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“Always focused on people and their circumstances”

Who addresses the pressing concerns of the “Fifth Switzerland”? Who comes to the aid of Swiss travellers who find themselves in an emergency situation abroad? Both these matters fall within the remit of the Consular Directorate (CD) at the Department of Foreign Affairs. Its director, Ambassador Johannes Matyassy, describes the challenge of having to constantly deal with new and extremely difficult problems.

INTERVIEW: MARC LETTAU

Swiss people living abroad like to see themselves as ambassadors for Switzerland. As an official ambassador yourself, you should know. Is this self-perception accurate?

It’s certainly true that when you live abroad, you become a walking advertisement for Switzerland. Nevertheless, there is also a place for questioning to some degree this self-construed image so prevalent among the “Fifth Switzerland”.

In what sense?

Every Swiss Abroad leaves behind positive and negative impressions, so everyone shares the responsibility of how Swiss are perceived. This doesn’t just apply to those living abroad, however, but also to the many Swiss who travel the world. Whether or not all of them really act as ambassadors is another matter, but we can definitely say that every Swiss Abroad has the potential, at least, to become one.

Almost 800,000 Swiss live abroad. Can Switzerland – or more precisely your Consular Directorate – still manage to address individual cases and concerns?

Swiss living abroad are usually well acquainted with the ins and outs of their country of residence and can manage on their own. For them, our diplomatic representations are a kind of community. More often, it is Swiss travelling abroad who ask us for help and consular protection. Some of these cases are difficult and solving them requires enormous effort.

Such as the case of Natallia Hersche, the Swiss woman arrested in Belarus in 2020? Switzerland did a great deal to secure her release – at least that’s how it looked from the outside.

It was indeed a highly complex, politically charged case that attracted enormous media attention. Natallia Hersche is a dual



A native of Berne, diplomat Johannes Matyassy has been director of the Consular Directorate of the FDFA since 2018. Matyassy’s previous positions included Swiss ambassador to Argentina and subsequently head of the Asia and Pacific Division in the FDFA. As CEO of Presence Switzerland, the official platform of Switzerland worldwide, Matyassy also focused on Switzerland’s activities abroad. He is retiring at the beginning of 2023.

Photos: Danielle Liniger

Swiss-Belarusian citizen. First of all, we had to get the Belarusian authorities to recognise that. Only then could we provide assistance to Natallia Hersche. Our ambassador in Minsk visited her in prison countless times. Furthermore, there were intense negotiations between Switzerland and Belarus on a political level. In the end, the main thing was that we left no stone unturned – but there was no “deal” made with the regime in Minsk.

Then we had the opposite of an isolated case when during the coronavirus pandemic, 4,200 people were flown back to Switzerland on 35 flights.

We’re talking about the largest repatriation campaign in the history of Switzerland! At first, we called on people to take responsibility for themselves. Many actually man-

aged to organise their own return journey, but we soon realised that not all of them could do it alone. This phenomenally large-scale operation can hardly be compared with other very complex cases. When rescuing abducted children or bringing young people home from a jihadist camp, for example, things remain extremely tense for months – sometimes years.

Switzerland provides assistance to its citizens abroad in emergency situations. But what does that mean for binational families, where the father might be Swiss, the mother of foreign nationality, the children dual citizens?

That’s a very important question which we also had to answer during the pandemic repatriation campaign. At that time, we took a pragmatic approach. You can’t tear fami-

lies apart in such cases because the mother – as an example – is Brazilian. We decided that the whole family could travel back to Switzerland together.

Switzerland is committed to addressing the concerns of the “Fifth Switzerland”, but it’s not always successful. I’m sure you’ve heard the complaints of those who want to vote in Switzerland, but in fact cannot.

Yes – and I completely understand their criticism, especially since I myself was a Swiss Abroad. During my time in Argentina, I received the ballot envelope together with the access code that allowed me to vote via e-voting. When the canton of Geneva no longer wanted to continue its e-voting system, which was also used by other cantons, and the Swiss Post’s system displayed flaws, it set us back a long way. To make matters worse, the current debate on e-voting in Switzerland is quite different from that in the “Fifth Switzerland”.

Different in what way?

In the debate within Switzerland, security concerns are clearly at the forefront. There must be absolutely zero possibility of fraud because public trust in voting results is a tremendously important asset. Concern about this asset explains the resistance in Switzerland. From my personal point of view, it would be worth examining the possibility of decoupling e-voting, i.e. allowing the “Fifth Switzerland” to use e-voting without launching it for the whole of Switzerland. This seems to me a valid option worth considering – alongside solving the technical challenges that still need to be addressed.

