

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 74 (2008)
Heft: [9]

Artikel: Minority languages still under threat
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943700>

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Minority languages still under threat

The Council of Europe says despite some progress Switzerland must do more to strengthen minority languages spoken in the country.

The human rights watchdog issued a series of recommendations, mainly to promote Romansh as a living language and protect Yenish, spoken by a few thousand gypsies.

The Council of Europe applauded moves by the federal government to extend the broadcasting time of public radio and television programmes in Romansh. It also welcomed the decision by the authorities in the canton of Graubünden, where Switzerland's approximately 35,000 Romansh speakers live, to translate its statutes into the Latin language.

But it said other obstacles remained to the use of the language in Graubünden, where German speakers are in the majority. It urged significant measures to ensure the use of Romansh in courts, in dealings with the cantonal administration and in parliamentary debates.

The Council also called on Graubünden to improve the introduction of the standardised version of Romansh in schools. In response to the Council's recommendations on Romansh, Constantin Pitsch of the Swiss Culture Office warned that support for additional moves to promote Romansh was lukewarm.

Travellers

Regarding Yenish, the Council's Committee of Experts regretted that Switzerland, which signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1993, had still not recognised Yenish as such. The Swiss authorities have said they are not prepared to extend "official recognition" to Yenish. However, Switzerland was making efforts to help the so-called travellers maintain their language.

Although the Strasbourg-based watchdog focused its recommendations on Switzerland's Yenish and Romansh populations, it also investigated cases where French, German and Italian are in a minority language situation.

The survival of a German dialect spoken in a village in Italian-speaking Ticino was one cause for concern. The Council was informed by the local authorities that they might discontinue the teaching of German in schools altogether instead of implementing the recommendation to increase it beyond two hours per week. This would occur as part of a merger of the German-speaking village of Bosco-Gurin with Italian-speaking municipalities.

The Council noted that awareness of the existence of Italian-speaking communities in Graubünden was low even if the overall situation of the language in the canton remained good.

from swissinfo

English makes inroads at Swiss universities

Switzerland already has four languages, but as far as its universities are concerned is fast acquiring a fifth one - English. The country has long welcomed foreign scholars and sent its own students abroad. The rise of English reflects Swiss universities' more global outlook, as well as the effects of the Bologna reforms.

Switzerland's neighbours, and Germany in particular, still provide the bulk of non-Swiss students and staff. However, the intake from other countries is on the rise.

Of non-European countries, China has the most foreign students in Switzerland. India and Russia also have important contingents. Switzerland has the highest proportion of foreign students in Europe, second only to Australia worldwide.

The Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities, the universities' umbrella organisation, welcomes this development, which it sees as a two-way street.

"We're trying to encourage our students to become mobile. We want to send them away and have other students coming, and to promote 'brain circulation'. If you want to attract foreign students, you will best do it by having courses in English," said Ziberi, who is responsible for promoting contacts between Swiss and foreign universities. "English is the language of academia."

The use of English is not new in Swiss universities, but it has gained in importance over the past decade. The Bologna Declaration of 1999, designed to create a European space for higher education, means that universities all over Europe are dropping their national focus. As a result they are offering courses at least at Master's level in English. Switzerland is very much involved in this movement. At the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich two thirds of the Master's programmes are offered in a way that students do not need to know German.

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