



## SWITZERLAND

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Switzerland is a country with a high percentage of migrants. What is the Swiss policy in relation to heritage languages? Do migrants have an opportunity to maintain their languages? Based on the legal framework, media analysis and current research, this paper gives a short overview of the heritage language policy in Switzerland.

### 1. Law

Multilingualism has a very long tradition in Switzerland. The laws regulating this phenomenon include the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 5 November 1992, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of 1 February 1995 (on the international level), as well as the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999, and the Federal Law on National Languages and Comprehension between Linguistic Communities of 5 October 2007 (on the national level) (cf. Ehrenzeller/Mastronardi/Schweizer/Vallender 2008<sup>2</sup>).

There are four official national languages in the country, which are constitutionally recognised: German, French, Italian and Romansh (Constitution, Article 4). Standard German, standard French, and standard Italian are used in written communication, while written communication in Romansh is done in Rumantsch Grischun (Federal Law on National Languages and Comprehension, Article 6). In oral communication dialects often prevail, usually without excluding anybody from communication because of any language deficits. German, French and/or Italian are used on the federal level. One of the languages of origin must be an official language at the cantonal level, though cantons may use any additional languages.

English is also used as an official language in the Swiss confederation, for example, in the international context: air traffic laws, customs matters, cinematography and in cooperation with the International Criminal Court<sup>3</sup>. For practical purposes, because international experts may be involved, it is recommended to submit research applications to the SNF<sup>4</sup>, the largest Swiss research-sponsoring foundation, in English. English can be a teaching language at universities. But English is only a partly official language (cf. Ehrenzeller/Mastronardi/Schweizer/Vallender 2008<sup>5</sup>).

The freedom to use any language (= *Sprachfreiheit, liberté de la langue, libertà di lingua*) has been a matter of course for many centuries. This unwritten rule was introduced as a law only in the latest revision of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation in April 1999 (Article 18). Though it is an official basic right, the freedom to use any language still might not be guaranteed in some situations and might even contradict other laws. For example, in the education sector, BGE 91 I 480 negates the right to attend a French-speaking private school in Zurich for more than two years (= principle of territoriality)<sup>6</sup>. This is intended to ensure integration into the local society, as Zurich is in a German-speaking

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank PD Dr Myriam Senn for her valuable comments and discussions. The article reflects only the authors' opinions, however.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrenzeller / Mastronardi / Schweizer / Vallender, Die Schweizerische Bundesverfassung, Kommentar, 2. Aufl. 2008, Zürich / St.Gallen.

<sup>3</sup> There is no official translation of legal texts into English.

<sup>4</sup> SNF = The Swiss National Science Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrenzeller / Mastronardi / Schweizer / Vallender, Die Schweizerische Bundesverfassung, Kommentar, 2. Aufl. 2008, Zürich / St.Gallen.

<sup>6</sup> This case might be regulated differently, for example, in Freiburg and Wallis, two-language (German and French) speaking cantons.





canton. Cantons also have the right to mandate language policies at private schools. In the judicial sector, the lack of knowledge of a language does not excuse any failure to observe time deadlines. If anyone does not understand the language of the decision, the person must obtain information about the content and the consequences him/herself (EVG, Pra 1991, No 126).

The freedom to use any language also means providing opportunities to learn and practise a language. In this regard, the state supports migrant children and youth in the study of their heritage languages (= HSK-Unterricht, Unterricht in heimatlicher Sprache und Kultur, LCO-Cours, les cours de langue et de culture d'origine, LCO-corsi, corsi di lingua e di cultura dei paesi d'origine, Engl.: Teaching heritage language and culture). The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) believes that the maintenance of heritage languages supports the learning of the state languages and thus promotes rapid integration into Swiss society; moreover, heritage language learning advances the study of other foreign languages and increases employability. It is also very important for the identity of migrant children and youth. HSK lessons are organised and financed by different sources: foreign embassies and consultancies, NGOs and private individuals. With HSK lessons, professional instructors not only have access to cantonal resources such as the use of school rooms, but are also able to teach a language that can be included in the students' school certificates and acknowledged by all Swiss and international educational institutions<sup>7</sup>. HSK lessons may be integrated into school curricula and are usually offered during school time; they are also discussed in the Swiss mass media and are the subject of research currently being conducted in the country.

## 2. Mass Media

HSK lessons are indeed an innovative idea originating in Switzerland. There are, however, some challenges in financing HSK teaching and in obtaining accreditation for providing HSK lessons:

1) Financing: Many HSK lessons are organised by the embassies of foreign countries. Because of the euro crisis there have been some difficulties in financing the institutions providing HSK lessons in the 2012-13 school years. Italian, Portuguese and Greek are the worst affected in the Canton of Zürich. Unfortunately, regional authorities are not able to substitute this support<sup>8</sup>.

