

## The legal framework of languages: Federal Constitution, Languages Act, Geneva Constitution

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Swiss multilingualism rests on precise texts. The Federal Constitution lists four national languages, German, French, Italian and Romansh, and entrusts the cantons with determining their official languages while respecting the traditional territorial distribution of languages and the indigenous linguistic minorities.<sup>1</sup> The Federal Act of 5 October 2007 on the National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistic Communities, in force since 1 January 2010, organises the use of languages in the federal administration and supports exchanges between the communities.<sup>2</sup> According to the Federal Statistical Office, German was in 2022 the main language of 61.8 per cent of the resident population, French of 22.8 per cent, Italian of 7.8 per cent and Romansh of 0.5 per cent, with around a fifth of the population declaring a non-national main language.<sup>3</sup>

Geneva has written its language into its Constitution. The Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Geneva of 14 October 2012, in force since 1 June 2013, provides in its Article 5 that “the official language is French” and that “the State promotes the learning and use of the French language” and “ensures its defence”.<sup>4</sup> The same Constitution charges the State with supporting Geneva’s international vocation.<sup>5</sup> This twofold provision sums up the position of the financial centre: a city that is French-speaking by law and international by vocation. The cantonal authorities, the courts, the commercial register, the land register and the tax administration work in French, so that the financial institutions dealing with them do so in that language, whatever their internal language may be.

For the actors of the financial centre, this framework has concrete effects. The articles of association of a Geneva company are filed in French with the commercial register, and French is also the language in which the tax administration issues its decisions. Proceedings before the Geneva civil, criminal and administrative courts are conducted in French, subject to the

new option, examined in Chapter I, of creating an international commercial court sitting in English. An institution whose management does not command French depends on its lawyers and translators for its relations with the State, a common situation in the subsidiaries of foreign groups and a source of misunderstandings when internal documents in English and official documents in French diverge.

**Key point.** French is the official language of Geneva by virtue of Article 5 of the cantonal Constitution of 2012, whereas the Confederation legislates in three languages of equal standing. Geneva financial institutions, whatever their internal working language, deal with the authorities in French and must organise consistency between their internal documents and their official documents.

## 1 Notes

1. Art. 4 and 70 of the Federal Constitution of 18 April 1999; “Langues en Suisse”, [fr.wikipedia.org](https://fr.wikipedia.org) (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Federal Act of 5 October 2007 on the National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistic Communities (Languages Act, LangA; SR 441.1), in force since 1 January 2010; “Langues en Suisse”, [fr.wikipedia.org](https://fr.wikipedia.org) (accessed September 2026). ↩
3. Federal Statistical Office, main languages 2022, cited in “Langues en Suisse”, [fr.wikipedia.org](https://fr.wikipedia.org) (accessed September 2026). ↩
4. Art. 5 para. 1 and 2 of the Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Geneva of 14 October 2012 (Cst-GE, A 2 00), in force since 1 June 2013, [silgeneve.ch](https://silgeneve.ch) (accessed September 2026). ↩
5. Art. 146 Cst-GE. ↩

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