one-year programme is available to deaf and hearing students to train as teachers of Swedish Sign Language. This is the only training programme in Sweden for Swedish Sign Language teachers. There are many opportunities for graduates of this programme, as there is a growing demand for Swedish Sign Language teaching in interpreter training programmes, at schools for the deaf (all levels), and in offering Swedish Sign Language classes to parents of deaf children, siblings of deaf children and to children of deaf parents. The Swedish Parliament decided to upgrade the training available for Swedish Sign Language tutors to college-level qualification following pressure from the SDR and those involved in delivering training at Västanvik (autumn 2000).

The French Community's *Promotion Sociale* system in **Belgium** offers Belgian-French Sign Language courses, but these are often unsuited to parents' needs, particularly as not many parents have access to the reduction of working hours that is normally part of the *Promotion Sociale* package. However, the courses are very popular and a lot of institutions include Belgian-French Sign Language as one of their courses. One consequence of this, in view of the lack of qualified deaf teachers, is that the system engages deaf persons with no basic training in language teaching.

In **Denmark**, the parents association, Bonaventure, has planned a training programme for parents in conjunction with the Ministry of Education.

In **Estonia** there is basic teaching in Estonian Sign Language for parents of deaf children. Courses and materials have been developed and managed by the Centre of Estonian Sign Language as from September 2000. Before this work was led by the Parents Association. Estonian Sign Language courses for parents of deaf children are financed by the Association of Parents of Hearing Impaired Children. There are Estonian Sign Language short courses for students at Tartu University since 1995.

In **Poland**, the Ministry of National Education fosters and promotes broadening and dissemination of the knowledge on communication of the deaf, organising or co-financing conferences in this scope. This Ministry has also issued various study and didactic materials for the learning and teaching of Polish Sign Language. Some universities enable non-deaf students to attend courses in Polish Sign Language, for example the University of Warsaw as from the academic year 1998/99.

## 7

# Use of sign language in media, politics, cultural expressions and religion

### 7.1 Media<sup>17</sup>

The European Parliament of the European Union noted in its Resolution of 1998 that there is inadequate provision made by television companies to provide programmes which are accessible to deaf people given that visual information is of very great importance to deaf people. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe instructed the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation of April 2003 to encourage the 45 member states to broadcast television programmes in sign languages, and make sign language subtitling of programmes transmitted in spoken language a general practice.

On 4 September 2003, the European Parliament voted in favour of a ground breaking report calling for improved access to television in Europe for people with disabilities. The report on the application of Directive 89/552/EEC “Television without Frontiers” written by Roy Perry, South East MEP, will lead to an increase in the levels of subtitling, audio description and sign language on television across Europe. Roy Perry, said, “Europe needs to make it easier for people with disabilities to access television. This report calls for a study to identify best practice, which will lead to increased enjoyment of television for people with sensory impairments.” Alongside this breakthrough, a report entitled “TV for All” is being produced for the European standardisation body, CENELEC, on the technical requirements necessary to increase access to television for disabled people.<sup>18</sup>

**Finland’s** national public service broadcasting company Yleisradio Oy operates two national television channels and four national radio networks and has to treat in its broadcasting Finnish and Swedish speaking citizens on equal grounds and to produce services in the Sami and Romany languages and in sign language as well as, where applicable, also for other language groups in the country (Act on Yleisradio Oy (746/1998), section 7). Finnish TV sends daily news in sign language and the Association of the Deaf publishes a monthly video bulletin in sign language. The company ProSign Oy produces multimedia in Finnish Sign Language was founded in 1998. They have produced, among other things, children’s programs for TV in Finnish Sign Language and the educational program ”I came, I saw, I signed”.

---

<sup>17</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

<sup>18</sup> The “TV for All” report for CENELEC was written by Broadcasting Consultant Gerry Stallard. From the “Mandate to the European Standards Bodies for Standardisation in the field of information and communications technologies (ICT) for disabled and elderly people. M/273.”

In **Portugal**, the Resolution of the Parliament no. 23/98 recommends that the Institute for the Media make TV companies aware of the need to include sign language in the main news about national and international events. Law no. 31-A/98 of 14 July 1998 (TV Law), Article 45, makes it compulsory for TV companies to guarantee, progressively, that television broadcasting may be attended by deaf people or people with hearing disabilities, by including captioning or sign language, as well as by creating specific programmes directed to that special segment of the public.

In **Denmark**, deaf persons can be informed through the use of subtitling or sign language interpretation in the public service channels' television broadcasts. In the Danish Act on Radio and Television Broadcasting from 2000 it is made clear that the public service channels are under an obligation to ensure that disabled persons' access to public service programmes is strengthened. This is to be done by utilising new technologies for, for example, subtitling etc. of Danish-language television programmes.

