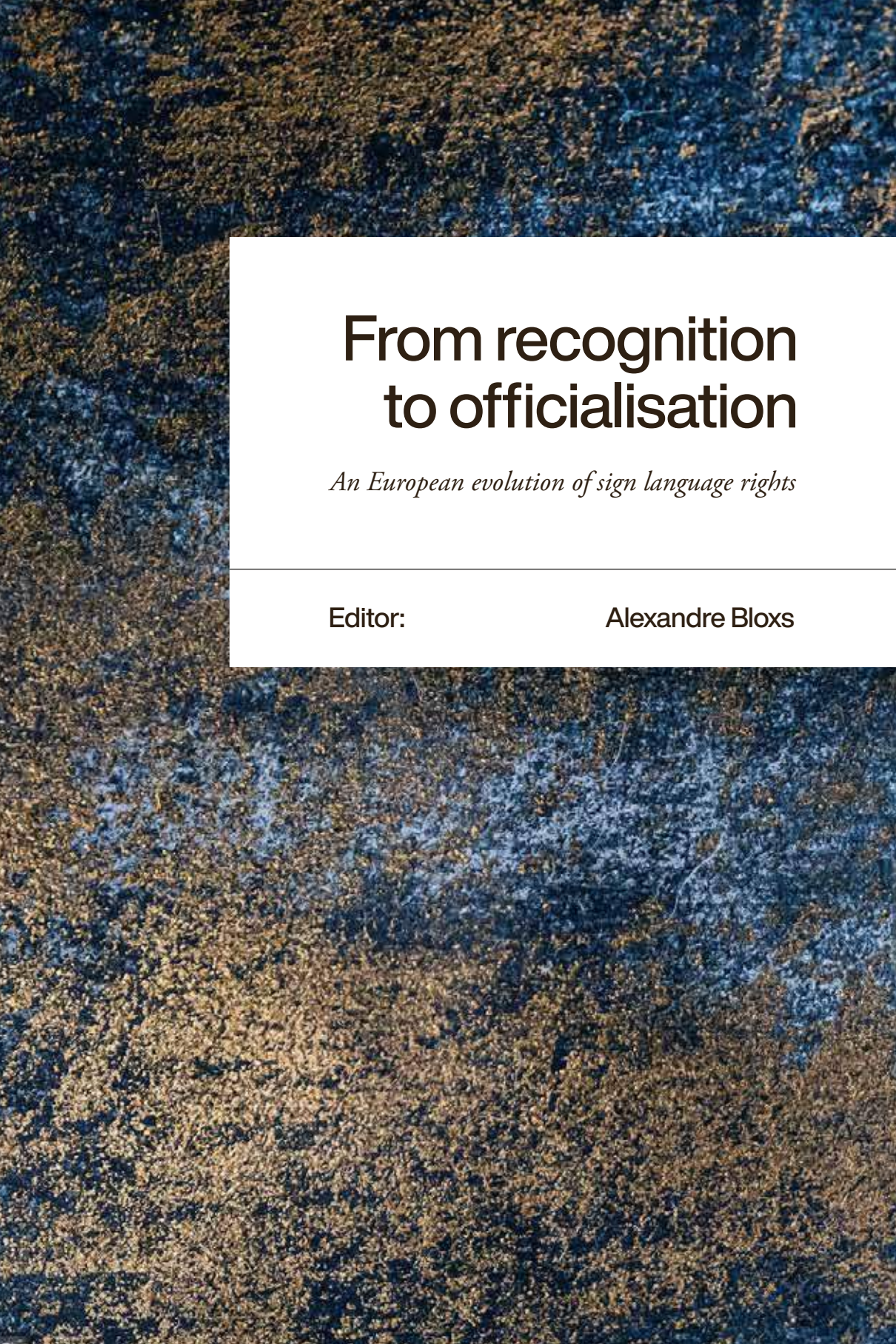


The background of the cover is an abstract, textured surface. It features a mix of dark blue, light blue, and gold or bronze tones, creating a marbled or mottled effect. The texture appears to be made of fine, irregular fibers or particles, giving it a tactile quality.

From recognition to officialisation

An European evolution of sign language rights

Editor:

Alexandre Bloxs

From recognition to officialisation

An European evolution of sign language rights

Alexandre Bloxs (Editor)

European Union of the Deaf
Brussels, Belgium

European Union of the Deaf (EUD)

Based in Brussels, Belgium, EUD is a not-for-profit European non-governmental organisation (ENGO) comprised of National Associations of the Deaf (NADs). It is the only supranational organisation representing deaf people at a European level, and is one of the few ENGOs representing associations in all 28 EU Member States, as well as Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland.

