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Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Lugano

This year's Congress of the Swiss Abroad focused of course on the parliamentary elections of 23 October. The theme of the congress was "direct democracy in an international context". There was much debate about how the Swiss abroad could obtain greater political influence.

Over 400 guests from all over the world took part in the 89th Congress of the Swiss Abroad. In keeping with tradition, the Congress, which was held at the Palazzo dei Congressi in Lugano, began on the Friday with the meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA). One of the most important issues discussed by the Council was the creation of a law governing the Swiss abroad designed to ensure that federal government adopts a strategy on all issues concerning the Swiss abroad.

The free movement of persons, an issue put forward for debate by people on the right politically, was also on the agenda. The members of the CSA passed a motion by 65 votes to 3 calling for the political parties to work towards maintaining and extending the free movement of persons. This was not surprising since 420,000 of the 700,000 Swiss abroad live in a European Union country and are directly affected by the free movement of persons. This was also a key issue in the electoral manifesto drawn up by the CSA in spring.

Visit of the Federal Councillor

A packed programme awaited visitors on the Saturday. In his welcome address, Jacques-Simon Eggly, OSA President, once again emphasised that Swiss citizens abroad should have more weight politically. Electronic participation in elections and referenda plays a key role here. Both the CSA and OSA intend to place special emphasis on this issue in future. Achille Casanova, former Vice-Chancellor and Federal Council spokesperson, then gave an extremely interesting speech on the challenges of direct democracy and concordance. He said that the Swiss system of concordance government was incomprehensible to most foreigners. However, he explained that there is a proud history of democracy and concordance in Switzerland "because our forefathers always rejected an excessive concentration of power". This resulted in a "subtle distribution of power", said Casanova. Another major benefit of direct democracy is that the people and government have to engage in constant dialogue. Casanova reminded the Swiss abroad of one factor in particular that has made Switzerland strong – respect for others. He added: "This strength is measured by the wellbeing of the weakest and respect for other cultures and religions. Unfortunately, such values seem to be losing their relevance."

Experts then voiced their views on "democracy in an international context" in a discussion session. The debate focused on Switzerland's relationship with the EU as well as on whether popular decision-making was always the right approach. Andreas Auer, a professor at the University of Zurich and head of the Centre for Democracy Studies in Aarau, forcefully put forward the argument that democracy and popular decision-making cannot take precedence over everything else. He explained: "Democracy cannot be above universal values such as human rights."

The event highlight was Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard's visit to Lugano. She spoke mainly about economic issues and vehemently defended the Federal Council's policy on the strength of the Swiss franc. She described the Swiss abroad as ambassadors for the nation.

A gala dinner on the Saturday evening and various excursions and visits on the Sunday rounded off the programme.

BARBARA ENGEL



The OSA executive board at the meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad



Enjoying good company over lunch on Saturday



Agnes Parodi-Coray (aged 98), the oldest participant of the congress, together with OSA employees



OSA advice

I am a Swiss citizen abroad and I have great difficulty communicating with the Central Compensation Office promptly owing to the length of postal delivery times. Wouldn't it be easier to communicate by e-mail?

It is true that postal delivery times can cause problems when communicating with authorities in Switzerland and, in this Internet age, asking whether communication by e-mail would be easier is a legitimate question. We contacted the Central Compensation Office and learned that the situation is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. In countries where delivery takes a long time and is less reliable, the Office works with the local Swiss representations, which are given the task of passing on mail to member organisations. Anyone who wants to contact the Central Compensation Office by e-mail can do so via its website at www.zas.admin.ch (under "The CCO" – "Addresses").

However, not all correspondence can be carried out by e-mail. For example, this is not permitted by law for declarations of income and assets required for setting old age and survivors' insurance/disability insurance contributions, or for supporting documentation and general benefit applications, etc. Furthermore, the Central Compensation Office cannot systematically respond by e-mail in all circumstances. Judgements, judicial correspondence and income and asset declarations have to be sent to insured persons by post. Upon the express request of an insured person, copies of some documents can be sent by e-mail. So, while some communication can be carried out by e-mail, postal communication is required in some circumstances for legal reasons.

SARAH MASTANTUONI,
HEAD OF THE LEGAL DEPARTMENT

OSA's Legal Department provides general information on Swiss law in areas which specifically concern the Swiss abroad. It does not provide information on foreign law or intervene in disputes between private parties.

Young people from all over the world

You too have Swiss roots. But do you know Switzerland? Would you like to find out more about the land of your forefathers? We organise opportunities for you to meet other Swiss abroad and come into contact with local people.

The coming together of different cultures and backgrounds is one of the most exciting aspects of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad's offers for young people. This year, 60 young people from 25 countries will meet at the New Year Camp in Lantsch. A mishmash of languages while queuing at the chair lift; different experiences of weather conditions, of snow and of wearing sports equipment on their feet; different temperaments, dietary habits and ways of life – all these come to light during the ten days. Tolerance and a good sense of humour are the key to having a good time and getting on well together. We know from experience that this is not only possible but also lots of fun. All participants take home very special and valuable experiences.

We would be delighted for you to take advantage of one of our offers. There are plenty of reasonably priced options available.

