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Autor: Engel, Barbara / Guldimann, Tim
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The concerns of the Swiss Abroad are being neglected

Tim Guldemann, who has been ambassador in Berlin for five years, is a well-known figure in Switzerland's diplomatic corps. He is now stepping down but is ready for a new challenge. He wants to enter politics.



INTERVIEW: BARBARA ENGEL

"SWISS REVIEW": YOUR LONG CAREER AS A SWISS DIPLOMAT COMES TO AN END ON 29 MAY. WHAT WAS YOUR MOST DIFFICULT MISSION?

TIM GULDIMANN: The most challenging was in Kosovo and the most spectacular Chechnya with the mediation of the ceasefire and the organisation of the elections. The most exhilarating was the five years in Iran representing US interests there.

Why did you interrupt your diplomatic career at the end of the 1980s?

After the end of the Cold War, I hoped we would also see a new dawn in Switzerland in terms of policy on Europe and found it frustrating that we allowed ourselves to get bogged down in a state of frenetic stagnation. I went over to the Department of Home Affairs to focus on science policy. I returned to the FDFA at the end of 1995 because Heidi Tagliavini - who at the time had returned from her OSCE mission in Chechnya - sought me out and said: "You have to come to Chechnya, we need someone who can speak Russian."

It is said that the relationship between Germany and Switzerland has become more fraught in recent years. Have you also experienced that as an ambassador?

The relationship is very robust, in fact almost indestructible because the Germans like us. Whether that sentiment is always reciprocated is a question I'll leave unanswered. We have had disputes over taxation which have today been resolved with the abolition of banking confidentiality. The major issue now is the restriction on immigration we announced which may also affect German cross-border workers and place strain on our relationship with the EU in general. And in the southern Baden border region lots of people are still angry about air traffic noise.

You intend to enter politics after your retirement at the end of May?

Yes, I'd like to. The SP International has put me forward as a candidate for the National Council elections. On 29 May, I'll clear my desk as an ambassador in Berlin. On 30 May, the SP delegates of the canton of Zurich will decide whether to put me on their list.

So, you would like to sit in Parliament in Berne as a Swiss citizen abroad?

Exactly, I would remain in Berlin if I were elected and would work on the issues concerning the Swiss Abroad. I would nevertheless also feel a sense of commitment to the canton of Zurich and addressing the issues of the cantonal SP.

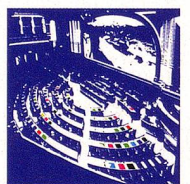
In the April issue of "Swiss Review", Stephanie Baumann, who sat on the National Council as a Swiss Abroad, said that such a mandate was an almost impossible task.

I would obviously not be able to represent all 730,000 Swiss Abroad. However, first of all the concerns of the Swiss Abroad deserve greater attention from our politicians as they are currently being neglected. Secondly, I would be able to make a useful contribution to the domestic political debate in Switzerland from my external perspective. The Swiss Abroad generally identify with the country overall whereas the Swiss at home increasingly just identify with their canton or region. This is reflected, for example, in the debate over the teaching of French in German-speaking Switzerland.

You say that the concerns of the Swiss Abroad are neglected in Parliament. What do you mean by that exactly?

The specific concerns are voluntary old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV), health insurance, the opportunity to hold a bank account in Switzerland and e-voting finally being introduced by all cantons.

Tim Guldemann was born in 1950 in Zurich. He studied economics and political science. He joined the diplomatic service in 1982. The main postings during his career were in Egypt, Chechnya, Croatia, Iran and Kosovo. He has been ambassador in Berlin since 2010. Guldemann retires from the diplomatic service at the end of May. He is married to a German journalist, has two daughters and will continue to live in Berlin.



**ELECTIONS
2015**

BARBARA ENGEL IS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF WITH THE "SWISS REVIEW"