In any case, political interest is high in the “Fifth Switzerland”, with more and more people registering to vote.

This clearly illustrates the close connection they feel to Switzerland – and their great interest in what is happening here. The “Fifth Switzerland” also represents substantial political potential. This is reflected, for example, by the fact that all the major parties are paying attention to this target group. However, the political participation of the Swiss Abroad is still not overly enthusiastic. There are 620,000 eligible voters and only 210,000 registered voters so far, but the trend is rising.



“The ‘Fifth Switzerland’ also represents substantial political potential.”



We’re all getting older – and the FDFA is currently devoting a lot of attention to “Aging abroad”. Would it be true to say you work in a very “senior-focused” way?

No, because we have to look at the overall picture. We pay just as much attention to the inclusion of young people, e.g. when they come of age or by teaching them about Swiss culture and giving them a connection to Switzerland. Our current focus on senior citizens in the “Aging abroad” project is well justified. On the one hand, the number of people over 65 is steadily increasing in many countries; people are getting older. On the other hand, we see a growing number of them emigrating after retirement; people are becoming more mobile. Of course, this also means that new issues become more relevant.

For example?

One question that is becoming more important is: how do aging Swiss Abroad react to suddenly finding themselves all alone? Or what about elderly people who begin to suffer from dementia? Or seniors who have never bothered to write a living will? Such things also pose challenges for the Swiss representations. If we consciously aim our attention at “Aging abroad”, then firstly our focus is on those who intend to emigrate. The emphasis here is on prevention. They need to prepare themselves and consider the question of what growing older abroad means. Secondly, we address those who are already living abroad, getting older – and then retiring abroad. The priority in that case is more on services that might become necessary. For example, as already mentioned, when someone develops Alzheimer’s. A tough topic full of tough questions.

Put simply, is “Aging abroad” an awareness raising campaign?

Absolutely. Ultimately, we are promoting increased self-responsibility, in relation to one’s own aging in this case.

If you want to raise awareness, you have to first be capable of reaching the diverse, multilingual community spread across the globe...

Thankfully, we can take advantage of our excellent network of representations – our embassies, consulates and honorary consuls.

They're important multipliers. In addition, we're currently launching the new app that President of the Swiss Confederation Ignazio Cassis announced at the Congress of the Swiss Abroad 2022.

Another app for what exactly?

The app will make it easier for Swiss Abroad to share experiences and solutions among themselves. Useful answers to many questions can be found within their own community, after all. It will also improve networking between the representations and the Swiss communities abroad.

Not everyone is a fan of networking, though. Aren't there sometimes high expectations that Switzerland itself is the one that should solve any existing problems?

During our visits abroad, we come into contact with very different mindsets. Many Swiss Abroad whom we meet face to face are managing their everyday lives very competently. From time to time, however, we definitely face high – even too high – expectations. It goes something like this: “Switzerland should take care of me because I paid taxes in Switzerland for decades.” On these occasions, I always explain what the Swiss Abroad Act actually states. Above all, try to help yourself first! Only when this fails will Switzerland step in, with a wide range of clearly defined services.

You are retiring at the beginning of 2023. What do you feel really characterises your personal achievements as ambassador and head of the Consular Directorate?

I can look back on a tremendously exciting period. The work of the Consular Directorate is always focused on people and their personal circumstances. This has really impressed and fascinated me, especially being able to solve the numerous “difficult cases”. In my previous positions, the focus was usually on politics. Here, it was always people, the individual, the human story.

And one very simple question to finish: will you be testing out the concept of “Aging abroad” for yourself?

(laughs) No, I'm determined to implement the concept of “aging in Muri bei Bern”.

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Travel Admin – the FDFA travel app

Travel Admin is the travel app from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). The app assists you in preparing for a trip abroad and supports you during your journey with useful functions, information and individually adaptable checklists. The regularly updated travel advice from the

Federal votes

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

The Federal Council has decided not to hold a federal popular vote on 27 November 2022. The next voting date is 12 March 2023.

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 Chancery's VotelInfo app.



Popular initiatives

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

- Federal Popular Initiative “Yes to a ban on the import of fur products derived from cruelty to animals (fur initiative)” (28.12.2023)
- Federal Popular Initiative “Yes to a ban on the import of foie gras (foie gras initiative)” (28.12.2023)
- Federal Popular Initiative “Fair working conditions for truck drivers (Truck Driver Initiative)” (12.01.2024)

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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