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Interview with Sergio Dini on the EDA's VERA project

Into the 21st century with VERA

Swiss representatives abroad (embassies and consulates) are to be electronically interconnected with Bern in a special network. This is the concept behind a project launched by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (EDA) and called VERA. The aim is to simplify, accelerate and rationalise procedures such as changes of address, changes in civilian status, issuing of passports etc.

Once VERA has been fully implemented, our compatriots will only need to register once with a Swiss representative abroad, since world-wide registrations will be centrally stored in Berne on a computer that can be

purely routine work to the back office.

For this reason (and provided VERA proves successful within the pilot project) we are also planning other measures. For example, at the beginning of 2001 Swiss

The EDA's network of representatives, with embassies and consulates spread throughout the world, is based on so-called "island solutions". While there is a central exchange in Berne that acts as the node, its branches – the Swiss representatives abroad – operate as largely self-contained units.

Thanks to developments in the telecommunications sector, the EDA will soon be able to connect its embassies and consulates with the central administration by means of an IT network, enabling new possibilities that were practically inconceivable just a few years ago. Among other things, the IT network will in future ensure a more efficient and professional service for the Swiss Abroad. Dieter Gruber, deputy Head of the EDA's Service for the Swiss Abroad, spoke to the head of this project, Sergio Dini, Section Head for the Representatives Network and Consular Duties (VKA).

In August 1998 you took over management of the VERA project. VERA is a female Christian name of Russian origins meaning "faith". What does VERA mean for you in the context of your project?

VERA is an abbreviation for "Vernetzte Verwaltung der Auslandschweizer" ("Networked Administration for Swiss Abroad"). The key element is a database for the centralised storage in Swit-



Sergio Dini (left) talking to Dieter Gruber. (Photo: R. Nyffeler)

zerland of all relevant data on Swiss Abroad. Access to this database is by means of specially protected data lines subject to strict security provisions.

This database helps to create a "virtual community" of all Swiss Abroad. The new system will modernise and enhance the way we serve our compatriots abroad. VERA is designed to be customer-friendly and to simplify processes, in line with the motto: "Less bureaucracy, less red tape, better service and fewer routine chores".

What does this mean for our compatriots abroad?

accessed by embassies and consulates.

When Swiss Abroad change address – even if the move is to another country or continent – all they have to do is report their new address. Changes in civilian status (for example births, marriages, deaths) will continue to be notifiable to Swiss representatives abroad.

What other advantages or simplifications can our compatriots expect from the new system?

Basically, the introduction of VERA reflects the EDA's declared mission of getting as close to the customer as possible and of transferring

nationals resident in Germany will no longer be handled centrally by the consular service centre in Bonn, but by the new embassy in Berlin and by the general consulate. So VERA is helping us move away from centralisation and the closure of representative offices.

Where and when will the pilot project be launched?

The VERA pilot project will be started up in November of this year in the USA, Canada and Brazil. Following a test phase of approximately six months we hope to be able to connect additional representatives to this new network in order of size, i.e. with the



(PHOTO: KEYSTONE)

initial priority on representatives with a high number of registered Swiss nationals such as those in Germany and France.

What other possibilities are inherent in the inter-

networking of embassies and consulates?

I'm glad you asked that question. Large-scale projects are also being implemented in other departments that will in future also have an impact on our compatriots abroad. For instance, the Infostar project in the field of civilian status registrations, aimed at setting up a central civilian status database of Swiss nationals. An appropriate interface to this database is foreseen for VERA.

In the field of passports/permits there is the Pass 2003 project commissioned by the Federal Justice and Police Department. On 1 January 2003 a new machine-readable Swiss passport will be introduced and a new law enacted. Due to the sophisticated technology deployed for security reasons in the production of this new passport, from 2003 Swiss passports will be manufactured exclusively in Swit-

zerland. The new electronic data transfer procedure will allow embassies and consulates to forward passport applications rapidly to the production plant in Switzerland.

