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A congress dedicated to the “future of democracy”

The future of Swiss democracy requires the involvement of young people – including young people from the “Fifth Switzerland”. This was one of the central messages at the Congress of the Swiss Abroad 2022 in Lugano.



Advocating in Lugano for youth involvement in politics. Luis Alberto Gostin Krämer (Chile) and Jacqueline Siffer (USA) from the Youth Parliament of the Swiss Abroad. Photo: Adrian Moser

After the long break imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the 98th Congress of the Swiss Abroad on 20 August once again brought together representatives of the “Fifth Switzerland”. It was a chance for making direct contacts, having face-to-face encounters, and finding collaborative solutions – with a focus on “the future of democracy”. “Today we experienced in real ‘real time’ what democracy means, i.e. exchanging views and healthy debating regardless of differences of opinion, whether you live in Switzerland or abroad, or even whether you are Swiss or not,” was how Ariane Rustichelli, Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA), summed up her personal congress experience in Lugano.

Debates and workshops were held beforehand to further elaborate several core statements relating to the congress theme. The importance of political participation was a central focus. OSA President Filippo Lombardi: “In order for our unique democ-

racy to endure and evolve, we also need the youth from the ‘Fifth Switzerland’ to get involved and actively shape our democracy.” At the congress, members of the Youth Parliament of the Swiss Abroad (YPSA) advocated in favour of lowering the voting age to 16. Rustichelli believes that this request should be met with openness and trust.

It's back: the perennial issue of e-voting

The right to vote and stand for election is central to political participation. In Lugano, the approximately 400 congress participants from 40 countries reiterated that it should no longer be made difficult or impossible for them to exercise their political rights as granted by Switzerland. Electronic voting is also unlikely to be possible in the 2023 federal elections, meaning that many Swiss Abroad will effectively be excluded from voting. In a differentiated analysis at the congress, correlations were drawn be-

tween the situation of Swiss living abroad and that of foreigners living in Switzerland. One quarter of those living permanently in Switzerland are also excluded from political participation.

This poses “a risk” and “a problem for democracy”, according to historian Kijan Espahangizi, because it is precisely the Swiss Abroad who understand that “multiple affiliation” is not synonymous with a “conflict of loyalties”. He believes that participating in political decisions in both your country of residence and home country actually strengthens democracy.

Although framing it very differently, the congress’s opening speaker, President of the Confederation Ignazio Cassis, drew a similar conclusion. Swiss Abroad see Switzerland from the outside, he stated, and this provides new perspectives and insights. In this way, they pave the way “for Switzerland, as well, to learn from other countries”. (MUL)

Free movement of persons – “Fifth Switzerland” makes its position clear to the Federal Council

The Council of the Swiss Abroad is calling on the Federal Council to take a firm stand in favour of maintaining the free movement of persons. The CSA feels it is essential to guaranteeing the rights of the 450,000 Swiss citizens living in the EU.

At its meeting in Lugano on 19 August, the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA), referred to as the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, voiced its “extreme concern” about the state of relations between Switzerland and the European Union (EU). It stated that the breakdown of negotiations for a framework agreement with the EU would have a particularly negative impact on the 450,000 Swiss nationals living in the EU. The CSA therefore passed a unanimous resolution calling on the Federal Council to adopt a clear and transparent strategy to preserve

Who will be affected by the new Swiss organ donation law?

the free movement of persons. Swiss citizens currently living in the EU benefit directly and in many ways from the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) between Switzerland and the EU, including in the areas of employment, taxes, social benefits, and family reunification. In light of this, OSA President Filippo Lombardi insists that “the free movement of persons must be upheld at all costs”.

First negative impacts

The CSA is concerned because the first negative consequences for Switzerland are already being felt in the wake of the breakdown of negotiations with the EU in May 2021. One example is Switzerland’s demotion within the Horizon Europe research programme (see pages 4-7). In Lugano, the former Swiss ambassador and top diplomat Alexis Lautenberg described the overall negotiating environment as having shifted to the disadvantage of Switzerland. According to him, Brexit, for example, has made Switzerland’s situation more complicated because whereas the UK emphasises “being on the outside”, Switzerland is actually striving for close collaboration with the EU. However, the Swiss position has “completely eroded” since Brexit, says Lautenberg. It is conceivable that the EU could draft a general framework for its relationships with third countries, but he doubts that such a concept would be able to cover Switzerland’s specific needs.

Momentum growing for the E-ID

The CSA also defined its stance on the electronic identity (E-ID) that Switzerland is working towards introducing. The Council is fully in favour of the planned E-ID, because – after the initial proposal failed at the ballot box – a state supported E-ID is now to be developed. From the CSA’s point of view, an E-ID will advance electronic democracy, in particular because it enables the implementation of digitally designed e-voting procedures, making it a beneficial tool for the “Fifth Switzerland”. (MUL)

More about the Congress and CSA meeting:
revue.link/lugano

The question: This spring, voters decided to introduce an opt-out system for organ donation. As a Swiss Abroad living in Germany, I am unclear on how this change affects me. Will it apply to all Swiss citizens, including Swiss Abroad? What happens if I die abroad as a Swiss citizen? And what about tourists staying in Switzerland?

