

ARE WE REACHING A TURNING POINT IN SERBIA WITH RESPECT TO SERBIAN SIGN LANGUAGE IN DEAF EDUCATION?

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Abstract: *This paper provides an overview of the challenges affecting deaf education in Serbia, as well as in Serbian Sign Language (SZJ) by probing important policy measures that have been introduced over the years. Furthermore, we provide a summary of sign language research and the beginning of deaf awareness in Serbia. Our discussion focuses on key changes in the education policy that took place in 2009 when inclusive education was introduced and when Serbia ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The ratification of UNCRPD and the subsequent empowerment of the Serbian deaf community paved the way for the legal recognition of Serbian Sign Language in 2015, along with the enactment/passing of the Law on the Use of Sign Language. We review the existing legal and policy documents concerning deaf education and Serbian Sign Language by providing an outline of the government's latest Strategy on Education until 2030 and its accompanying Action Plan until 2023. In conclusion, by focusing on the major goals set by the Strategy and the Action plan, we consider the feasibility of the goals with respect to the time frame and situation in practice.*

Keywords: *Serbian Sign Language, deaf education, education policy, sign language research*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Serbia (for as long as the oldest deaf person can remember), deafness has been primarily viewed as a debilitating impairment through an almost fatalistic approach. This is due to the deep-rooted ideological convictions related to language and the legacy of oralism that is ingrained in all aspects of deaf life in Serbia. In addition, it is a testament to the social model of disability, a paradigm introduced by Oliver (1983), that restricts people with some physical or sensory impairment from partaking fully in society by imposing the label "disability" on them.

The 'deification of speech' (Lane, 1984, p.101) has been typical of deaf education around the world, and Serbia is no exception to this mainly medical view of deafness. One only needs to look at the plethora of Serbian studies on deafness and hearing loss (e.g. Savić, 1986; 1995; Dimić, 2003; Nikolić, Ostojić and Mirić, 2014) that focus mainly on rehabilitation practices aimed at teaching deaf people to speak, rather than providing deaf

people with learning opportunities which hearing people have. These studies are grounded in the traditions of oralism, which, in turn, have shaped the ideological practices of language planners, policy makers, educators of the deaf, and even deaf people themselves (see Savić, 1986, 2005; Savić and Ivanović, 1988). While studies have shown that there has been very little change with respect to the status of Serbian Sign Language (*srpski znakovni jezik* or SZJ) in deaf education (Raičević Bajić, Nikolić, Gordić, Mouvet and Van Herreweghe, 2021), important shifts have been noted in policy over the last two decades. It was not until deaf people in Serbia came into contact with politically empowered deaf people from abroad that the first signs of changing consciousness became evident. Furthermore, deaf people's attitudes towards SZJ have started to shift in the direction of a heightened linguistic and cultural awareness (for a similar process of deaf awakening in Flanders, Belgium see De Clerck, 2007). Grassroots ideologies have thus evidenced a change, while top-down ideologies have remained largely the

same: this is evident in the government's lack of commitment to language planning frameworks. The hegemony of special education that thrives on oralist ideologies and practices remains uncontested (Nikolić, Đorić and Kovačević, 2019).

Our main aim in this paper is to provide a broader picture on deaf education and sign language in Serbia by outlining the background of the current language policies and planning committees. We examine the historical context of deaf education and sign language research in Serbia spanning from the 19th century until now. First, we provide a brief overview of the societal context in Serbia, followed by a historical overview of deaf education in Serbia and sign language usage until 1945, from 1945 to the beginning of the 1990s, and from the 1990s until 2009. Next, we focus on the emerging awakening in the Serbian deaf community with respect to the linguistic status of sign languages. Then, we provide a summary of the first research studies concerning the grammar of SZJ that coincided with the introduction of inclusive education and the ratification of the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006, UNCRPD) in 2009, as well as the Law on the Use of Sign Language which was passed in 2015. Finally, we examined the new Strategy of Education until 2030 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 63/2021) and the accompanying three-year Action Plan until 2023, which was adopted by the Serbian government on June 23, 2021, in order to take a closer look at the government's intentions regarding the use of SZJ in deaf education, as well as the feasibility of goals set by the Strategy and the Action plan.