What about the voluntary old age and survivors' insurance and disability pension (fAHV/IV)?

Unlike at present, VERA will allow fAHV/IV to be centrally structured. For this reason it is necessary to rethink the way in which voluntary members of these insurance schemes will in future be handled.

The Swiss Compensation Fund (SAK) in Geneva has decided to structure the fAHV/IV for Swiss Abroad on their own account. Under the new model for this fund, members will in future be served only by Geneva or by so-called fAHV/IV satellites abroad.

For the sake of clarity I would like to add that the term "fAHV/IV satellites" refers to future foreign branches of the SAK which are being integrated in existing Swiss representatives abroad. The EDA is assisting SAK in implementing the preparations and the build-up phase for these new infrastructures.

The creation of such fAHV/IV competence centres will allow Swiss residents abroad to benefit from enhanced professional guidance and service.

In the pilot project, insured persons in Canada and the USA will be directly served by a fAHV/IV satellite in Montreal and those in Brazil by a fAHV/IV satellite in Rio de Janeiro.

Interviewer: Dieter Gruber ■

Optional AHV/IV

• Age limit at 50

According to the instructions for the optional age for the AHV/IV the declaration of readiness to join may be lodged up to one's 51st birthday (exceptions reserved).

• Women

Following the tenth AHV-revision, women may now join independently on an optional basis from January 1st 1997. They may also retire from the insurance scheme individually as long as they fulfill the other conditions required by the law.

The optional pension scheme

How do I claim my pension?

• If you are a member of the optional pension scheme (AHV/IV), you will automatically receive an application form for an old-age pension from your Swiss diplomatic post a few months before you reach pensionable age.

• If you are not or are no longer a member of the optional pension scheme but belonged for at least one year to either the compulsory or the optional state pension schemes, you will not be automatically informed of your rights. In such case you should apply to your Swiss diplomatic post a few months before you reach pensionable age, since you will be entitled to at least a partial pension.



Initiatives in brief

Away from nuclear power

The Association "Strom ohne Atom" has launched two initiatives: 1. "Away from nuclear power – for a turning point in the energy field and for the progressive dismantlement of nuclear power stations (Away from nuclear power)" and 2. "Moratorium Plus – to prolong the moratorium against the construction of nuclear power stations and limitation of the nuclear risk (Moratorium Plus)".

The first initiative aims at a progressive dismantlement of nuclear power stations. The plan is to decommission the Beznau 1, Beznau 2 and Mühleberg nuclear plants at the latest two years following

acceptance of the initiative, and the nuclear power stations at Gäsgen and Leibstadt at the latest after thirty years each in operation. In addition the initiative seeks to call a halt to the reprocessing of spent reactor fuels. Moreover, it calls upon the government to draw up provisions for an ecological shift to non-nuclear energy sources, for the secure long-term storage of radioactive waste produced in Switzerland, as well as for a regulation governing all costs associated with nuclear power station operations.

The second popular initiative calls for a prolonging of the moratorium on nuclear

Changes of address

Please not to Berne

You should notify changes of address to your Swiss embassy or consulate only. Your diplomatic post alone is responsible for processing the addresses of our compatriots abroad and for distributing "Swiss Review".

By doing this you will help us to reduce the time-consuming research work which the Service for the Swiss Abroad has to carry out after publication of each issue because of the large number of wrongly addressed "Swiss Review" copies which are returned.

power station construction, with no government approval of new nuclear plants for a period of ten years following acceptance of the initiative, an increase in nuclear heat production in existing plants, and the redeployment of reactors for the purposes of research and development in nuclear technology (provided these are not for medical applications). Should a

nuclear power station remain in operation for more than forty years, this would necessitate a government directive, subject to a referendum, on extending the operating life by a maximum of ten years. In particular, the referendum on an extension of operating life would address the issue of safety.

