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Meeting of the Swiss abroad

The Congress of the Swiss Abroad took place in Lausanne from 17 to 19 August. Almost 400 Swiss abroad attended. This year's theme was "Mobility and Innovation: Switzerland in Times of International Challenges".

This year's Congress of the Swiss Abroad featured several highlights. Participants eagerly anticipated the visit of the new foreign minister, Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter. In his speech, he outlined the Federal Council's priority objectives in foreign policy for the coming years. He indicated that relations with neighbouring states, the European Union and stability in Europe were key issues. Burkhalter said the Federal Council regarded support for the Swiss abroad as another priority. He pointed out that the Law on the Swiss Abroad, which is currently being drafted by Parliament, would be a key instrument here. There are plans to make one department in the federal administration responsible for all areas concerning relations with the Swiss abroad. Under the new law, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad is to obtain the "status of a privileged discussion partner of federal government", Burkhalter explained.

Eminent speakers

Attendees particularly enjoyed the presentations by the two speakers who directly addressed the congress' theme: Kurt Wüthrich, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry (2002) and Elmar Mock, the inventor of Swatch. Wüthrich gave an account of the vitally important experiences he gained abroad. Mock explained what is required to achieve genuine innovation and not just improvements on what already exists and also recounted the true story of how Swatch watches were invented. Both speeches can be found online at: www.revue.ch > OSA (menu on the left).

Swiss banks and the Swiss abroad

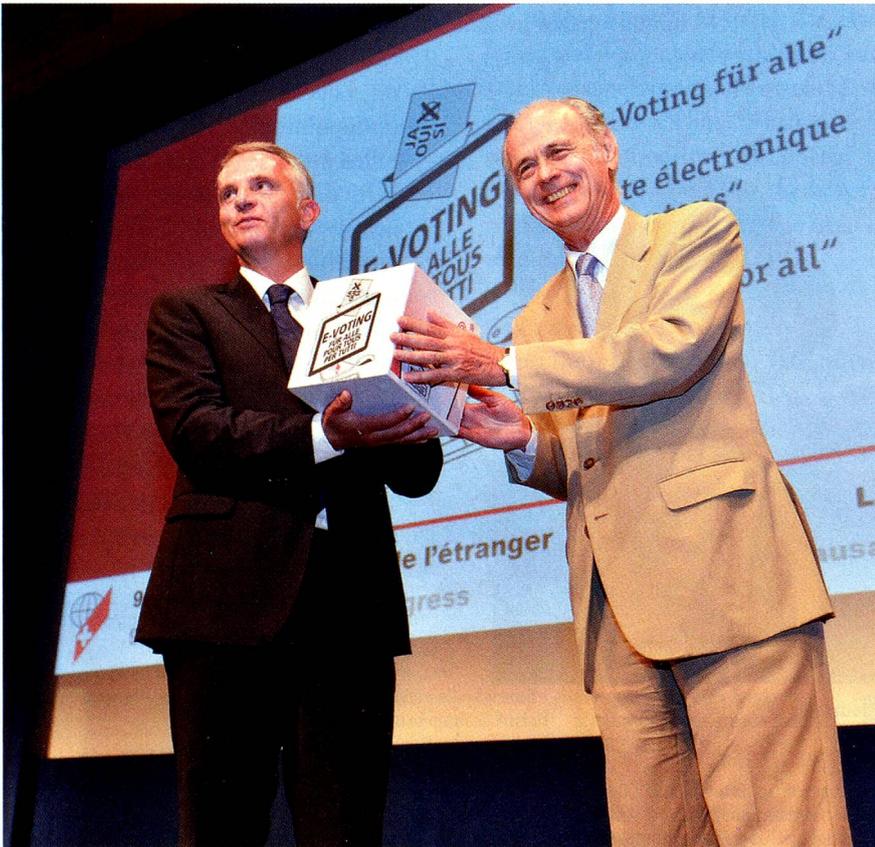
As it does every year, the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) met for the second time this year on the day before the congress. The conduct of the Swiss banks, an issue of great concern to the Swiss abroad, was once again discussed in great depth. Over the past few months, members of the executive and management of OSA had been constantly in touch with banks and financial institutions (Swiss Bankers Association, PostFinance and Raiffeisen, etc.) as well as with the Department of Finance and the price supervisor. The latter is apparently not in a position to intervene on behalf of the Swiss abroad as there is no price agreement on the accounts of Swiss clients abroad, which means competition between the banks continues to exist. (Response of the price supervisor in German online at: www.aso.ch > Beratung > Leben im Ausland > Banken)

None of the banks contacted is currently willing to make a binding offer at moderate cost to Swiss citizens abroad. However, PostFinance is prepared to offer basic services for payment transactions, account management and e-banking to all Swiss abroad under certain conditions. The CSA concluded that the Swiss abroad presently have no option but to try to find a solution individually. One thing is certain and that is that clients will almost always have to visit the bank in person to open an account.

As at the CSA meeting in March, ambassador Gerhard Brügger, head of the Consular Directorate at the FDFA, provided information on the "optimisation of the consular service". (Details regarding the merger and closure of consulates and the opening of new embassies abroad can be found on pages 27 and 28).

Federal government's new Law on the Education of the Swiss Abroad was another important item on the CSA's agenda. The Council was generally satisfied with federal government's plans and unanimously approved OSA's input as part of the consultation process.

Finally, François Baur was elected as a new member of the CSA. He replaces Monika Notter as the representative of Economie-suisse.



