

Italian speakers in management

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The gap is widest in the senior ranks. In 2014 Italian speakers held 4.8 per cent of positions in salary classes 34 to 38, the senior management of the administration, against a minimum target of 6.5 per cent. German speakers held 72.5 per cent and French speakers 21.9 per cent of these positions.¹ The figure was cited by National Councillor Giovanni Merlini of Ticino in an interpellation of March 2015 that asked the Federal Council how it intended to achieve fair representation of the linguistic communities in the leadership of the administration.² According to the Federal Council's answer to the Fehlmann Rielle interpellation, the share of Italian speakers in the top salary classes rose from 4.8 to 5.7 per cent between 2014 and 2018. In middle management, however, it remained at about 5 per cent.³ The analysis of 2020 confirmed that German speakers remained over-represented and Italian speakers clearly under-represented in senior positions.⁴

The under-representation in management has practical consequences that go beyond fairness in employment. Senior officials decide which language a working group uses, in which language a draft is prepared and how much time the translators receive. When few of them read Italian with ease, the Italian version of a text is more likely to be produced at the end of the process as a translation, without the participation of Italianspeaking experts in the substantive discussion. The Languages Ordinance attempts to counter this by requiring senior managers to have active knowledge of a second official language and passive knowledge of a third.⁵ Passive knowledge of Italian among German- and French-speaking managers is the precondition for the right of Italianspeaking staff under Article 9 of the Languages Act to work in their own language.

1 Italian as a working language

The figures on representation measure who is employed. They do not measure which language is used. On this point the evaluation reports are blunter. The 2020 analysis described Italian as "pressoché inesistente", practically non-existent, as a language of internal communication in the federal administration, while German dominated and the use of French had increased.⁶ Italian-speaking officials in Bern generally work in German or French, write their memoranda in German and use Italian mainly in contacts with Ticino or with Italian authorities. The right to work in Italian under Article 9 of the Languages Act exists on paper but is rarely exercised, because an Italian text circulated in a German-speaking unit risks not being read.

The administration has responded with training measures. In January 2015 an interdepartmental project began to teach passive comprehension of Italian to federal staff, based on the course book *Capito? Comprendere l'italiano in Svizzera*. According to the Osservatorio linguistico della Svizzera italiana, almost two hundred persons, most of them members of the management, had taken part by March 2015.⁷ The Federal Council's answer of 2019 referred to positive results of the measures adopted since 2013 in terms of cooperation, coordination and awareness.⁸ Such programmes improve understanding, but they do not turn Italian into a language in which federal policy is conceived.

2 Notes

1. Pandolfi and Casoni, letter to the *Corriere del Ticino*, 24 March 2015 (above). ↩
2. "Sostenere il plurilinguismo a difesa della coesione nazionale", *tio.ch*, 20 March 2015, <https://www.tio.ch/ticino/politica/1023517/sostenere-il-plurilinguismo-a-difesa-della-coesione-nazionale>. ↩
3. Fehlmann Rielle interpellation and Federal Council answer (above). ↩
4. *laRegione*, 17 November 2020 (above). ↩
5. *LangO*, Art. 8, version of 1 October 2014 (above). ↩
6. *laRegione*, 17 November 2020 (above). ↩
7. Pandolfi and Casoni (above). ↩

8. Fehlmann Rielle interpellation and Federal Council answer (above).
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