2. DEAF EDUCATION IN SERBIA

2.1 Societal context of Serbia

SZJ is the language used by deaf and hearing signers in Serbia. The current Republic of Serbia was established in 2006 after Montenegro voted in a referendum for independence from the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2011, Serbia had 7,186,862 inhabitants (Marković, 2014) and one official language, Serbian. In 2011, the total number of deaf people and those who are hard of

hearing in Serbia was 144,648 (Marković 2014, p. 35). However, this number includes people who became deaf or those whose hearing deteriorated because of age, accidents, illness and so on. Many deaf representatives of deaf associations believe that there is a lack of accurate information about the number of members of the deaf community in Serbia (Allen and Walters, 2007; personal communication with deaf representatives of deaf organisations in Serbia).

Ethnically speaking, Serbia is a multinational community, where Serbs constitute the majority¹. Deaf people in Serbia are regarded as belonging either to the majority group of speakers of Serbian or to one of the national minority groups that live in Serbia regardless of the sign language they use and the fact that they self-identify with the Serbian deaf community.

2.2 Deaf education and sign language use until 1945

Many deaf children in Serbia were first exposed to SZJ in schools for the deaf, mainly through contact with older peers in the school playground. As Hill (2015, p. 157) emphasised, this is known as 'horizontal transmission' and it is typical of deaf and/or hard of hearing children at deaf schools, as opposed to 'vertical transmission' of hearing children who acquire their mother tongue from their family².

The oldest school for deaf students in Serbia (still existing) – Stefan Dečanski – is located in the centre of Belgrade. One of the two pioneering teachers of deaf children and a teacher in this school, Kosta Đ. Nikolić, was sent to Berlin in 1882 by the Ministry of Education to be trained to work with deaf children. He designed the very

¹ Other national minorities in Serbia are Hungarians, Romans, and Bosniaks, followed by Slovaks, Croats, Montenegrins, Vlachs, Romanians, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Ruthenians, Bunjevci, Germans, Slovenians, Albanians, Ukrainians, Poles, Ashkali, and Greeks (Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government).

² As pointed out to us by an anonymous reviewer, language transmission with respect to a hearing child's mother tongue(s) can also be 'horizontal' in the case of children who have siblings.

first curriculum for primary deaf education based on the curriculum of the Berlin Institute at that time. The ‘German system’, established by Samuel Heinicke, was known for embracing oralism as ‘the route the deaf must follow to achieve true education’ (Lane, 1984). In contrast, the ‘French system’ established by Charles-Michel de l’Epée focused on education in sign. In 1896, the Serbian curriculum for educating deaf students was published in a newspaper as a special offprint. Any consideration of the curriculum in deaf education includes an examination of the appropriate means of communication as evidenced by the very first curriculum for deaf students in Serbia. This curriculum called for the exclusive use of the speech method (*glasovna metoda*), while ‘the use of artificial finger speech (*Gebärdensprache*), as well as finger spelling was to be excluded in its entirety’ (Vujičić 2017, p. 19; our translation). Evidently, Serbia followed the trend adopted at the conference in Milan in 1880 when superiority of oral education was decalared. To this day, oralism, which primarily focuses on speech, seems to be the norm in deaf education in Serbia as testified by a number of deaf signers in a recent study conducted by Raičević Bajić, Nikolić et al. (2021).

Apart from the playgrounds of schools for deaf students, a number of deaf organisations, particularly the deaf clubs of these organisations, have also been locations where deaf people have socialised and communicated in sign language. The first associations of deaf people started to appear in 1921 in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, of which Serbia was a part. These were small organisations consisting mainly of workers who gathered together to help each other in the midst of an economic crisis. These organisations disintegrated at the beginning of World War II (Savić 2005) when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia ceased to exist.

2.3 From 1945 to the beginning of the 1990s

After World War II, an association, which eventually became the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Yugoslavia (*Savez gluvih i nagluvih Jugoslavije* SGNJ), was founded. Initially, SGNJ’s main goal was to suppress the astounding rate of illiteracy (80%) among deaf peo-

ple in Yugoslavia, as well as to create favourable conditions for training and employing deaf people (Savić 2005). Subsequently, SGNJ played a significant role in the oral education of deaf people, the publication of textbooks, and in the socialisation and employment of deaf people.

