

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 3

Rubrik: Notes from the Parliament Building

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The pandemic has changed the nature of consular services

The pandemic that began at the beginning of 2020 also affected Switzerland's consular network, with work in the area of consular protection and social support becoming more important. At the same time, it has been difficult or impossible to visit consular representations in person due to the Covid restrictions that have hampered freedom of movement. Even routine work has been hindered, although the Consular Directorate's virtual counter has remained open at all times and the entire consular network has maintained its services.

In these challenging times, a number of Swiss representations have been looking at new ways to stay in touch with and keep track of Swiss on the ground while offering them specific services. Here are three reports from Bangkok, San José and Ottawa that illustrate the agility of Switzerland's consular network and of the FDFA employees in fulfilling their mission regardless of the circumstances. Time will tell whether these experiences enhance the consular network's regular work in the long run. (FDFA)

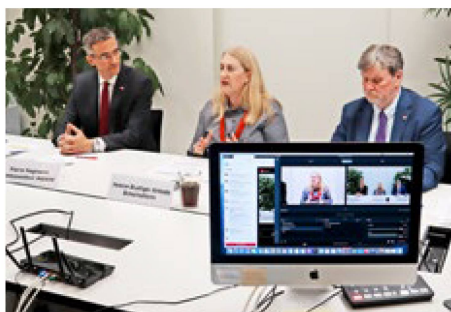
Bangkok / Thailand

Digital "community meetings" during the pandemic

As we know, necessity is the mother of invention. When the Covid-19 pandemic came to a head in Thailand and neighbouring countries in March 2020, the Swiss embassy in the capital Bangkok decided to improve its digital reach. In less than four weeks, Ambassador Helene Budliger Artieda sent a total of 18 video messages in three different languages to local Swiss expatriate communities to inform them of the latest developments and advice.

This inspired the idea of creating a regular virtual "community meeting". #AskTheEmbassy launched on 22 June 2020 – the first of 16 live Facebook events for the Swiss communities in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Myanmar (the accumulative Swiss expatriate population of these four countries is around 13,000).

Community meetings at local level have a long tradition in Swiss democracy. The response from the Swiss expatriate community was suitably positive. Given the many questions that were asked, we have decided to build on this new form of communication.



In an improvised studio – Ambassador Helene Budliger Artieda with Pierre Hagmann (deputy head of mission, left) and Consul General Pierre Chabloz (right)

Photo provided

For example, we have already welcomed two special guests to talk with us on air. Firstly, the regional director of Lufthansa Group covered everything people wanted to know about travelling during the pandemic. Then in February 2021, the Thai health minister Anutin Charnvirakul paid us the honour of a visit to answer questions in person about vaccinations for foreigners in Thailand. Further video surprises await.

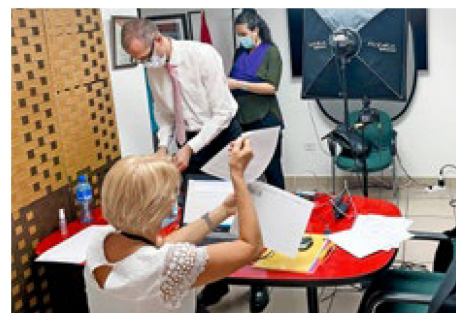
SWISS EMBASSY IN BANGKOK, THAILAND

San José / Costa Rica

Travelling to remote regions to gain a better understanding of requirements

The Regional Consular Centre (RCC) in the Costa Rican capital of San José, which is responsible for some 6,000 Swiss citizens in six Central American countries, hosted a virtual meeting during the pandemic to introduce itself and respond to people's questions.

Under the "Six countries, one region" tag line, the RCC's next event will take the form of a hybrid meeting: six colleagues who specialise in consular services at our six representations in Central America will meet in person in Costa Rica, from where they will conduct a video call with our



Our mobile passport office in Panama – travel restrictions make this a very popular service

Photo provided

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 Online Registration when travelling abroad

Swiss community. All six countries around our region – Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama – face similar challenges.

Take passport applications, for example, for which there is no online facility. In this difficult year, our mobile passport offices (excluding consular services) will therefore again be touring neighbouring countries. This has proved a very popular, successful initiative to date.

Ultimately, we are focusing on elderly members of society who have been particularly affected by the pandemic. Embassy staff will travel to remote regions to listen to the concerns of our retirees and answer their questions. This will not only lend our services a human face, but help us better understand the needs of older Swiss Abroad.

SWISS EMBASSY IN SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

Ottawa / Canada

A simultaneous live stream from three different regions of our vast country

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely restricted our freedom of movement. But it has widened our horizons too. Given the global dimensions of the crisis, this means thinking outside the box to come up with good ideas that will enhance consular services. The “community meetings” hosted by the Swiss embassy in Thailand (see article on the left) were an inspiration for us in Canada to do something similar. However, we had to tailor our own virtual town hall



Simultaneously connected – Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver all attended the town hall meeting Photo: screenshot

meetings to Canadian specificities, because the sheer size of our country, along with its federal structure, have resulted in each province implementing different Covid guidelines.

In addition to the embassy in Ottawa, Switzerland has general consulates in Montreal and Vancouver. These are the points of contact for the 40,000 Swiss registered as living in Canada. It was therefore important to involve and connect with all three Swiss representations, so that we could include input from different regions and take account of both of Canada’s national languages, English and French. The town hall meeting therefore took the form of a Zoom call on Facebook Live, which was simulcast via the three Facebook pages of the Ottawa, Vancouver and Montreal representations. Interest in the event was considerable, with some 500 viewers tuning in. People asked a varied range of questions and gave positive feedback. This reinforces our intention to continue harnessing the potential of digital formats in our work after the pandemic.

SWISS EMBASSY IN OTTAWA, CANADA

Federal votes

The Federal Council determines voting proposals at least four months before the voting date.

Everything you need to know about voting proposals (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by Parliament and the Federal Council etc.) is available at www.admin.ch/votes or via the Federal Chancellery’s VoteInfo app.

The Federal Council decided that there will be five federal proposals submitted to the people on 13 June 2021:

- Federal Popular Initiative of 18 January 2018 ‘For clean drinking water and healthy food – No subsidies for pesticides and the prophylactic use of antibiotics’;
- Federal Popular Initiative of 25 May 2018 ‘For a Switzerland with no synthetic pesticides’;
- Federal Act of 25 September 2020 on the Legal Framework for Federal Council Ordinances to overcome the COVID-19 Epidemic (COVID-19 Act);
- Federal Act of 25 September 2020 on the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions (CO₂ Act);
- Federal Act of 25 September 2020 on Police Counterterrorism Measures (PCTA).

Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiatives had already been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for the collection of signatures in brackets):

- Federal Popular Initiative “For individual taxation regardless of civil status (Fair taxation initiative)” (09.09.2022)
- Federal Popular Initiative “For safer vehicles” (16.09.2022)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in German, French and Italian at www.bk.admin.ch > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen

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