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A closer look at the logistics of the electoral register

Link with the home country

For the mobile part of the Swiss population who wish to exercise their political rights, the electoral register plays a key role. A look at the administrative procedures uncovers some surprising facts.

In the corridors of Zurich's central electoral registry office, stacks of plastic boxes full of reply envelopes await transportation to polling stations, where the ballot slips will be counted on the voting weekend. For politically

Lukas M. Schneider

active Swiss residents abroad the electoral roll is an important link between their host country and the home country.

Wide-ranging remit

Cornelia Troller, Head of the City of Zurich Electoral Register, derives obvious satisfaction from her role as an administrative assistant to the Fifth Switzerland. Her tasks include the computer-aided upkeep of the electoral register, as well as the addressing, packaging and mailing of associated documentation. Currently she has 5316 Swiss voters registered as resident in 111 countries.

Not all communities demand such a comprehensive range of tasks. The city of Berne electoral register office, for example, boasts a more modest infrastructure. Packaging and mailing of documentation is outsourced to AWZ, the Addressing and Advertising Centre of Berne.

Kurt Senn, who runs the Packaging Department, points out that it is no longer cost-effective to package the large volume of documentation manually. Now specially-designed machines ensure efficient and rational packaging. "The volume of material for the upcoming National Council elections will necessitate several procedures. We still do not have the technical capability to insert everything in an envelope in one go," says Senn. Packaging demands a

great deal of concentration. He freely admits that they once forgot to include a reply envelope. Only when the first complaints were received from abroad did they notice the error. The result was an expensive follow-up mailing.

Swiss Abroad: a global phenomenon

In terms of volume the city of Berne's electoral roll of 1716 voters abroad is manageable. "The ballots are delivered to the electoral register office together with the envelopes. The next day they are mailed throughout the world," says Senn, describing the timing of the operation. The procedure takes some time, according to Senn, since because of the wide range of postal charges every ballot needs to be separately checked. "At times like that you realise what a global phenomenon the Fifth Switzerland is," adds the Head of Packaging wryly.

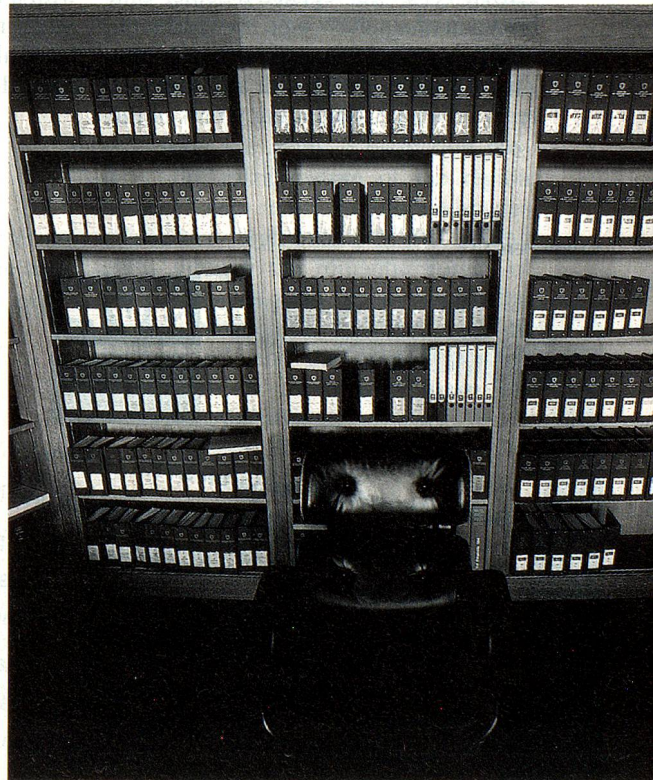
Peripatetic compatriots

The first thing one notices is that the voters can hardly be accused of putting roots down elsewhere. Our compatriots abroad are primarily mobile professionals who have left Switzerland in order to broaden their mental horizons but intend to return at some stage in the future. Heidi Hofer, who works for the Berne electoral register office, has noticed a marked rise in applications from China in recent years. The reason, she adds, is that "apparently there are lots of companies who contract Swiss nationals for infrastructure projects." The increase in peripatetic professionals is reflected in the electoral rolls. Asked whether he ever toyed with the idea of becoming a Swiss Abroad himself, Senn assumes a far-away look. Almost apologetically the Head of Packaging admits, "Once, when I spotted an envelope addressed to the Fiji

Islands, I dreamed of how wonderful it would be to travel the world as a mailman and deliver the documents in person."

Delays in arrival

The election and voting documents are sent from Berne by first-class post, while Zurich sends them first-class to the neighbouring countries of Germany, Liechtenstein and Austria. The list of countries reads like an exotic journey: there are voters in such far-flung corners of the world as the Bahamas, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast. According to Troller the documents are only sent to locations where German-speaking Swiss are resident. "It usually takes longer for French and Italian-language documents to be sent from the Federal Chancellery," sighs Troller, citing a fundamental obstacle to on-schedule mailing. Due to high postal charges, everything is sent in one pack-



Legislation such as the decree governing the political rights of Swiss Abroad strengthen the ties between the home country and the Fifth Switzerland.

age to countries with a linguistic mix of voters.

The cost is already high enough; on average the city of Berne spends around CHF 3000 on postage, while Zurich spends as much as CHF 6500. Depending on the weight, the cost can even increase to almost CHF 10,000. The municipalities pay a high price for the votes of their compatriots abroad. But, says Troller, it is adequately justified by the above-average turnout alone. "For the vote on constitutional reform it was exactly 51.9 percent," she proudly claims. In Berne, too, Hofer claims that voter participation from Swiss Abroad is 40 to 50% above the average domestic turnout.

Late changes of address

Telephone calls with consular representatives are an important time-saver in the updating of the electoral register; accurate registration of the data often leads to lengthy correspondence. Troller regards the frequent changes of address and country of residence as an integral part of the lives of the Swiss Abroad community. Address changes which arrive too late for updating reflect the high-level mobility of our compatriots abroad. To minimise administrative complications the head of Zurich's electoral register, together with her team of six, has come up with an innovative solution: every six months Zurich sends a letter with an addressed reply envelope, reminding voters of the

four-yearly obligation to re-register and asking them to check their address. According to Troller the effort has been well worthwhile, since it has helped to consolidate the register.

Welcome callers

Now and again Swiss Abroad drop into their local electoral register office. These contacts are much appreciated, because such flying visits put a human face on addressees spread around the globe. The brief notes contained in the reply documentation also help bring to life our compatriots abroad. Hofer secretly wishes for even more feedback in this respect.

Problem of tight mailing schedules

For Zurich at least, complaints are by far the most common reason for contacts. Mostly the criticism is aimed at the tardy arrival of voting documentation. Troller has no choice other than to placate critics with the standard explanation: "If we don't receive the voting documentation from Berne, then we can't send it out." From an administrative standpoint the civil servant regards the late arrival of voting material as the main shortcoming. Seconds later, with a twinkle in her eye, she mentions another problem: "We would be grateful if all voters would write down their new address legibly!" ■

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