Dragoljub Vukotić, who was elected president of SGNJ in 1948 became president of WFD in 1955 and stayed on for the next 28 years, until his retirement in 1983. He was awarded an honorary PhD from the University of Gallaudet in 1969 as a testament to the high esteem in which he was held internationally. It was during Vukotić’s presidency that SGNJ undertook a very important educational role and it was very active in the printing and publication of textbooks for deaf children. It was the only non-governmental organisation that engaged in such activities. SGNJ published newsletters, magazines, books, and manuals for educators working with deaf people. All school textbooks were distributed to deaf schools for free. It also founded the Society of Parents of Deaf Children and translated the correspondence course of the American John Tracy Clinic for parents of small deaf children into 12 booklets written in Serbo-Croatian and distributed it for free to the parents (Savić 2005, p. 92). Some of the topics in the booklets dealt with therapy services, different approaches to speech and language development, support to parents, and so on.

Although SGNJ promoted oral education for deaf children, it felt that “sign language” or gesticulation is an important means of communication for deaf people, but mostly as an auxiliary tool or an in-group language that a deaf person needed to be able to use at the organisation. As a result of this view, SGNJ encouraged its hearing staff members who worked with deaf people to adopt at least the basics of “sign language”. At the Association’s plenum held in November 1964, Article 7 stated ‘acquiring gesticulation on the part of hearing clerks and associates is necessary in all organisations, to this end courses for improving communication between managing staff and employees, and deaf members have to be set up immediately’ (Savić 2005, p. 155; our translation).

The literature available in Serbian on deaf related matters before the 1990s does not mention Yugoslavian Sign Language or any of its varieties (e.g. SZJ). The importance of signing was recognised as a necessity, especially within the Serbian deaf community, but the awareness of the linguistic status of the national sign language, which was very often dubbed as ‘gesticulation’ (Savić 1996), was missing. Addressing hearing loss based on an audiologist’s approach was considered to be more important. Being deaf was viewed as a limitation to communication and as a problem to be solved, which was in accordance with SGNJ’s efforts to help the rehabilitators by translating and publishing major works in the field of deaf rehabilitation. SGNJ cared about the well-being of its members and worked on improving their quality of life by organising courses aimed at suppressing illiteracy, creating employment opportunities, organising recreational activities, as well as providing audiological diagnostics, education, resources, and support for families with deaf children (Savić 2005). However, all the activities SGNJ initiated were carried out in accordance with a ‘helper philosophy’ (Humphrey and Alcorn, 1996) that perpetuates the medical and pathological view of deafness. The cultural linguistic model of deafness did not play any role in public discourses at the time (see Savić, 1986, 2005; Savić and Ivanović, 1988).

The dissolution of Yugoslavia affected SGNJ, leading to a split in the organisation into the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Serbia and the Croatian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Other former Republics of Yugoslavia also had their own associations. After the split occurred, contact between deaf people in the region was not as frequent as it used to be. To what extent this has had an effect on the development of sign languages is a matter of speculation since no research has been conducted on this aspect. However, it might be likely that it led to a divergence. Some of the Serbian deaf people in their 60s who grew up in former Yugoslavia say that there was great intelligibility among signers of different Republics with certain interregional differences in signing, but the sign language they

used to communicate among themselves was never referred to as Yugoslavian Sign Language because the awareness of the linguistic status of the language was non-existent. The prevalence of the oralist ideology among deaf people in Serbia was evident and, as stated by Bourdieu (1977, p. 164), ‘successfully naturalised’, as is the case for such dominant ideologies.

3. USHERING IN A NEW ERA

3.1 Increased awareness in the Serbian deaf community

Political and economic circumstances led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 and the subsequent establishment of the Republic of Serbia in 2006. During this turbulent socio-political and economic climate, deaf organisations in Serbia had to face many challenges since the situation in the country had rapidly deteriorated because of the Yugoslav Wars and reduced funding from the State and private foundations. In 2003, all the funding that the Association of the Deaf used to receive from the government was terminated (Allen and Walters, 2005). The lack of lobbying capacity left the Association with very few possibilities to advance its causes.

The 1990s were marked by the establishment of the first interpreting agencies, inclusive education, and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 1997, the organisation that is now the Association of the Deaf of Serbia started holding an annual seven-day seminar on SZJ, which created opportunities for interpreters to receive certification by the National Association after passing the exam at the end of the seminar, as well as to perform interpreting services in various settings for deaf people (Allen and Walters, 2005). The lack of (formal) interpreter training had left interpreters in Serbia, who are mainly children of deaf adults (CODAs), with an approach to interpreting that was based primarily on machine (conduit) philosophy, focusing on the volume of signs and not so much on meaning (Humphrey and Alcorn, 1996; Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen, 2006): they felt ‘that sign language in Serbia has a limited vo-

cabulary’, which ‘can be frustrating in their work’ (Allen and Walters 2005, p. 81).

