

Federal language policy and English

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The Confederation pursues an active policy for its national languages. The Federal Act on National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistic Communities of 2007 obliges the federal authorities to use the official languages, to promote multilingualism in the federal administration and to support exchanges between the language regions.¹ The Act does not mention English as a language of the authorities. The federal administration nonetheless uses English increasingly in its international work, in its communication with foreign investors and in specialised fields such as finance, research and technology. Parliamentarians from the French- and Italian-speaking regions have criticised this trend, fearing that English will displace the national languages as the common language of the Swiss.

The debate touches a sensitive point of Swiss identity. Switzerland defines itself as a nation of several languages whose citizens understand each other through the national languages. If English becomes the language in which a German-speaking Swiss and a French-speaking Swiss communicate, the national model of multilingualism loses part of its meaning. In the international economy of Zug, this has already happened in many offices, where Swiss employees from different language regions work together in English. The canton's experience therefore feeds into a national debate about the role of English in Swiss society.

1 Notes

1. Bundesgesetz über die Landessprachen und die Verständigung zwischen den Sprachgemeinschaften (Sprachengesetz, SpG) of 5 October 2007, in force 1 January 2010, SR 441.1, text on lexfind.ch: regulates the four national languages; English is not mentioned in the Act. ↩

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