

German, the language of Swiss institutions

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German is the language of the federal authorities, of FINMA, of the National Bank, of the majority of Parliament, of the large Zurich banks, of the national professional associations and of a substantial part of Swiss legal scholarship. A Geneva practitioner who does not command German is at a disadvantage in dealings with these institutions, in reading the preparatory materials and the scholarly literature, in exchanges with German-speaking colleagues and in the national associations.

Federal legislation exists in the three official languages, with equal authority, which guarantees French speakers access to the law. But drafts, explanatory reports, circulars and communications from the authorities are often written first in German, so that their French versions sometimes bear the mark of translation. The case law of the Federal Supreme Court is rendered in the language of the proceedings, most often German. Part of the scholarly literature, for its part, exists only in German.

This situation raises a question of representation for the Geneva financial centre. Geneva's interests in federal debates — on financial regulation, on taxation, on sanctions, on International Geneva — must be advanced in German, in parliamentary committees, consultations and associations. Geneva practitioners who command German, together with the organisations of French-speaking Switzerland present in Bern, play an essential role in this representation.

The relationship between Geneva and Zurich, described in Part E as one of complementarity and rivalry, also has a linguistic dimension. The two financial centres serve different clienteles, partly according to language: French speakers, Mediterraneans, Africans and Middle Easterners in Geneva, German speakers and Eastern and Central Europeans in Zurich. This division reinforces the specialisation of each and the complementarity of the Swiss financial centre as a whole.

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Caution. For Geneva practitioners, a command of German conditions access to the federal authorities, to legal scholarship, to case law and to the national associations. A financial centre that neglected German would deprive itself of part of its influence within the institutions of the country on which it depends.

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