Sport offers

Are you already a free rider, able to ski down slopes covered in fresh powder snow? Or do you not know what a stem turn is yet? It doesn't matter! The instructors on the OSA team will take your abilities and preferences into account and provide you with individual support. You will of course also gain an insight into your homeland. There are still places available for the following camps:

Winter sports week in Wengen from 25 Feb to 3 March 2012 – a camp for Swiss abroad aged 18 and over;

Easter camp in Fiesch (Valais) from 7 to 15 April 2012 – a unique camp with plenty of sports opportunities. Indoor halls, outdoor activities, summer sports, winter sports and a fantastic group of people from all over the world. Aged 13 and over.

Learning during your holidays

OSA knows that young people enjoy experiencing new things during their holidays.

However, action-packed holidays can be combined wonderfully with learning. There are still places available on the language courses in Berne and Fribourg in January 2012. You go to school in the morning, and in the afternoon you can enjoy a fringe programme, spend time with your host family or explore Switzerland on your own by train.

Our "Training in Switzerland" offer primarily aims to provide you with advice on training and educational opportunities. After your stay, you may decide to take a vocational training course in Switzerland, spend a semester abroad at a Swiss university or do a professional apprenticeship. For this offer too you can stay with a host family from whom you will learn a great deal and who can offer you a comfortable home.

Information on offers for young people can be found under "Offers" at www.aso.ch.

Study grants – harmonisation needed

The National Union of Students in Switzerland (VSS) is launching an initiative for the harmonisation of the grant system.

Parents in Switzerland are obliged by law to meet the costs of their children's initial education. If they do not have the means to do so, they can apply to the authorities for support in the form of grants. Swiss residing abroad from low-income families who are undertaking vocational training or a degree course in Switzerland are also entitled to apply to their canton of origin for a grant. Among the many Swiss abroad who take educational courses in Switzerland, there are some who would be unable to do so without the financial support of their canton of origin.

Given that in Switzerland it is the cantons that decide on the award of educational assistance, grants are not issued according to uniform criteria. Both the conditions for support and the amounts differ. The National Union of Students in Switzerland has therefore launched an initiative for the harmonisation of the grant system. It wants to transfer responsibility for educational grants in higher education to federal government.



100,000 signatures need to be collected by 20 January 2012.

Further information on this issue and the full text of the initiative can be found on the following website: www.stipendien-initiative.ch

For information on educational opportunities in Switzerland:

AJAS – Association for the Promotion of Education for Young Swiss Abroad
Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3006 Berne
Tel. +41 31 356 61 04, Fax +41 31 356 61 01
E-mail: ajas@aso.ch

Swiss schools abroad with quality seal

Thanks to their high educational standards, Swiss schools abroad will be entitled to carry a Swiss government quality seal in future.

educationsuisse

Swiss Government Approved School

Swiss schools abroad provide education to Swiss standards on four continents. This high-quality education is now to receive an official quality seal. Only Swiss schools abroad recognised by federal government and evaluated by sponsor cantons may carry it in accordance with specially issued guidelines. The logo contains several symbols: the Swiss cross stands for official authorisation from Switzerland, while the red squares represent the school locations abroad and their important relationship with Switzerland.

The office for the Swiss schools abroad has also adapted its name and logo. The "Committee for Swiss Schools Abroad" is now called "educationsuisse".

The name highlights Switzerland's linguistic diversity. It is intended to be easy

to understand and to underline the schools' key role – the provision of Swiss education.

SWISS SCHOOLS THAT PROVIDE EDUCATION TO SWISS STANDARDS CAN BE FOUND IN THE FOLLOWING LOCATIONS:

Brazil:	São Paulo and Curitiba
Chile:	Santiago
Columbia:	Bogotá
Ghana:	Accra
Italy:	Bergamo, Catania, Como, Milan and Rome
Mexico:	Cuernavaca, Mexico City and Querétaro
Peru:	Lima
Singapore:	Singapore
Spain:	Barcelona and Madrid
Thailand:	Bangkok

Winter camps for children aged 8 to 14



There are still **some places left** on our two New Year ski camps in Arolla and Sedrun!

Winter camp in Arolla (Valais)

Winter camp in Sedrun (Grisons)

Date: Tuesday, 27 December 2011 to Thursday, 5 January 2012

No. of participants: Arolla 36, Sedrun 48

Cost: CHF 900 (contribution to the camp)

Ski or snowboard hire: approx. CHF 150

Registration

Precise details on the winter camps and the registration form are available at www.sjas.ch ("Our forthcoming activities"). Reduced contribution rates are available in justified cases. The form required can be requested on the registration form. We are also happy to post you our information brochure on request. The two winter camps in Arolla and Sedrun will be the only FYSA offers available during the 2011/12 winter season.

Summer camps for children aged 8 to 14

Registration for the summer camps will begin in February 2012.

Precise details on the various summer camps in 2012 (dates, locations and age groups, etc.) and the registration form will be available from February 2012 at www.sjas.ch ("Our forthcoming activities"). If you would prefer to look through our offers on paper, you can order a brochure from the office from February 2012.

Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA)

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E-mail: sjas@aso.ch, www.sjas.ch

ORGANISATION OF THE SWISS ABROAD

Our services:

- Legal Department
- Youth Service
- Association for the Promotion of Education for Young Swiss Abroad (AJAS)
- Committee for Swiss Schools abroad (CSSA), new: [educationsuisse](http://educationsuisse.ch)
- Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA)

Organisation of the Swiss Abroad

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