2) Accreditation<sup>9</sup>: In many cantons there are no written procedures for how an institution might obtain HSK status. If there is only one school providing heritage language lessons in a canton, it usually acquires this status very easily. If there are a number of schools offering HSK teaching in one canton, they should unite, which is not always easy for all actors<sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, there are many instances of best practice. For example, at the St. Johann school in Basel HSK lessons are integrated into the school curriculum. This contributes to the students' successful integration<sup>11</sup>. Also schools offering Russian as an HSK benefit from the current state policy and its level of support. HSK lessons help Russian children and youth to build their own identities and learn new languages, enabling them to integrate quickly into society.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.edk.ch/dyn/19191.php> accessed 6 February 2013.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/zuerich/stadt\\_region/die-euro-krise-wird-auch-in-zuercher-schulen-spuerbar-1.17699708](http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/zuerich/stadt_region/die-euro-krise-wird-auch-in-zuercher-schulen-spuerbar-1.17699708) accessed 15 January 2013.

<sup>9</sup> More about accreditation <http://www.edk.ch/dyn/18799.php> accessed 6 February 2013.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nashagazeta.ch/news/10576> accessed 15 January 2013.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/startseite/patchwork-schulklassen-im-dreilaendereck-1.2216374> accessed 15 January 2013.



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One additional issue discussed in the Swiss media in relation to HSK teaching is the importance of dialects. Dialects are very important for the identity of Swiss people living in the German-speaking part of the country. Dialects used to exist in the French-speaking part of the country, too. At the beginning of the 20th century, children were forbidden to speak dialects at schools. So these dialects began to disappear in the course of time. As of today, various associations are trying to revive these dialects. Many people argue that if the state supports HSK teaching for the maintenance of a first language, then it should also support dialects<sup>12</sup>. These discussions are the results of referenda forbidding the use of dialects in kindergartens.

In general, Switzerland benefits from its migrants. There are some obstacles, however:

**1) National vs. regional level:** Migrants are treated differently in different cantons. There are various sets of rules for obtaining Swiss nationality and for bringing family members into Switzerland. This situation needs to be better coordinated.

**2) Health:** Many migrants have psychiatric illnesses. Many of them receive a disability pension; migrants from Turkey receive a pension of 5.8%, while people from the former Yugoslavia receive 4.8%, and native people 3.1%<sup>13</sup>.

**3) Discrimination:** Highly qualified people with migrant backgrounds are, in part, discriminated against on the Swiss job market – even those with degrees from Swiss universities. People from Turkey, southeastern Europe and Portugal are especially disadvantaged<sup>14</sup>.

Switzerland has the most migrants of all the OECD countries, with the majority coming from the EU. Nearly one out of every two migrants has a university degree, and most of them work in rapidly growing sectors.

### 3. Research

HSK teaching is the subject of current research. Iwar Werlen and his colleagues, for example, argue that many children with migrant backgrounds are often disadvantaged. The researchers have developed a plan for how to improve this situation: 1) HSK lessons; 2) family involvement; 3) coordination between institutions offering HSK lessons, schools and families.

Many studies covering bilingual education have been conducted in Switzerland. Henrik Saalbach and Roland Grabner for instance explore the neurocognitive basis of bilingual learning and ask whether and to what extent these programmes tend to generate 'cognitive costs'. Researchers are investigating whether the representation of learned information in the brain depends on the language in which the learning took place, as well as what difficulties arise when the language of learning and the language of application are not the same, and whether these potential difficulties depend on the types of information.

One of the research instruments sponsored by the SNF is the 'National Research Programme' (NRP). The NRP is a programme devoted to current national problems of high priority. One of the major objectives of the NRP is applied research, which includes collaboration with non-academic partners, knowledge and know-how transfer in education and practical work. The NRP 56 (2003-2008) was devoted to various questions of language policy in Switzerland<sup>15</sup>:

#### 1) Language and School.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/startseite/kulturgut-dialekt-1.10444841> accessed 15 January 2013.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.ekm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/ekm/dokumentation/materialien/mat\\_alter\\_d.pdf](http://www.ekm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/ekm/dokumentation/materialien/mat_alter_d.pdf) accessed 15 January 2013.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/wirtschaft/unternehmen-und-konjunktur/Der-Arbeitsmarkt-be-nachteiligt-auch-hoch-qualifizierte-Migranten/story/18741636> accessed 15 January 2013.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.nfp56.ch/> accessed 6 February 2013.





