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Shifting minorities to centre stage

Referat von Regierungsrätin Jacqueline Fehr anlässlich des Jubiläumskongresses der Stiftung Convivenza

Mr Secretary General
Mr Government Councillor
Mr President
Members of the Convivenza Board of Trustees
Ladies and Gentlemen

I could start by stating the obvious and pointing out that the main topic of this evening, minority rights, is nothing other than a primal concern of social democracy. Of course it is. Fortunately, though, it's not just a concern of social democracy. Minority rights are something that also involves many other thoughtful people.

Indeed it's one of the broadest-based political concerns of all. Switzerland is a veritable nation of minorities. There's no one group that can determine the fate of this country on its own. Everyone needs allies to get their concerns heard. But even for all the politicians in this country who have this experience more or less on a daily basis, a commitment to minority rights is important.

For this reason I'm grateful to the initiators and driving forces behind Convivenza. They're continually putting the issue of minority rights on the public agenda, reminding us of a key duty of free societies. Isn't the way a majority deals with its minorities an indicator of the maturity of a society or democracy?

So why don't we create a minority index? We could publish it every year, like the charts.

We're talking minorities, but of course minorities aren't all the same. The landscape of minorities is in constant flux. Old or established minorities in Switzerland, such as the Romansh people, insist on their right to protection and support. That's understandable, and a good thing too. Mainstream society supports these old minorities, for example by protecting their language and giving them their own schools and media channels.

But there are also new minorities besides the established ones. In Switzerland it used to be the Italians, then the Tibetans, then the Kosovo Albanians. Although the Kosovo Albanians are now mainly responsible for scoring goals for the Swiss football team, their language enjoys no protection, and they don't have their own schools or Swiss radio or TV station. They speak a foreign language, not a national language.



Besides this there's at least one other category of minorities: groups that actually constitute majorities, but which are made into minorities artificially.

Women, for example, who in terms of sheer numbers are the clear majority in Switzerland, but very few of whom actually wield power. Or urban people – in some cases they're also a minority. I remember the referendum we had in Switzerland on federal family policy. The majority voted in favour. They were mainly people living in towns and cities. But despite the majority vote, the new article never made it into the constitution: the rural minority unceremoniously overturned the urban majority in a vote in the Council of States.

Minorities? What are they? What is their role? Should they only be insisting on their rights? Or do they have obligations as well? Yes, they do. Because it takes more than just protective hands to safeguard a minority. The same thing applies to all minorities: they have to keep themselves alive. There need to be forces within these minorities to fight for their continued existence and promote the special culture of the minority, to make clear to the majority what they would lose if this minority wasn't there. Minorities in Switzerland do this – often loudly and to a great political response.

This is why I'm basically optimistic when it comes to the situation of minorities in Switzerland.

Next week, for example, I will have the privilege of presenting the Pink Apple Film Festival with the Zurich government's gold medal of honour. It will give me great satisfaction to do so, because the award is an example of protecting minority rights in action. The growing success of the festival, which is run by lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender is evidence that our society is open when it comes to vulnerable communities. By giving this award, the Zurich government is recognising the strength, joie de vivre and courage emanating from the LGBT- community, the gift this minority bestows on the majority.

Just as the landscape of minorities takes many and varied forms, so too does the way the state deals with these groups. Shifting minorities to centre stage is one of the main issues of our time. And where better to do so than here, in the land of minorities? For more than ten years, the Convivenza Foundation has been working for precisely this.

And for that I would like to express my warmest thanks on behalf of the Zurich government.