The first signs of empowerment began to emerge in 2004 through an increase in awareness about the cultural model of deafness that promotes deaf identity, the use of a (national) sign language, a particular set of beliefs, behaviours, history, art and so on. This increase in awareness was brought about by the Survey team of WFD who visited four countries in the larger Balkan Region (Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Turkey) in order to document the status and situation of deaf people. This two-year project ended in a Forum called ‘Deaf People in the Balkans’ in Belgrade in 2006. The Forum remains a historical turning point in many deaf people’s lives with respect to realising what being a deaf person means. This was the first time that many deaf people in Serbia saw Yugoslavian Sign Language and Serbian Sign Language being discussed in terms that denoted real languages and those that were distinct from any major spoken language and gesturing. The sense of Deafhood (Ladd, 2003) and the comprehensive meaning of a sign language in the life of a deaf person started to emerge owing to the developments and acquired knowledge in the international deaf community and through international documents. However, the Serbian deaf community faced a big challenge with respect to language maintenance when the provisions of the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System in 2009 encouraged enrolment of deaf students in regular schools and students with various mental challenges in deaf schools. This led to the imminent elimination of exclusively deaf and hard of hearing schools as the source of sign language. The vague prospects of bilingual-bicultural education for deaf children, as discussed in Nikolić (2009), aggravated the situation further. If one takes into account that only a small percentage of congenitally deaf children have deaf parents (Mitchell and Karchmer, 2004) and that cochlear implantation is planned right after birth (Miller 2016) (i.e., before the child’s second birthday), SZJ is arguably under constant pressure of preservation and survival.

Until 2009, special education curricula were used in special education schools, which included

deaf education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 72/89). The outcomes of courses in deaf education were below the desired standard compared to the outcomes of courses for hearing children in mainstream education. The only exception to the adaptation of mainstream curriculum was the curriculum for partially blind and blind pupils. Special education curricula were accompanied by special plans and programmes that were meant to offer additional support to special needs pupils (Nikolić et al., 2019). Children were enrolled at schools exclusively based on their special needs. Until 2009, there were seven schools for deaf and hard of hearing students in Serbia (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no 72/89). Furthermore, until 2009, textbooks were designed according to the special education curricula. For deaf and hard of hearing students, the content of textbooks was adapted significantly (Nikolić et al., 2019). A major drawback of these textbooks was reduced content with no consideration for SZJ or deaf culture, or even assistive tools such as adequate illustrations or videos that could facilitate further understanding of the content. Special needs educationalists, along with a very small number of teachers qualified to teach a particular course, were part of the teaching staff at schools for deaf and hard of hearing children (Nikolić and Nedeljković, 2015). Teachers who held a degree in a particular field, for example, mathematics or the Serbian language, underwent an obligatory training programme in order to be able to work with deaf and hard of hearing pupils. These teachers, as well as deaf or hard of hearing teachers were a minority at deaf schools. The only deaf teachers who worked at schools for deaf students were art teachers. During the period until 2009, only special needs educationalists taught deaf children up to the fourth grade of primary school. From the fifth grade until the end of primary education, the same educationalists worked with deaf students with the assistance of other special educationalists who were trained to teach a particular course. Teachers who had specialised in teaching a particular subject were an exception at deaf schools. At secondary schools for deaf students, the ratio of special educationalists to teach-

ers was roughly fifty-fifty. The primary language of instruction was Serbian and SZJ was demoted. However, a first glimpse of change with respect to the use of SZJ in deaf education was the experimental introduction of an elective SZJ course in the Stefan Dečanski school for deaf pupils in Belgrade between 2001 and 2003 (Raičević Bajić, Nikolić et al., 2021). Since many teachers of the school disapproved of the course, mostly because they felt it could be of little assistance in everyday life and in communication with the majority of hearing people, the course was cancelled. However, it had an effect on the first mention of ‘the language of signs’ in a legal document, namely Article 7, paragraph 4 of the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System from 2003, which states that:

Education for persons who use the language of signs is conducted in the language of signs and with means of that language (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 62/03; our translation).

