
South Tyrol enjoys a high degree of autonomy today, which had been a territory of the Habsburg Empire for centuries before being ceded to Italy in 1919 with no regard for its right to self-determination. Before the First World War, 93% of the South Tyrolean population were German (and just 4% Ladin and 3% Italian). This ratio was actively altered through massive fascist repression under Mussolini: Today, the 500,000 inhabitants of the Province of Bolzano comprise 70 percent German speakers, 26 percent Italian speakers and 4 percent speaking Ladin (one of the Raeto-Romance languages). This reflects years of assimilation through the prohibition of German language schools and the Italianisation of family names as well as the so-called “option” program, under which German-speaking individuals were forced to choose between remaining in their homeland and accepting complete Italianisation or being settled somewhere in the territory of the Third Reich. The tide slowly began to turn in 1946 with the signing of the Gruber-De Gasperi Agreement. These guidelines (part of the peace treaty with Italy) solidified South Tyrolean autonomy under international law.

The blatant non-implementation of the 1948 “First Autonomy Statute” was met with demonstrations and bombngs in the 50s and 60s. South Tyrol came to the world’s attention. When the conflict between the South Tyroleans and the Italian authorities escalated to the point of fatalities on both sides, in 1959 the United Nations addressed the South Tyrol question. Only after this second international intervention was the so-called “Packet” prepared: a package of measures prepared by a mixed commission of Italians and South Tyroleans: the 1972 “Second Autonomy Statute”. Following a 20-year implementation phase, in 1992 Austria and Italy officially declared the dispute settled before the United Nations. The still-standing autonomy statute primarily protects the German and Ladin-speaking minority, but as a genuine territorial autonomy, it is also of benefit to all of South Tyrol’s language groups.

Proportional representation is provided in the public sector for all three South Tyrolean language groups. Introduced in 1972, this “quota system” was intended to curb the glaring dominance of the Italian population in public service: Public positions and various social and financial benefits are distributed proportionally amongst the language groups. For this purpose, individual membership in one of the groups is based upon a declaration made in the census. As for the school system, the smaller Ladin group follows a different model than the two major language groups. This parity-based model assures Ladin-speaking children equal hours of instruction in the Italian and German languages. On the other hand, pupils of German or Italian mother tongue attend separate schools and have only a few hours of instruction per week in each other’s mother tongues. Due to a lack of second-language proficiency upon matriculation, this school model has drawn criticism from the population for its divisive potential. Since both German and Italian are official languages, a full-fledged bilingual (and in the Ladin valleys, trilingual) administrative system had to be developed. The requirement of bilingual language competence in the public sector is assured by the requirement of a bilingualism assessment test, the so-called “patentino”.

Only a few competences are left to the central state: defence and foreign policy, internal security, monetary and fiscal policy and civil and criminal law. The central government in Rome (since a 2001 constitutional amendment) lacks the power to veto South Tyrolean provincial legislative acts.