

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 39 (2012)
Heft: 4

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Limits of direct democracy

THE SWISS PEOPLE DO NOT WANT EVEN MORE DEMOCRACY. This is one way of interpreting the outcome of the vote on mandatory referenda for treaties that took place on 17 June. Over 75 % of the electorate rejected the “decision on state treaties by the people” initiative, which was essentially an extension of the rights of the people. Nobody anticipated such a clear verdict. The notion that the Swiss electorate does not want even more democracy and feels “over-burdened” with referenda on often highly complex matters is further borne out by the extremely low turnout, which stood at just 38 % on 17 June. Political scientists will undoubtedly analyse the referendum result over the coming months and attempt to shed light on the question of when a nation reaches its limitations with democracy.

The outcome of the vote on the “decision on state treaties by the people” initiative has been interpreted by some Swiss politicians as an expression of confidence in parliament and the government. This would appear to be a rather bold interpretation as the same voters overwhelmingly rejected the managed care proposal, supported by government and parliament, on the same day (details of the results on page 19).

Calls for more democracy and referenda are currently growing outside Switzerland, even in well-established democracies such as Germany and Austria. The sense of powerlessness as a result of globalisation, the constraints of the financial and economic crises, and EU decisions often perceived as too far removed from ordinary citizens may explain these calls. In Austria, the “MeinOE” committee is currently successfully collecting signatures for a petition for a referendum on democratic reform, with a view to basing more decisions on direct democracy. Several prominent politicians are surprisingly playing a leading role here.

In education policy, we have experienced over the past two decades how difficult decision-making and reforms often are in Swiss democracy with its great emphasis on federalism. The situation here has stabilised to some extent, the trench warfare is over and the most challenging issues appear to have been resolved. For this reason, we have made education in Switzerland a focal topic of this issue (from page 8). This choice also reflects the 50th anniversary of AJAS, the Association promoting Education for Young Swiss Abroad. AJAS is affiliated to the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad and provides great support for young Swiss abroad faced with the complex web of authorities and institutions in Switzerland.

Finally, I would like to return to the “Hildebrand affair”. The treatment of Philipp Hildebrand as President of the National Bank in the media and his resignation on 9 January 2012 have been the subject of fierce and contentious debate in Switzerland. The Swiss Press Council, as the complaints authority for the public and for media professionals which addresses issues of media ethics, has examined the case extensively and published its opinion shortly before the editorial deadline. As some readers – and the “Weltwoche” – also complained about my article on this matter entitled “How the story of a forced resignation unfolded” in the April 2012 issue of “Swiss Review”, we have published the Press Council’s statement on our website. It contains interesting reflections on the role of the media and background information on the Hildebrand affair. www.revue.ch/editorial-en

BARBARA ENGEL

IMPRINT: “Swiss Review”, the magazine for the Swiss abroad, is in its 39th year of publication and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in 14 regional editions. It has a total circulation of 395 000, including 135 000 electronic copies. Regional news appears four times a year.

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■ **PRINT:** Swissprinters AG, CH-4800 Zofingen. ■ **CHANGE OF ADDRESS:** Please advise your local embassy or consulate. Do not write to Berne. ■ All Swiss abroad who are registered with a Swiss representation receive the magazine free of charge. Anyone else can subscribe to the magazine for an annual fee (Switzerland: CHF 30 / abroad: CHF 50). Subscribers are sent the magazine direct from Berne. ■ **INTERNET:** www.revue.ch

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Echo

Cover photo: The Rolex Learning Center at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL). This issue profiles Patrick Aebscher, EPFL President and the man behind the global acclaim the institute has enjoyed in recent years. This year’s Congress of the Swiss Abroad also takes place in Lausanne.

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