The curriculum for deaf students changed in 2009 as a reflection of the inclusion process. Based on the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System in 2009 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 72/09), inclusive education was introduced and special schools were defined as resource centres (Article 27). Article 77 of the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System stipulates that special needs students must follow the general curriculum, while there is an option of applying specific educational approaches that match the individual needs of the child through an individually designed programme (Nikolić, Lukić and Janković, 2010). A set of specific goals concerning inclusive education and special needs pupils were outlined in the Strategy of Education until 2020, which the Serbian government adopted in 2009 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 107/12). Within the system of inclusive education, deaf and hard of hearing students were encouraged to join regular schools. This had impact on deaf schools, which were no longer solely for deaf and hard of hearing students, but began to cater to children with other special needs. Apart from the important changes in the curriculum for deaf students, the year 2009 brought a crucial

change to SZJ from a legal standpoint. On July 31, 2009, Serbia ratified the UNCRPD. The ratification was particularly important for SZJ since the UNCRPD equates sign languages to spoken languages. Importantly, UNCRPD highlights access to a natural sign language as a prerequisite to success in deaf education. Thus, changes in deaf education policy brought about by inclusive education in 2009 were supported by the emerging legal recognition of the importance of a sign language for deaf people in all walks of life. The Serbian deaf community and the national deaf association used the ratification of the UNCRPD to strongly advocate for the legal recognition of SZJ. While there were evident changes in policy, the situation in practice with respect to the use of SZJ in deaf education remained unchanged. Deaf children became even more invisible in the system of inclusive education with no sign language support or true consideration for their educational needs. Oralism remained as strong as ever, while SZJ continued to remain at the margins of deaf education.

3.2 Sign language research in Serbia

The first papers on the grammar of SZJ were published in 2009. These initial research efforts in the field of sign language linguistics were the result of a project launched by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs in 2007. The working group had four subgroups that focused on preparing the Law on the Use of Sign Language, creating a corpus of signs in SZJ, conducting linguistic research on SZJ by describing its grammar, and outlining the history of SZJ. The working group consisted of members of the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Serbia, The Faculty for Special Education and Rehabilitation, an NGO for persons with disabilities, and The Institute for Improving Education, which worked on harmonising and ratifying the Serbian laws with respect to the UNCRPD adopted in 2006. The project lasted until 2015 when the Law on the Use of Sign Language was passed. All four subgroups consisted of mainly hearing people with limited or no knowledge of SZJ. The team that worked on legislative issues produced

the most tangible results since they participated in drafting the Law on the Use of Sign Language that was passed in 2015. Similarly, the subgroup that worked on the collection of SZJ signs published a CD containing the most frequent SZJ signs that was distributed along with a daily newspaper. This corpus of signs is now available at the official website of the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Serbia (<https://www.savez-gluvihsrbiije.org.rs/srpski-znakovni-jezik/video/>). Other aspects of the project were not as transparent, neither to the expert community, nor the general public. As a result, we were able to find only two linguistic papers on SZJ that were produced under the framework of the project: a paper on grammatical categories in SZJ by Polovina and Dimić (2009a) and another on linearity and simultaneity of signals in SZJ by Polovina and Dimić (2009b). The paper on grammatical categories in SZJ (Polovina and Dimić, 2009a) was briefly reviewed in a paper on constituent order in SZJ by Raičević Bajić, Vermeerbergen, Schembri and Van Herreweghe (2021): the authors highlighted the lack of transparency with respect to data collection and research participants, as well as some of the conclusions, such as the lack of classifier morphemes in SZJ. The part of the project that focused on documenting grammatical aspects of SZJ remained unknown to the Serbian deaf community at large and has not contributed to the emancipation of the deaf community the way similar projects have elsewhere (e.g. the KOMVA project in the Netherlands van den Bogaerde and Schermer, 2007).

In the next section, we turn to one of the most tangible and relevant results of the 2007-2015 project – the Law on the Use of Sign Language.

3.3 Official recognition of (Serbian) Sign Language in 2015

It was not until the first signs of the growing network of politically empowered deaf people worldwide became evident that language attitudes of Serbian deaf people started to show a shift in the direction of heightened linguistic and cultural awareness (cf. De Clerck, 2007). On the one hand, deaf empowerment led to the first major lobbying

efforts by the Serbian deaf community, which in turn led to the official recognition of SZJ. On the other hand, the Serbian deaf community's cause was fostered by the ratification of UNCRPD, as well as Serbia's path to joining the EU, which meant meeting a number of standards concerning minority languages and cultures, including sign languages and deaf culture.