In **Belgium** Flanders, Fevlado (Flemish equivalent of Dovenschap) has its own TV-series "World of Signs" aiming to provide the hearing community in Flanders with a better understanding of deaf people and their sign language.

Since 1981, RTBF, Belgium's French-speaking state channel, has been providing Sign Language interpretation of the 7.30 evening news, but it is frequently cancelled in favour of live sports coverage. Since 1999, French Community funding has enabled RTBF to create 2½ full-time posts for closed-subtitle coding of some programmes. The FFSB conducted a survey to determine which programmes should be subtitled. However, the most-requested programme is only subtitled 50 per cent of the time (one programme in two).

**Germany** provides, even without a legal basis, special tools to people with disabilities in the areas of broadcasting and television. In respect of deaf people, public television broadcasting stations in Germany, for example, provide access to some of their programmes by using subtitles or sign language interpreters. The state run broadcasting station, "Phoenix", has interpreters on the 20h00 news every evening as well as on a news round-up programme, broadcast later at night.

In **Italy** there are two national television live news programmes per day with closed captioning and three pre-recorded news bulletins provided with Italian Sign Language interpretation.

In the **United Kingdom**, provisions in the Broadcasting Act 1996 also came into force in May 2000, which require broadcasters of digital terrestrial TV services to provide sign language on 1% of their programmes every week. This will increase gradually to 5% by 2008. The government published its Communications White Paper in December 2000 in which it affirmed its commitment to extending the requirements for sign language on TV.

In **Estonia**, the broadcasting authorities offer daily news programme translation into signed Estonian. Teletext news is available and widely used. For example, the Parents Association spreads information mostly through teletext. There are no special programmes for the deaf.

## 7.2 Parliament<sup>19</sup>

In **Sweden**, information on the Parliament website exists in Swedish Sign Language. “Samhällsguiden” (The Civic Guide) is a manual for all citizens who want to know more about their rights, obligations, the legal system and regulations. It is now used as part of the course literature for civics at the special schools for the deaf. In February 2000, the Swedish Parliament notified the media that sample elements from the Civic Guide were available on the web in Swedish Sign Language. The media highlighted the launch of the website, and after the first week, evaluations showed very positive feedback from Swedish deaf people who had visited the site ([www.samhallsguiden.riksdagen.se](http://www.samhallsguiden.riksdagen.se)).

The Swedish Government has a committee whose task is to make information about the Swedish authorities accessible in plain language. They encourage authorities to start projects that encourage clear use of language and every year, they award a prize, “The Straight Talking Crystal” to an authority who has been successful in making their information accessible. The theme for the year 2000 was “Straight Talking for People with Disabilities”. The SDR and the Parliament’s Information Unit were invited to participate in the award ceremony on 19 May 2000, and were invited to speak on the topic “This is how we created the Civic Guide in Sign Language”.

On 3 October 2003, the Scottish Parliament in the **United Kingdom** has launched a new British Sign Language (BSL) video, approved by the British Deaf Association, which explains the many ways in which people can get involved in the work of the Parliament. The video, ‘Get involved in the Scottish Parliament’, aimed at BSL-users, includes information on:

- How to contact your MSPs
- How to find out what is happening in the Scottish Parliament
- How to contribute your views to Committees
- How to submit a petition to the Parliament
- How to get involved in the work of a Cross Party Group
- The difference between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive.

Launching the British Sign Language video, Presiding Officer George Reid said: “Every person in Scotland has the fundamental right to be involved in the work of the Scottish Parliament and we are constantly striving to ensure that people do not face any kind of barrier when trying to do so. Our BSL-presented video takes people through democracy in action. It includes the work of the Committees, the role of MSPs and how our laws are made. This practical guide will help people all over Scotland to ensure that they know how to make their views known to the Parliament.” Levi Pay, the Scottish Parliament’s Equalities Manager said: “Along with openness, accountability and the sharing of power, accessibility is a founding principle of the Scottish Parliament. We are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to the work of Parliament, the services it provides and any information that people require in order to participate in the democratic process. This BSL video is an example of the very practical steps we are taking to deliver a truly accessible Parliament.”

The Scottish Parliament has produced previous videos containing BSL interpreting. However, this is the first video to be presented in BSL only. This video does not contain subtitles or a voice-over in English because it is aimed solely at members of the Deaf community. The

---

<sup>19</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

Parliament already produces a wide range of printed publications in English. The aim of this video is to ensure that BSL-users have equal access to the Parliament and to ensure that they have the same opportunities as speakers of other languages to make their views known to MSPs.

