

## The Italian-speaking Grisons

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

The Italian-speaking part of the Grisons, the *Grigioni italiano*, comprises four valleys separated from each other by mountain ranges: Mesolcina and Calanca, which form the Moesa region and open towards Bellinzona, Bregaglia in the Maloja region, which descends from the Maloja pass towards Chiavenna, and Valposchiavo in the Bernina region, which leads from the Bernina pass to Tirano in the Valtellina. Bivio, on the Julier route, was historically counted among the Italian-speaking communes. The region has about 15,000 inhabitants, of whom more than 85 per cent speak Italian. Since 1918 the Pro Grigioni Italiano association has promoted Italian language and culture in the canton and is recognized by the cantonal and federal authorities as representing the Italian-speaking minority.<sup>1</sup>

The Grisons valleys show the vulnerability of Italian where it is a minority within a canton. Their inhabitants deal with a cantonal administration in Chur that works mainly in German, attend upper secondary schools that often require a move to Chur or to Ticino, and are economically linked partly to Ticino and partly to Lombardy. Under Article 22 of the Languages Act, federal financial assistance therefore goes to the Grisons for Italian as well as for Romansh.

### 1 Italian speakers outside the Italian-speaking territory

The most striking demographic fact is that about half of all Italian speakers in Switzerland live outside Ticino and the Grisons. The Federal Council relied on this figure in October 2025 when it amended the Languages Ordinance to allow federal support for Italian outside its traditional territory, and the Osservatorio linguistico della Svizzera italiana had made the same point a decade earlier.<sup>2</sup> These speakers live mainly in the cities of German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland, in Zurich, Basel, Bern, Geneva and Lausanne. Some are Ticinese and Grisons Italians who moved north for study and work, some are descendants of the Italian

immigration of the twentieth century, and a growing number are recent arrivals from Italy, many of them highly qualified.

For the language policy of the Confederation this diaspora is both a resource and a problem. It provides a reservoir of Italian-speaking candidates for the federal administration in Bern. At the same time it lives in cantons where Italian has no official status and where the school system offers Italian, if at all, only as an optional subject. The children of Italian speakers in Zurich learn standard German and English at school and often lose active command of Italian. The amendment of 2025, which allows the Federal Office of Culture to finance projects outside Ticino and the Grisons, addresses this problem for the first time with federal funds.

In figures. Italian, Ticinese or Italian-Grisons dialect was named as a main language by 11 per cent of the permanent resident population in 1970 and by 8 per cent in 2020, when the same share of the employed population used Italian at work.<sup>3</sup> Ticino had 358,903 permanent residents at the end of 2024, including 64,240 Italian citizens.<sup>4</sup> The Italian-speaking Grisons have about 15,000 inhabitants, more than 85 per cent of them Italian speakers.<sup>5</sup> About half of all Italian speakers live outside Ticino and the Grisons.<sup>6</sup>

Indicator 1970 2020 German and Swiss German as main language 66 % 62 %  
French as main language 18 % 23 %  
Italian as main language 11 % 8 %  
Romansh as main language 0.8 % 0.5 %

Source: Federal Statistical Office (below).<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Grigioni italiano", [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigioni\\_italiano](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigioni_italiano) (figures based on the census of 2000; used as a last resort). ↩
2. RSI, "La Svizzera rafforza la promozione dell'italiano e del romancio" (above); Elena M. Pandolfi and Matteo Casoni (Osservatorio linguistico della Svizzera italiana), letter to the Corriere del Ticino, 24 March 2015, [https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DCSU/OLSI/documenti/OLSI-CDT-2015-03-28\\_Plurilinguismo-e-coesione-nazionale.pdf](https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DCSU/OLSI/documenti/OLSI-CDT-2015-03-28_Plurilinguismo-e-coesione-nazionale.pdf). ↩
3. FSO, "Languages" (above). ↩
4. USTAT, Notiziario statistico 2025-31 (above). ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Grigioni italiano" (above). ↩
6. RSI, 29 October 2025 (above). ↩

## 7. FSO, "Languages" (above). ↩

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