On 28th April 2015, the Serbian National Assembly passed the 'Law on the Use of Sign Language. Here is Article 3 of the law as it was accepted in 2015: Sign Language is a natural form of communication of deaf persons that has its inherent language properties, including grammatical functions, phonology, morphology, and syntax. (our translation; Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 38/2015)

The law contains the following measures: (1) a symbolic recognition of sign language, (2) the recognition of the sign language interpreting profession, (3) the provision of conditions for using sign language interpreting services and funds for hiring interpreters, (4) the encouragement of sign language use in electronic media and through telecommunication services, (5) the improvement of sign language use, and (6) the design of a curriculum for learning sign language.

The Serbian deaf community saw the recognition of sign language and the right to use interpreting services as the most relevant aspects of the law (personal communication with representatives and leaders of deaf associations in Serbia). Educational linguistic rights are found in the realm of possibilities as 'education at educational institutions and studies at institutions of higher education CAN (our emphasis) be done in sign language for deaf persons, in accordance with their needs, abilities and possibilities' (Article 7 of the Law on Sign Language; Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 38/2015). Article 19 of the law calls on research, educational, and cultural institutions to assume certain responsibility and assist with sign language promotion within their means in cooperation with the National Deaf Association. In accordance to the sixth measure listed above, the responsible minister was supposed to draw up a sign language curricu-

lum within six months from the date the law was passed. In 2017, a sign language curriculum for training the interpreters was completed (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – Education Gazette, no. 1/2017; for more on the contents of the curriculum see Appendix). The lack of teaching material and qualified professionals who could be in charge of the training course is yet to be addressed. After the initial efforts with respect to the linguistic research of SZJ under the framework of the 2007-2015 project, there have only been individual research projects conducted by a Masters and PhD student that resulted in studies on mouth gestures in SZJ (Raičević, 2014), constituent order in SZJ (Raičević Bajić, Vermeerbergen et al., 2021), and language attitudes towards SZJ and deaf education in Serbia (Raičević Bajić, Nikolić et al., 2021), as well as a short manual on the SZJ grammar (Raičević and Nikolić, 2016). A systematic approach to language documentation was announced more recently as part of the new Strategy of Education (described in the next section).

4. NEW STRATEGY OF EDUCATION

The Strategy of Education is an official document developed every ten years by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia. The strategy provides an overview of the existing domestic and international legislation concerning education, an overview of the current state of education in Serbia, as well as lays out future goals with respect to primary, secondary, and tertiary education. For the first time in Serbian history, the Strategy on Education until 2030 considered the role of Serbian Sign Language in the education of deaf students. In the overview and analysis of the current state of inclusive education referring to accessibility in education as outlined in UNCRPD, the Strategy accurately summarised the plight a deaf student's education in Serbia:

[...] the analyses show that the education of children and pupils whose mother tongue is Serbian Sign Language do not have adequate access to an educational system in their mother tongue, nor do they have adequate support. Similarly, even though the Law on Higher Education grants the opportunity of studying in Serbian Sign Lan-

guage, the law does not define the entity that needs to provide this opportunity. Hence, numerous generations of deaf students, despite their efforts, do not manage to get the necessary support. This results in poorer achievements of deaf students who either remain in the system of education or quit before completing higher education (pp. 32-33, our translation).

The Strategy set general and specific goals based on the above-mentioned summary of the situation of deaf students in the educational system in Serbia. One of the general goals is to ensure quality education for children, young persons, and adults so that they can reach their full potential. Specific goals deal with advances in primary and secondary education, and larger number of (deaf) students in higher education. More specifically, this refers to (i) adjusted textbooks in SZJ, for example, in the form of video files; (ii) comprehensive research of SZJ followed by standardisation of SZJ; and (iii) more students receiving SZJ interpreting support in higher education. The strategy further notes that legal framework will be revised in order to specify the entity responsible for providing support, that is, SZJ interpreting services to deaf students.