### 7.3 Culture<sup>20</sup>

In **Sweden**, the public libraries provide sign language video programmes for the deaf, with cultural and news programmes, and Swedish Television broadcasts news in sign language daily. In the guidelines decided by the Parliament and government, the Swedish public service broadcasting companies (radio, television and educational programmes) have far-reaching demands on their efforts to make programmes accessible to disabled people. One of the most important demands is that the number of subtitled programmes shall increase considerably.

In **Denmark**, the Minister for Culture has tabled a Bill Amending the Act on Museums. The Bill proposes that to keep and obtain subsidies museums must endeavour to provide the greatest possible accessibility for, among others, persons with disabilities. Accessibility here means not only physical accessibility but also the possibility of sign language interpretation.

In **Finland**, the Centre for Finnish Sign Language of the Finnish Association of the Deaf promotes the status of the Finnish sign language and carries out research on sign language. As an outcome of its work, in 1998 it published The Basic Dictionary of Finnish Sign Language. The dictionary describes Finnish sign language as the Finnish Deaf people in their daily lives use it. The book contains the most used everyday signs whose natural contexts of use are presented with lots of example sentences. The uniqueness of the book is based on its search system: the dictionary is structured so that you look from Finnish sign language towards the Finnish language. The search is done on the basis of sign language, so this is not a Finnish-sign language dictionary, but the other way around. Finnish Sign Language has been studied relatively little, and a book like the Basic Dictionary of Finnish Sign Language has not been published before in Finland. All the other sign language dictionaries published in Finland previously have been from Finnish into sign language. The Dictionary has gained a wider public recognition by getting for instance a nomination for the "Finnish Factual Book Prize" in 1998, one of the most important book prizes in Finland. The significance of the book for the Deaf community extends beyond the mere use of the dictionary.

In **Greece**, NOEMA is the first electronic dictionary of Greek signs and also the first DVD-ROM production in Greece. It contains 3.000 video recorded signs with their Modern Greek translations and is equally addressed to native signers as well as to hearing students of Greek Sign Language (GSL). On the basis of an ergonomic arrangement focusing on optimal product utilisation by the two user groups, every video lemma is accompanied by its equivalent in Modern Greek, further explanatory remarks, if necessary, as well as synonyms and antonyms in GSL, whenever such exist. The incorporation of explanatory remarks and Modern Greek translations helps non native GSL users to better understand the meaning of the presented signs, while it allows native GSL signers to enrich their vocabulary in Modern Greek. The dictionary also provides for lemma classification according to semantic categories, the goal of which is to enable presentation, and accordingly, teaching of groups of

---

<sup>20</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.

signs, which are semantically or pragmatically related. However, the most important element of the dictionary, as reported to the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf (HFD) by deaf evaluators, remains its multimedia structure, given that the lemmas are actual video recordings of signs, accompanied by a significant number of explanatory icons. Funding for the project was obtained through the General Secretariat for Research and Technology (GSRT) of the Ministry of Development.

In **Norway**, the Ministry of Education started in 1998 a Norwegian Sign Language Dictionary Project. In **Denmark**, preliminary work began on a new, extended Dictionary of Danish Sign Language. A steering committee was formed, working in co-operation with a linguist. In **Estonia** two booklets have been published by Tartu University (“Speaking Hands” and “The Dictionary of Christian Signs”) as research of Estonian Sign Language is in its infancy.

## 7.4 Religion<sup>21</sup>

In **Finland**, in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, which is the main church of the country - 85% of the Finns belong to it - there are 7 ministers for the Deaf. In the Church they are also at present translating into the sign language the church manual that regulates the church services.

In **Sweden**, on 29 November 2001, 600 deaf people from all of Sweden attended a celebration church service where Queen Silvia received the first edition of the Bible in Swedish Sign Language. The whole of the Marcus Evangelism and five different biblical texts related to the most important religious days during the year, i.e. Christmas and Easter, have been translated. The project, among others, was financed by the Swedish Culture Department, the Swedish Church, the Swedish Bible Company, the Swedish Deaf Association, the Swedish Institute for Disability issues in school.

In **Denmark**, a video with some of the most important biblical text translated into sign language has been released. To make the translation more accurate it was done directly from Greek and Hebrew into sign language. A special translation committee to accomplish the work consisted of four people: a deaf linguistics student, a deaf teacher of interpreters, a hearing priest for deaf and a hearing sign language expert. Together they have worked half a year to translate 26 texts and 8 hymns. There are still many important texts to translate and the committee started on new texts in January 2002 and will continue for another four years. The aim is to translate the whole of the New Testament into sign language and make it available on DVD, CD-ROM and on the Internet. So far it is only available on VHS. The project cost for the whole period is estimated to be 1.1 million Euro and is sponsored by the Danish church ministry and a wide range of funds.

---

<sup>21</sup> The countries mentioned in this chapter serve as examples. Due to the limited available information in English, it was not possible to give an exhaustive overview of the situation in all European countries.