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

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

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

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Toward recognition: Sign Languages and European Institutional Legitimacy¹⁹

Tant Cédric and Nicolas Hanquet

Introduction

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

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

This chapter examines the legitimacy of European institutions as reflected in the EUD's public discourse, focusing on five dimensions: accessibility, inclusion, involvement, identity recognition, and democratic participation. Each of these dimensions highlights a distinct aspect of how institutions can either fail or succeed in fulfilling their democratic promises. Additionally, the chapter questions the reliance on digital

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

tools as a means to foster institutional change and promote visibility and advocacy for minority communities. By studying these critiques, we can better understand how legitimacy is constructed, contested, and potentially restored in the context of minority rights and linguistic justice within the European Union.

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

Critique and the Process of Legitimisation

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

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

In practice, the EUD uses critique to frame its arguments about institutional responsibilities and citizen rights. For instance, when it denounces the lack of sign language interpretation in EU communications, it is not only expressing a grievance; it is asserting a normative principle that accessibility is a prerequisite for democratic participation. In this sense, the critique is both reflexive and performative: it draws attention to institutional shortcomings while proposing the basis for legitimate practice.

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

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

Accessibility

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

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

Accessibility is not only about providing information but also about ensuring that the information is usable and meaningful. This includes the quality of sign language interpretation, the clarity of translations, and the timely dissemination of materials. A poorly interpreted speech or a delayed translation can render the information effectively

inaccessible. The EUD highlights these concerns by advocating for professional, high-quality interpretation across all EU events: “Full access [to information from the European institutions] is a basic precondition of our most fundamental rights. Yet, deaf people face barriers in this regard” (EUD, 2022, September 21).

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

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

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

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

Inclusion

Inclusion is more than a principle; it is a condition for meaningful participation in

society. For the EUD, inclusion means that every citizen—regardless of their hearing ability—should be able to participate fully in cultural, social, and political life. This includes being able to understand and engage with EU decisions, debates, and documents in a language they can use: their national sign language.

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

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

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

The digital environment plays a dual role in inclusion. Social media platforms like X provide a space for deaf communities to share information, express opinions, and participate in discussions that would otherwise be inaccessible. These tools allow the EUD to reach a wider audience, raise awareness of issues, and apply pressure on institutions. However, digital inclusion has its limits. Not everyone has equal access to digital platforms, and online engagement does not always translate into real influence over decision-making. As Proulx (2020) and Carpentier (2016) emphasise, online participation does not automatically amount to having a real say in decision-making; access to information or the ability to post and comment remains only a preliminary step. True inclusion requires not only digital visibility but also institutional recognition

and concrete opportunities to exert influence.

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

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

Involvement

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

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

Involvement also relates to the broader principle of participatory democracy. For the EUD, deaf citizens are experts in their own experiences and therefore should be consulted in shaping policies that affect their daily lives. This perspective reflects a growing recognition in democratic theory that legitimacy is not only granted by procedural correctness but also by the capacity of institutions to incorporate the voices of those affected by decisions (Rosanvallon, 2008). When EU institutions fail to provide sign language interpretation, translated documents, or accessible online platforms, they restrict the opportunity for deaf citizens to contribute, reducing the

legitimacy of their actions.

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

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

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

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

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

Identities recognition

Identity recognition²⁰ is a central criterion of legitimacy for the EUD. For deaf communities, linguistic identity is inseparable from cultural identity: national sign languages are not simply communication tools, they are living expressions of community, history, and heritage. Recognising these languages at the EU level validates the unique identities of millions of deaf citizens across Europe.

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

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

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

This focus on identity ties directly to legitimacy. When institutions ignore linguistic and cultural identities, they risk creating alienation and disengagement among citizens. Legitimacy is not simply a matter of procedural correctness or legal compliance; it depends on institutions being perceived as inclusive, respectful, and attentive to the realities of the populations they serve (Rosanvallon, 2008). For the EUD, failing to recognise sign language identities signals a gap between the principles of diversity and

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

their practical implementation.

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

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

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

Participation in democracy

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

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

Access to information is particularly critical. European institutions produce a vast

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

Digital tools, including social media platforms like X, provide alternative spaces for participation, allowing the EUD to make its voice heard and mobilise communities. However, as noted in broader research on digital participation (Carpentier, 2016; Proulx, 2020), online spaces cannot replace formal mechanisms. They can facilitate awareness and discussion, but they do not automatically grant influence over institutional decision-making. This limitation is particularly relevant for deaf citizens, as social media engagement may not translate into meaningful policy impact. The EUD’s persistent online advocacy demonstrates both the potential and the boundaries

of digital participation, showing that offline institutional change remains essential.

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

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

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

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

Despite these constraints, digital tools are essential for creating public spaces of discussion, visibility, and advocacy. Yet the EUD's experience demonstrates that online participation alone cannot replace formal mechanisms of consultation, decision-making, or institutional recognition.

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

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

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

From Recognition to Officialisation – An European Evolution of Sign Language Rights analyses and dissects the meaning of official status, exploring its challenges and opportunities for national sign languages at the Union's level through multidisciplinary perspectives from some of the most prominent experts in the field. The book also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of current legal frameworks surrounding the rights to sign languages at the national level, offering tailored recommendations for legal reforms that would facilitate the officialisation of national sign languages.



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