The Action Plan until 2023 targets two goals. The following measures were set based on the first goal of improving teaching and learning at the pre-university level: enhancing conditions and support for educational institutions in order to improve the curriculum and learning at the pre-university level of education; programme accreditation of continuing professional development of pedagogical assistants for SZJ; establishing new and improved mechanisms of support for educational institutions, with the number of children who receive the support of a pedagogical assistant with SZJ knowledge being set as an indicator of the measure; as well as developing and implementing SZJ training for pedagogical assistants. The second goal that focuses on greater equality in higher education includes the revision of existing legislation aimed at defining the way in which SZJ interpreters can be provided for deaf and hard of hearing students during the entire process of studying.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given the history of language planning and changes in language policies, we observed a small nominal shift with respect to deaf education. However, there are indicators that the attitudes towards SZJ have undergone significant changes in the Serbian deaf community over the course of the last century, from the view of signing as a necessity to the continuously developing view of SZJ as a full-fledged language that is distinct from spoken Serbian and spoken Serbian supported by SZJ signs (for more on this shift in attitudes see Raičević Bajić, Nikolić et al., 2021). Empowerment from sign language research and information is yet to come. In some countries, the description of the linguistic system has been shown to cause a shift in ideologies and a change in attitudes towards the language in question (de Clerck, 2007; Hill, 2015). For the Serbian deaf community, a turn to the international deaf community helped Serbian deaf people to be on par with their peers in terms of gaining appreciation for their cultural and linguistic identity. Even though Serbia has validated the linguistic aspect of “sign language” by passing the legislation, there continues to be a lack of cultural recognition. This fact, as pointed out by De Meulder (2015, p. 499), prevents policymakers from fully appreciating deaf culture and identity. As Kannapell (1989, p. 207) rightfully observed, no language planning can be complete without identity planning.

The Strategy of Education until 2030 and its accompanying Action plan until 2023 have envisaged important changes with respect to SZJ in deaf education in Serbia. The most extensive change refers to the preparatory training for teachers in deaf education, which would include SZJ classes. It is important to consider potential challenges announced by this sharp turn towards SZJ in deaf education. The key questions are – what programme will be used to teach SZJ to teachers involved in deaf education, and who would be teaching these SZJ courses? The three-year action plan includes ambitious goals, especially with respect to producing a significant number of SZJ teachers. One has to wonder whether three years is sufficient time to diligently prepare the

SZJ curriculum for training teachers in deaf education, and whether it would be possible to create a sufficient pool of accredited SZJ teaching staff who would then be able to teach in SZJ to deaf students. Furthermore, the teachers who complete the SZJ training would need to follow a curriculum that focuses on teaching pupils in SZJ. This curriculum has not yet been developed. Similarly, since there is no university department nor centre that focuses on SZJ research, one can only reach the conclusion that the Strategy until 2030 and the Action plan until 2023 have shown openness to deaf students in principle, but there is a lack of a thorough approach that would put into motion a series of actions aimed at solving some of the perennial problems in deaf education in Serbia. Our intention in this paper was not to frown upon the good intentions shown by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development to deaf students, but to raise the question of feasibility of the abrupt change in policy with little consideration of practice within the neglected field of deaf education. We argue for a more top-down commitment to sign language policies and planning through strategically developed programmes in educational institutions. The best way to help improve education for deaf people would be a combination of the top-down commitment along with bottom-up inputs from the Serbian deaf community.

At the moment, SZJ remains relegated to the informal domains of the deaf community. Much of the effort in bringing awareness to different aspects of deaf culture and SZJ as a language of Serbian deaf people, as well as disseminating the same knowledge among hearing people, rests squarely on the shoulders of the Serbian deaf community. Its efforts are far more tangible nowadays than they used to be, though the grip of oralism on deaf education in Serbia seems to remain as strong as ever.

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Appendix

SZJ curriculum has two modules (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – Education Gazette, no. 1/2017)

Module 1 – Sign language

The first module consists of 432 lessons (across a span of two years and three months) on the grammar of SZJ, the Serbian Deaf community, and Deaf culture.

SZJ curriculum includes four levels:

- A1 (beginner’s level) – 3 months, 48 lessons;
- A2 (elementary level) – 6 months, 96 lessons;
- B1 (intermediate level) – 9 months, 144 lessons;
- B2 (upper-intermediate level) – 9 months, 144 lessons

Module 2 – Sign language interpreting

The second module consists of 432 lessons. The courses included in the second module are:

- Sign language interpreting - 9 months, 144 lessons
- Cultural expression – 3 months, 48 lessons
- Ethics and decision making – 6 months, 96 lessons
- Interpreting in specific fields – 6 months, 96 lessons
- Interpreting for specific groups – 3 months, 48 lessons