NYF

Current popular initiatives

The following popular initiatives are still open for signature:

Health at a price within reach (health initiative)

(until 9 June 1999)
Swiss Socialist Party (SPS),
PO Box, CH-3001 Berne

Exemplary hospital wards

(until 9 June 1999)
Kunigunde Grätzer-Karner, PO
Box 144, CH-8042 Zurich

Six lanes for the A 1 between Zurich and Berne

(until 13 July 1999)
National Councillor Michael
E. Dreher, Ränkestrasse 2,
CH-8700 Küsnacht

Six lanes for the A 1 between Geneva and Lausanne

(until 13 July 1999)
National Councillor Michael
E. Dreher, Ränkestrasse 2,
CH-8700 Küsnacht

A second motorway tunnel for the Gotthard

(until 13 July 1999)
National Councillor Michael
E. Dreher, Ränkestrasse 2,
CH-8700 Küsnacht

For the suppression of the right of appeal of associations at federal level

(until 13 July 1999)
National Councillor Michael
E. Dreher, Ränkestrasse 2,
CH-8700 Küsnacht

For a credible security policy and a Switzerland without an army

(until 17 September 1999)
Group for a Switzerland without an army, Nico Lutz, PO
Box 6348, CH-3001 Berne

Solidarity creates security: for an optional civil service for peace (SPC)

(until 17 September 1999)
Group for a Switzerland without an army, Nico Lutz, PO
Box 6348, CH-3001 Berne

Moratorium Plus – to prolong the moratorium against the construction of nuclear power stations and limitation of the nuclear risk (Moratorium Plus)

(until 1 October 1999)
Association "Strom ohne Atom", Leo Scherer, PO Box
2322, CH-8031 Zurich

Away from nuclear power – for a turning point in the energy field and for the progressive dismantlement of nuclear power stations (Away from nuclear power)

(until 1 October 1999)
Association "Strom ohne Atom", Leo Scherer, PO Box
2322, CH-8031 Zurich

For a sufficient range of vocational training (apprenticeships' initiative)

(until 28 October 1999)
Sarah Müller, Postgasse 21,
CH-3001 Berne

For shorter working hours

(until 11 November 1999)
Swiss Trades Union Congress,
Monbijoustr. 61, CH-3007 Berne

For a capital gains tax

(until 11 November 1999)
Swiss Trades Union Congress,
Monbijoustr. 61, CH-3007 Berne

For freedom of expression and simultaneous lifting of the prohibition on race discrimination

(until 12 November 1999)
Kunigunde Grätzer-Karner,
PO Box 114, CH-8042 Zurich

The individual sovereignty of citizens (installation, as a supreme judicial body, of a Technical Commission of the Senate of a Swiss Academy for Technology, Vital Questions and Science)

(until 12 November 1999)
Kunigunde Grätzer-Karner,
PO Box 114, CH-8042 Zurich

For mother and child – for the protection of the unborn child and aid for his mother in distress

(until 2 December 1999)
Dominik Müggler, PO Box,
CH-4011 Basle

For a secure income in the event of illness (daily allowance initiative)

(until 16 December 1999)
Swiss Trades Union Congress,
PO Box 64, CH-3000 Berne 23

Equal rights for handicapped persons

(until 4 February 2000)
Konrad Stoker, ASKIO, Effingerstrasse 55, 3008 Berne

For Switzerland's adhesion to the United Nations (UN)

(until 3 March 2000)
Association for Switzerland's Adhesion to the United Nations (UN), PO Box 734, CH-4003, Basle

For the safe and wholesome provision of medication (Medication Initiative)

(until 15 March 2000)
Swiss Apothecaries Association, Max Brentano, Stationstr. 12, PO Box 193, CH-3097 Bern-Liebelfeld

Lifelong internment for perpetrators of sexual or violent crimes who are judged to be highly dangerous and untreatable

(until 3 May 2000)
Self-help Group "Licht der Hoffnung", Anita Chaaban, PO Box, CH-9471 Buchs SG.