

## French in Switzerland: a national language

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP  
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),  
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

On the Swiss side of the border, French holds a strong constitutional position. Article 4 of the Federal Constitution of 1999 names German, French, Italian and Romansh as the national languages. Article 70 makes German, French and Italian the official languages of the Confederation, with Romansh as an official language in dealings with Romansh speakers.<sup>1</sup> The cantons determine their own official languages but are required by Article 70(2) to respect the traditional territorial distribution of the languages and to take account of indigenous linguistic minorities. This territorial principle means that the canton of Basel-Stadt uses German as its sole official language, although the cantonal authorities answer correspondence in French and publish information for residents in several languages.<sup>2</sup>

The Federal Act on National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistic Communities of 2007, known as the Languages Act, gives these principles a statutory form. It regulates the use of the official languages by the federal authorities, the representation of the linguistic communities in the federal administration and the promotion of exchanges and of language teaching in the cantons.<sup>3</sup> The cantons are responsible for schooling. Under the intercantal agreement on the harmonisation of compulsory schooling, HarmoS, pupils learn a second national language and English during primary school, with each region deciding which comes first.<sup>4</sup>

The cantons along the language border, including Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, chose in the *Passepartout* project to begin with French in the third year of primary school and to introduce English in the fifth year. The project developed teaching materials with a strong emphasis on communicative methods. It proved controversial, because parents, teachers and politicians questioned whether the results justified the effort. Several parliaments debated a return to more traditional teaching or to a later

start.<sup>5</sup> Basel-Landschaft, for example, decided to allow schools to use alternative teaching materials. The debate about the place of French in primary school continues in several German-speaking cantons. Any proposal to postpone French in favour of English triggers a political reaction from the French-speaking cantons and from the federal level, because school French is regarded as a pillar of national cohesion.<sup>6</sup>

## 1 Notes

1. Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999 (SR 101), Articles 4 and 70. ↩
2. Federal Constitution, Article 70(2); Constitution of the Canton of Basel-Stadt of 23 March 2005 (SG 111.100), provisions on the official language. To be verified. ↩
3. Federal Act of 5 October 2007 on the National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistic Communities (Languages Act, SpG; SR 441.1) and the Languages Ordinance of 4 June 2010 (SpV; SR 441.11). To be verified. ↩
4. Intercantonal Agreement on the Harmonisation of Compulsory Schooling (HarmoS Concordat) of 14 June 2007, Article 4, and the language strategy of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) of 2004. To be verified. ↩
5. On the Passepartout project of the cantons of Bern, Basel-Landschaft, Basel-Stadt, Fribourg, Solothurn and Valais and the debates about its teaching materials and results, see the publications of the participating cantons and the EDK. Status to be verified. ↩
6. On the political debates in German-speaking cantons about the order of foreign languages in primary school and the reactions of the Federal Council and the French-speaking cantons, see the reports of the Federal Office of Culture and the EDK. Status to be verified. ↩

---

*For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.*

Online version: [helveticaregister.com/basel-french-in-switzerland-a-national-language](https://helveticaregister.com/basel-french-in-switzerland-a-national-language)