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## "The Swiss abroad are ambassadors for Switzerland"

With the FDP Switzerland International section, the Free Democrats (FDP) are the first Swiss party to set themselves the goal of facilitating political co-determination and active participation for the Swiss abroad and of representing their interests. Helen Freiermuth, a member of the Executive Committee and herself a Swiss abroad, explains why in an interview with "Swiss Review". The questions were put to her by Heinz Eckert.

### "SWISS REVIEW": *What do the Swiss abroad mean to you?*

HELEN FREIERMUTH: The Swiss abroad are ambassadors for Switzerland in their country of residence. They help shape Switzerland's image in their respective environment. But equally important is the fact that they bring home new ideas through their experiences abroad and contact with foreign cultures, thereby enriching the political debate.

### *What were the aims behind the foundation of FDP International?*

Initially, the emphasis was on providing our compatriots abroad with information on political affairs in Switzerland. However, it is becoming increasingly important for us to engage in dialogue with the Swiss abroad and to harness their enormous potential in terms of creative ideas and solutions.

### *Of all the Swiss parties, yours is one of the most active in terms of the Swiss abroad community. Why?*

For the reasons I mentioned earlier. The Swiss abroad have to be well-informed in order to exercise their political rights knowledgeably, and we benefit from the exchange with highly motivated and committed citizens who have an international background.

### *How many members do you have among the Swiss abroad?*

We currently have just over 200 members in 26 different countries. We are delighted with

the number of new members in recent months. This is a testament to the growing commitment of the Swiss abroad and strengthens our belief in our new strategic approach.

### *How do you maintain contact with Swiss abroad?*

To date, mainly through mailings and "Freisinn", our newsletter. Though, we have made it a top priority to improve communication with active and potential members and we intend to adopt innovative means by which to do so.

### *What does the Council of the Swiss Abroad mean to you?*

The Council of the Swiss Abroad is the direct voice of citizens residing abroad and ensures that the concerns of our expatriates are taken seriously in Parliament.

### *Will a Swiss abroad ever make it onto the National Council?*

The existing system where candidates have to stand for election in individual cantons makes a successful candidacy rather unlikely. Our task, nevertheless, is to ensure that the interests of the Swiss abroad are safeguarded through our

Members of Parliament, even without direct representation in Parliament.

### *Where do you believe you have the most common ground with the Swiss abroad?*

As a party committed to a Switzerland that is open to the world, we are particularly close to our compatriots residing outside our national borders. When we fight for the integration of foreigners in Switzerland, we are empathising with the situation faced by the Swiss abroad in their respective countries of residence.

### *Why have you abandoned the Swiss Abroad of the Year prize?*

Definitely not because of a lack of worthy candidates. FDP International was reorganised last year and set itself new strategic priorities. We considered how we could offer the

Swiss abroad the greatest possible support and had to bundle our resources. Even though it was not an easy decision, we came to the conclusion that the Award for the Swiss Abroad no longer fitted in with our strategy.

### *What does FDP International do for the Swiss abroad in concrete terms?*

We offer an increasingly wide range of specific information for the Swiss abroad on political events in Switzerland. We are also working on a new website and are developing innovative ways of communicating more effectively and more directly with our members. The objective is to stimulate debate on various topical issues among the Swiss abroad. This will enable them to play an active role in shaping the future of their homeland.

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HELEN FREIERMUTH has her roots in Switzerland, but is a citizen of the world. She has lived abroad with her family for 14 years like a modern-day cultural explorer (China - USA - Canada - and China again since January 2010). Before setting off on her travels, she lived in Bassersdorf and Freienstein-Teufen in the canton of Zurich, where she worked in school administration and for the audit commission. She supports a modern, outward-looking and confident Switzerland that takes its opportunities in a changing world. Her diverse cultural experience on three continents enables her to bring the perspective of a Swiss citizen abroad to the work of the Executive Committee.

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