Swiss Linguistic Rights Report, 2006

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As a *Willensnation* or "voluntaristic nation" rather than either a so-called *Kulturnation* like Germany or a nation state like France, Switzerland is defined to a large extent by its official multilingualism (German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Rumantsch*), which at once connects it to the linguistic communities of its larger neighbours and sets it apart from their official unilingualism.

One anomaly deserving of special attention is the fact that Swiss speakers of German (as well as of Italian and, to a much lesser degree, French), while officially conversant in the written and spoken forms of the "high" or standard language, in daily life speak a number of different, mutually distinct regional dialects, rendering their linguistic "penetration" by foreigners (including standard German speakers) often very difficult. In this regard it is interesting to note that the FDP, the Swiss centre-right "liberal" party, is at present campaigning to have standard German (rather than a local dialect) introduced as the language of instruction in public schools in German-speaking Switzerland at the kindergarten level, presumably in an effort to render the integration of immigrants less problematic. (Although, since the quotidian, affective and, indeed, often commercial lives of almost two thirds of the population are in fact carried on in a Swiss-German dialect, the actual extent of such an integration may be questioned.)

The 2002 national census determined the following distribution of language communities in Switzerland: German speakers 63.7%, French speakers 20.4%, Italian speakers 6.5%, Rhaeto-Rumantsch speakers 0.5%, speakers of other languages (such as Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish and Albanian) 9.5%. Among the "other" languages, it is interesting to note that, while the various communities stabilised or grew only slightly during the decade preceding the census (or actually decreased, as in the case of Italian, Rhaeto-Rumantsch and Turkish), the community of Albanian speakers increased by almost 200% during the nineteen-nineties, in large measure as refugees arrived from the various conflicts in former Yugoslavia.

While Swiss language policy is determined at the federal level, it is in actual practice a matter for cantonal (i.e. provincial) implementation. Article 70 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, "Languages", enshrines the principle of multilingualism thus:

> [1] The official federal languages are German, French and Italian. Rhaeto-Rumantsch is also an official federal language for communication with speakers of Rhaeto-Rumantsch.

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* This last, a Latin tongue itself composed of various local dialects, was given official language status during the rise of the "Third Reich" in the name of Switzerland's "spiritual defence" (*geistige Landesverteidigung*) against the Nazis' "Germanic" project.

[2] The cantons shall determine their official languages. In order to ensure harmony among linguistic communities they shall respect the traditional linguistic composition of their territories and show consideration toward established linguistic minorities.

[3] Federal and cantonal authorities shall promote understanding and exchange among the linguistic communities.

[4] The federal authorities shall support multilingual cantons in the fulfillment of their special duties.

[5] The federal authorities shall support the cantons of Graubünden and Ticino in the maintenance and promotion of the Italian language.

A recent project to create legislation to implement multilingualism across the cantons, however, has failed. Thus Switzerland remains de jure quadrilingual but de facto bilingual at best, with only a handful of cantons recognizing more than one official language (German and French in Fribourg, for example, or German, Rhaeto-Rumantsch and Italian in Graubünden: compare the Canadian situation, with unilingual and bilingual provinces co-existing in an officially bilingual country). Otherwise the so-called territorial principle is followed, whereby, as the Constitution indicates, "the traditional linguistic composition" of a given canton's territory determines its official language, and minority languages are at best "shown consideration".

Hence such recent aberrations from the Swiss linguistic model as the proposal by cantonal ministers of education that the traditional teaching of a second national language in schools be made voluntary, with the option of replacing it with English, on the theory that the "global" language will stand young people in better stead "on the market" (perceived automatically as international) than any of the other three tongues.

This move is currently being contested by an organisation known as Coscienza Svizzera (Swiss Conscience). Based in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino, CS recognises the threat posed by such a development to Italian above all (which along with Rhaeto-Rumantsch among the official languages saw its population of speakers decline over the nineteen-nineties). The organisers propose three measures to counteract what they see as an attack not only on their language but on the tradition of Swiss multilingualism in general: 1) mandatory teaching of a national language as second language in the schools (which would principally benefit French in German-speaking Switzerland); 2) federal support for the teaching of a third national language (which would principally benefit Italian); and 3) federal promotion of a "national plurilingual space", in particular with the aid of audiovisual media (which is evidently aimed at preventing cuts to funding for Italian-language broadcasters).

Meanwhile, a forthcoming referendum (24 September 2006) is aimed at stopping last year's revision of the Swiss law on asylum seekers, which has come under attack by human rights activists for its introduction of biometric data requirements, stricter surveillance of putative "marriages of convenience", and more draconian expulsion methods. A columnist in the French-speaking region of Switzerland has criticised one of the less well-publicised effects of the new law, namely its proposal of the mastery of a national language as a criterion for acceptance as a "genuine" asylum seeker. This in turn sheds a new light on recent positive reports of the improved linguistic integration of immigrants to Switzerland, particularly in the French-speaking region, especially in view of the fact that there is virtually no attempt made anywhere in Switzer-

land to promote or highlight the specific linguistic culture of those immigrants (as for instance by offering “heritage language" classes in Albanian or Serbo-Croatian at the lower and middle school level, on the North American model). Indeed, apart from Spanish, none of the languages spoken by the major Swiss immigrant minority groups is taught even at the higher educational level.

Taken together with cantonal efforts to supplant secondary national languages with English (despite the recent nearly unanimous federal parliamentary decision against such a move), these developments suggest a Swiss linguistic landscape in which an opportunistic nationalism co-exists uneasily with a simplistically “globalising” tendency, to the ultimate detriment of Swiss linguistic and cultural diversity.