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"Real opportunities for the Swiss abroad"

The "SP Schweiz International" (International Section of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland) was founded in 1999. The aim was to provide a political home outside Switzerland's borders for the many Swiss abroad who identify with the objectives and values of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SPS). Walter Suter has presided over the International Section of the SPS since 2007. Interview by Heinz Eckert

"Swiss Review": What do the Swiss abroad mean to the SPS?

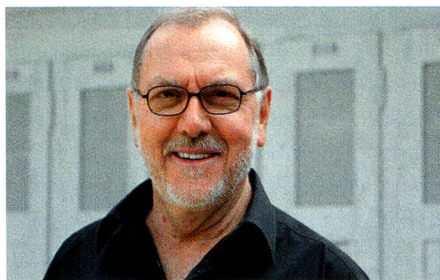
Walter Suter: As a community of over 700,000 Swiss citizens, of whom around 130,000 are registered on electoral rolls in Switzerland, the Swiss abroad are very important even purely from a numerical perspective. The SPS believes the Swiss abroad have a legitimate right to take part in elections and referenda and to represent the common concerns of the Swiss abroad directly at political level as Members of Parliament in the Federal Assembly. For this reason, in 2007, both SPS National Councillors Mario Fehr and Carlo Sommaruga submitted proposals aimed at implementing legal measures to provide the Swiss abroad with the real opportunity to stand for Federal Parliament in the elections.

What do you consider to be the most urgent political issues regarding the Swiss abroad?

The creation of a legal framework to provide Swiss citizens abroad with genuine opportunities to be elected to the National Council and/or Council of States.

What significance do the resolutions of the Council of the Swiss Abroad have for the SPS?

The SPS is represented on the Council of the Swiss Abroad by former and current federal parliamentarians, such as Remo Gysin and Carlo Sommaruga. It therefore supports its resolutions. The CSA's resolutions give the SPS' initiatives on policy relating to the Swiss



Walter Suter retired as an ambassador in January 2008 and lives in Berne.

abroad greater weight and credibility in the National Council and Council of States.

The budget for "Swiss Review" has been cut, swissinfo is in danger and savings are constantly being made on the network of representations. What is your view on these developments?

The SPS and the International Section are following developments with great concern and would like to put a stop to all cutbacks.

There will be federal elections again next year. Why should Swiss people abroad vote for the SPS?

The SPS has always advocated an open Switzerland that plays a leading role in the international community based on cooperation and solidarity, while showing a healthy degree of self-confidence. Based on social justice, we aim to make a proactive and sustained contribution to a

peaceful co-existence between nations. This is also in line with the long-term interests of the community of the Swiss abroad. The SPS has always taken a coherent and consistent stance on all issues relating to policy on the Swiss abroad and will continue to do so. It represents the legitimate concerns of the Swiss abroad in the Federal Council and in Parliament without any ifs and buts.

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

Under the present terms where Swiss citizens abroad have to stand as candidates for a place on their party's list in the polling canton, the chances are very slim. However, I am convinced that with perseverance and a great deal of persuasion, the constitutional and legal amendments that would be required to enable the Swiss abroad to stand for election may one day be achieved. This would also resolve the issue of electoral opportunities which needs to be addressed. With a view to ensuring improved direct representation for Swiss citizens abroad, the SP Schweiz International believes the role of the Council of the Swiss Abroad should be strengthened in the interim to allow it to function as a genuine and democratically legitimised representative of the Swiss abroad vis-à-vis the political authorities.

How do you maintain contact with Swiss abroad?

As far as our members are concerned, contact takes place electronically. Internet access is a prerequisite nowadays for membership of the International Section of the SPS. The section also maintains targeted contact with the Swiss abroad through annual participation in the Congress of the Swiss Abroad. The SPS parliamentarians on the Council of the Swiss Abroad also take this opportunity to exchange views at length with council members visiting from abroad and with many other people attending the congress.



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