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The only daily newspaper published in Romansh is facing closure

"La Quotidiana" has existed for 20 years. Unless something happens quickly, the newspaper will appear for the last time at the end of this year. It would be a huge loss for the already endangered Romansh language.



The optimism of 1997 is long gone.
Pictured: the former editor-in-chief Enrico Kopatz and publisher Hanspeter Lebrument with the first edition of "La Quotidiana"

Photo: Keystone

ANDREAS FAGETTI

With its 150 valleys and three official languages of German, Italian and Romansh, the canton of Grisons is a complex place both culturally and topographically. As if that were not enough, Romansh consists of five dialects which differ so greatly that the 60,000 Romansh speakers, whose vernacular varies depending on which valley community they come from, do not always immediately understand one another. No standard language has emerged. However, a uniform written language has existed since the early 1980s. Known as Ro-

mansh Grischun, it is an artificial language. When the first edition of "La Quotidiana", with a circulation of over 6,000, rolled fresh from the press on 1 January 1997, it marked a milestone. It was the first daily newspaper in Romansh that would allow the language to develop into a linguistic bond – a never-ending process. So far, so good.

However, "La Quotidiana" could face closure at the end of the year unless the advocates of Romansh – politicians such as CVP National Councillor Martin Candinas and the Romansh lobbyists of Lia Rumants-

cha together with Somedia – can quickly find a sustainable financial solution. The biggest media group in the canton of Grisons, Hanspeter Lebrument's Somedia, announced in March that it could no longer sustain annual losses of 300,000 Swiss francs and would close the newspaper at the end of the year.

The shortfall mainly comes from personnel costs for the editor-in-chief, layout designer, proof-reader, a permanent freelance employee and the office staff. The newspaper's layout is as complex as the canton in which it is published.

The supra-regional main section is written in Romansh Grischun, while the local ones are published in local dialects. This presents a major challenge for the proofreader who has to master all of the dialects as well as Romansh Grischun.

Constant fall in circulation

Like all daily newspapers, "La Quotidiana" is suffering from dwindling circulation figures. It now no longer has 5,000 to 6,000 subscribers, as at the outset, but just 4,000. The daily newspaper was never a lucrative business in any case. The market is too small and too fragmented. In Engadine, for example, the "Engadiner Post" is published in German. When "La Quotidiana", a merger of various local newspapers in the Romansh language, was launched, the "Engadiner Post" responded by introducing a Romansh section.

While the situation is difficult, there is still hope. National Councillor Martin Candinas has submitted an interpellation in the National Council. He is seeking to establish whether federal government and the canton would be willing to provide financial support to secure the survival of the Romansh newspaper until 2020, providing enough time to find a sustainable solution. Grisons already receives 25 million francs of licence fee money every year from the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation for RTR, Romansh radio and television, which employs 160 people.

A proposal to save "La Quotidiana" is also being put together at the cantonal parliament of Grisons. Candinas remarks: "Time is of the essence as notice periods must be taken into account. We have to come up with a solution by August." There is no alternative for this Romansh speaker, who grew up in Surselva and today lives in Chur – "La Quotidiana" simply has to be saved. "Any other out-

come would be a major setback for our language. For the language to survive, we Romansh speakers need these daily newspapers to preserve a living language, for our identity, solidarity and sense of community," says the member of the board of trustees of the Agentura da Novitads Rumantscha (ANR) news agency. This organisation supplies all the Romansh media with news, including "La Quotidiana", which could not survive in any case without its copy. The agency has existed since 1997 and took on editorial staff from "La Quotidiana" in 2009 to enable it to continue to be published. The agency is funded by federal government and the canton, which provide its annual budget of 1 million francs.

Migration from the Romansh-speaking region

Lia Rumantscha plays a key role for Romansh speakers and the survival of their culture. It was founded in 1919 as the umbrella organisation of all Romansh language societies and is their lobbying association, in a sense, which is supported by federal government and the canton. Some 40 % of Romansh speakers now live outside the region where the language is spoken. The association believes that bilingual schools are vitally important. One such school exists in Chur to help ensure the survival of the language. Martin Candinas' eldest son attends it. Candinas remarks: "We are facing tremendous challenges. The number of Romansh speakers is falling and many are leaving the region for educational reasons and better career prospects. This is why "La Quotidiana" is so important, but so too are bilingual schools outside the Romansh-speaking region. Otherwise nobody in the diaspora will speak Romansh within two generations and the language will die out." That would be a huge and irre-

trievable loss for Switzerland – even if the songwriter Linard Bardill has a more relaxed attitude towards the situation. He wrote an obituary for Romansh four years ago in the "Tagess-Anzeiger": "Everyone wants to keep Romansh alive. We should let it go to go on for as long as it can..."

Digital salvation?

Martin Cabalzar, editor-in-chief of "La Quotidiana", is now looking to the future. He managed the "Gasetta Rumantscha" before it was merged into "La Quotidiana". The newspaper's distribution area was Surselva and its circulation stood at 6,000 copies. "If "La Quotidiana" is actually closed down, this newspaper could be revived," he comments. "It would probably be viable just as a local newspaper but would represent a huge backwards step in terms of language policy."

Cabalzar is therefore focusing on saving "La Quotidiana" by means of digital publication in the long term. Subscribers can already download the newspaper in PDF format, which is of particularly great benefit for homesick Romansh speakers abroad. However, "La Quotidiana" does not have a website where news is continually updated. These are dreams of the future – if there is one for the only daily newspaper published in Romansh. It now depends on the goodwill of the politicians and Somedia, who will probably get on board provided that they are no longer faced with losses. People are already working tirelessly to save "La Quotidiana". The public will find out by the autumn whether it will survive or go to the wall.