For example, Bruno Moretti and his team established a curriculum for Italian as a heritage language in Switzerland.<sup>16</sup>

#### 2) Language Competence in Adults.

Iwar Werlen and his colleagues have analysed in their study the current situation of the language awareness of the Swiss population: 4 official languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh), English and a heritage language (if any) and also the factors that influence language awareness, and points out where there might be room for improvement<sup>17</sup>.

#### 3) Language, Law and Policy.

Alberto Achermann and Jörg Künzli have examined the current situation of language minorities in Switzerland and made some recommendations for how to improve the situation. For example, the researchers have suggested, that hospitals should prepare written explanations in multiple languages and have an interpreter service; English should be made a semi-official language in the country (Achermann 2007<sup>18</sup>, Achermann/Künzli 2009a<sup>19</sup>, Achermann/Künzli 2009b<sup>20</sup>)

#### 4) Language and Business.

Grin and his colleagues argue that economics, languages and education are linked to one another in a number of complex ways. These links are becoming more and more important as a result of the increasing visibility of linguistic diversity in modern societies. In their studies the researchers contribute to the study of these complex and multifaceted links<sup>21</sup>.

#### 5) Language and Identity.

Rosita Fibbi has analysed the maintenance of heritage languages through three generations of migrants living in Switzerland<sup>22</sup>.

### 4. Conclusion and Outlook

Switzerland has a very good policy in relation to heritage languages, particularly with regard to acceptance on different levels, HSK lessons and other issues. This innovative concept might be applied in other European countries.

Though HSK teaching is the subject of current research, there is a gap when it comes to certain languages, such as Russian. This shortage needs to be addressed in the future, as the number of Russian migrants continues to grow. Russian migrants play an important role in Swiss society: as businesspeople, creative people and scientists. There are many highly

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.italianosubito.ch/> accessed 6 February 2013.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.isw.unibe.ch/content/forschung/archiv\\_projekte/sprachkompetenzen/index\\_ger.html](http://www.isw.unibe.ch/content/forschung/archiv_projekte/sprachkompetenzen/index_ger.html) accessed 6 February 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Achermann, Alberto «Integrationsverpflichtungen», in: Alberto Achermann et al., Jahrbuch für Migrationsrecht 2006/2007, Bern 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Achermann, Alberto/Künzli, Jörg «Ein Recht auf Übersetzung», in: Janine Dahinden, Alexander Bischoff, Dolmetschen, Vermitteln, Schlichten – Integration der Diversität? Zürich 2009a.

<sup>20</sup> Achermann, Alberto/Künzli, Jörg Sprachenrecht im Zuwanderungsstaat, Bern 2009.

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.unige.ch/traduction-interpretation/recherches/groupes/elf/observatoire\\_de.html](http://www.unige.ch/traduction-interpretation/recherches/groupes/elf/observatoire_de.html) accessed 6 February 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Fibbi, Rosita, Matthey, Marinette and Wyssmüller, Chantal «Stratégies familiales et pratiques langagières des jeunes de la troisième génération», Neuchâtel 2008, in: Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies 1, 8 and Wyssmüller, Chantal, Fibbi, Rosita «Welche Mehrsprachigkeit bei Jugendlichen der dritten Generation in der Schweiz?», Neuchâtel 2009, in: Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies 1, 49. Wyssmüller, Chantal, Fibbi, Rosita «No encuentro bien ser cien por cien suiza. Sprachgebrauch und nationale Identifikation bei italienisch- und spanischstämmigen Jugendlichen der dritten Generation in der Schweiz», Neuchâtel 2009, in: Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies 1, 58.



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qualified Russians employed as engineers, including, for example, many of the team members working on the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. According to Swiss national statistical data, about 30,000 Russian-speaking people were living in the country in 2010. This is only equal to about 2% of all the foreigners currently living in Switzerland, but considering that many foreigners come from the local region – Italy, Germany, France, Portugal, Spain and the former Yugoslavia – this number might be considered impressive. Moreover, Russian was the tenth most commonly spoken native language in the country, although many of those people might have more than one nationality, which is not reflected in the statistics.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Denisova-Schmidt, Elena: Heritage Language Learners in Switzerland: Challenges and Opportunities. In: The Sixth Heritage Language Research Institute, 18-22 June 2012 at the University of California, Los Angeles, <http://www.nhlrc.ucla.edu/events/institute/2012/posters.asp>