Jacques Simon Eggly, President of OSA, hands over the e-voting petition containing over 15,000 signatures to Federal Councillor Burkhalter



Voting made easy

Young people aged 18 to 25 visit the ballot box less frequently than older voters at elections and referenda. The Swiss Federation of Youth Parliaments (DSJ) is attempting to redress this situation through the *easyvote* project. The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad's Youth Service is also involved. The DSJ presented the *easyvote* project during the summer camp for young Swiss abroad. So, now young Swiss abroad can join in, too.

The interests of people who never or seldom vote are extremely unlikely to be represented properly. This obviously also applies to young adults. The DSJ has developed the *easyvote* system to make voting simpler. All federal and some cantonal referendum proposals are explained simply and objectively. Young people eligible to vote – and, of course, any other interested parties – will be able to find out about upcoming referenda quickly and comprehensively, irrespective of which country they live in. *easyvote* is politically neutral and its information is based on the official voting documents issued by federal government or the cantons.

The project aims to make it easier for young people to understand Swiss politics and to take advantage of the opportunity to vote. In addition to the national version for federal referenda, *easyvote* is also currently available for the cantons of Aargau, Berne, Grisons, Lucerne, Schwyz, Solothurn and Zurich.

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By young people for young people

The content of the *easyvote* leaflets is written in German by school pupils, apprentices and students aged 16 to 30 on a voluntary basis. The texts are then discussed in groups via Skype, their clarity is checked and they are revised where necessary. They are then reviewed and edited again by other young people. Those involved come from all over Switzerland and sometimes also from abroad.

easyvote is currently being sent to more than 22,000 young people on behalf of over

100 communes and around 20 schools. It also has numerous individual subscribers of all age categories. Subscriptions are offered for both print and PDF versions. *easyvote* will also be published in French and Italian from autumn 2013.

Annual subscription costs CHF 15 for the print version and CHF 10 for the PDF version. Further information is available at www.easyvote.ch

SEMINAR ON THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY YOUTH SESSION

Each year, over 200 young people gain an insight into how Swiss politics works at the Youth Session. This provides them with the opportunity to obtain information about political players and processes as well as ways of participating. The aim is to encourage them to take part in further political activities. Places at the Youth Session are also reserved for the Swiss abroad. OSA will prepare participants for the session with a programme that will take place from 12 to 15 November 2012. This will enable them to take part in political debate with other young parliamentarians at the Federal Palace.



Young people in the National Council chamber in Berne during the Youth Session

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OSA advice

There are various Swiss societies abroad. Some are recognised by OSA while others are not. How do you become a society recognised by OSA?

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) is a foundation established under private law that aims to strengthen the links between Swiss citizens abroad and their homeland, to represent their interests in Switzerland and to provide them with a wide range of services (information, legal advice, offers for young people, etc).

OSA is made up of Swiss societies abroad that it recognises. To obtain recognition from OSA, a Swiss society must meet the following criteria:

- The objective of the society must be to strengthen links between the Swiss abroad and their homeland;
- Over 50% of the active members must be Swiss citizens;
- The majority of the committee must hold Swiss nationality;
- The presidency must be held by a Swiss citizen;
- Its membership must include at least seven Swiss citizens;

- As a minimum, it must hold a members' meeting once a year and have a committee that is reappointed on a regular basis;

- The society must be affiliated to the umbrella organisation in the country where it is located, if one exists (France, Germany, Italy, UK, Spain-Portugal, Austria-Liechtenstein-Slovenia, the Netherlands, Canada, Argentina);

- It must undertake expressly to inform OSA if it is unable to continue meeting any one of these criteria.

The societies recognised by OSA may participate in the appointment of their country's delegates to the Council of the Swiss Abroad. This Council, which is made up of delegates from the Swiss communities abroad as well as members from Switzerland, such as federal parliamentarians, representing the institutions in contact with the Swiss abroad, meets twice a year to discuss issues that specifically concern the Swiss abroad. The media refer to the Council of the Swiss Abroad as the "Parliament of the Swiss abroad". The Swiss societies recognised by OSA make a direct contribution to policy on the Swiss abroad.

Societies which do not meet all of the conditions set out above can obtain recognition as an associated group. In contrast to the Swiss societies fully recognised by OSA,

associated groups cannot participate in the appointment of delegates from their country to the Council of the Swiss Abroad but benefit from all of the other advantages.

Having obtained recognition from OSA, the societies and groups join the global network of Swiss societies and institutions abroad. They also automatically receive information and newsletters from OSA and enjoy a high profile at www.swisscommunity.org, the social network of the Swiss abroad. They also add to the weight of OSA and therefore of the Swiss community abroad, which has an impact on the representation of the interests of the Swiss abroad.

Any societies interested in obtaining recognition from OSA can complete the recognition application form, which can be found on OSA's website at www.aso.ch > "About ourselves" > "Swiss Societies abroad" > "Recognition of a Swiss society by OSA".

SARAH MASTANTUONI,
Head of the Legal Department

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad's Legal Department provides general legal information on Swiss law and specifically in areas that concern the Swiss abroad. It does not provide information on foreign law and does not intervene in disputes between private parties.

Project for the Area for the Swiss Abroad



The winning project by artist Gino Bühler.

A distinctive symbol is to be created for the Area for the Swiss Abroad in Brunnen. The Area for the Swiss Abroad Foundation took this decision at the beginning of the year and launched a competition for the creation of this distinctive symbol. The winning project, which the jury selected from 52 entries, is called "Sprungbrett" (springboard) and was submitted by Gino Bühler, a Swiss photographer and graphic artist living in Düsseldorf.

Bühler's "Springboard" consists of a curved, wave-shaped structure, which will be constructed on the south-west corner of the meadow. It points towards the Rütli while also symbolising the springboard into the outside world. Visitors will be able to walk on the monument and reach a viewing platform some twelve metres above the lake via a set of steps. It is not yet clear how the work of art will be funded.