The answer: In the referendum of 15 May 2022, the Swiss electorate voted in favour of the introduction of an extended opt-out system for organ and tissue donations. In future, all deceased individuals are to be assumed to be willing organ and tissue donors – unless they explicitly stated otherwise during their lifetime. Since this is what is known as an extended opt-out system, however, the person’s relatives will still be contacted if the deceased’s wishes were not documented anywhere. A relative can prevent the removal of organs or tissue if, in their opinion, this does not correspond to the wishes of the deceased person. If no relatives can be contacted, no organs or tissue may be removed. These changes will come into force at the beginning of 2024 at the earliest. In principle, laws on organ and tissue removal are not based on nationality, but instead operate according to the territorial principle. In concrete terms, this means that a person’s location at the time of death determines which laws apply. The May vote will not change this. Regardless of national-

ity, the opt-out system will therefore apply to anyone who dies in Switzerland – whether they are tourists, Swiss Abroad visiting Switzerland, or people whose permanent residence is in Switzerland.

When Swiss citizens die abroad, the laws of their place of death are applied accordingly. The change to Swiss law is part of a wider trend, as more and more European countries are adopting opt-out solutions. However, there are still exceptions, such as Germany, so it makes sense for Swiss Abroad to research the rules in their country of residence and consider recording their wishes in the relevant registry or document. If you want to be prepared for any eventuality in Switzerland, you can also download and fill out an organ donation card on the Swiss-transplant website. This will remain valid even after the amendment to the law comes into force.

Smilla Schär, OSA Legal Department,
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A donor organ is removed from the cooled transport container shortly before transplantation.
Photo Keystone



“Moving to Switzerland gave me freedom”

The Swiss Abroad Brigitte König came to Switzerland from Latin America for her education. Here she talks about her experiences.

“I grew up in Paraguay, South America. My father had met my mother on a trip around the world and so he emigrated to Paraguay. However, it was very important to him that we grew up speaking German. That’s why I spent my school years at a German school. The school holidays allowed us to travel to Switzerland often to visit my grandparents. This familiarised me with Swiss traditions at an early age.

When I was 16 years old, my father thought it was time for me to move to Switzerland to start professional training. However, I didn’t feel grown up enough and wasn’t ready to leave my life in Paraguay behind. In 2016, at the age of 18, I flew to Switzerland alone with mixed feelings. Only when I arrived in Switzerland did I realise that I was facing a completely new phase in my life. I had left my friends and family behind in South America.

The traditional Paraguayan lives in the here and now and does not give much thought to tomorrow. Spontaneity is one of his strongest qualities and punctuality in South America means “I’m only one hour late.” Swiss punctuality was difficult for me

at first. However, like other Swiss characteristics, I have come to appreciate it because it simplifies everyday life.

I also quickly became aware that Switzerland is a country full of different cultures. People from all over the world, with different religions and languages, can be found in this small country. I liked this multicultural diversity and was always discovering new things.

When I arrived in Switzerland, I worked in a restaurant in Bettmeralp during the winter season. Many of the staff on the alp came from all over the world and I got little of the Swiss culture. When the season ended, I moved in with my grandparents and slowly I made contacts through work and sport. I was also able to make friendships, which made my path easier and continue to this day.

I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do professionally or in which areas I saw my future. So, I decided to do an internship in service at a retirement home in Rheinfelden. After my internship, I did my apprenticeship as a hotel manageress in Basel, where I was able to build a life for myself, make contacts and

cultivate friendships. The apprenticeship allowed me to grow as a person, to discover a passion for the organisational side, to create daily routines and to help with the scheduling of staff.

Since I could not finance myself during the apprenticeship, I had to inquire about a scholarship. I contacted various institutions, including my home canton of Aargau, but unfortunately, I only received rejections. Through my grandfather, I became aware of educationsuisse. This organisation supported me in obtaining scholarships from the Willy Müller Foundation and the Hans Freiburghaus Fund of the Foundation for Swiss Abroad. Thanks to educationsuisse, I became independent and was able to successfully complete the training of my choice.

Moving to Switzerland gave me freedom, in the truest sense of the word, and allowed me to find and go my own way. The various encounters have shaped me and helped me find my own identity.

In September, I started part-time studies in social work at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern FHNW in Muttenz. Meanwhile, I continue to work 50 percent as deputy chef de service, breakfast.”

Edutionsuisse offers young Swiss Abroad counselling related to education in Switzerland.
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Great experiences, new friendships and lots of exercise – thanks to our summer camps

After a two-year interval, this year's OSA summer camps once again offered memorable experiences for young Swiss Abroad – in the Fieschertal valley (VS), in Jaun (FR), and in a camp that took them all over Switzerland.

The suspension of the summer camp tradition of the Youth Service of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic finally came to an end in July 2022. A total of 110 young people from 40 countries took part in three summer camps – in the Fieschertal valley (VS), in Jaun (FR), and in the "Swiss Challenge" camp that crisscrossed all of Switzerland.



Open-air cheese fondue

At the sport and leisure camp in Fieschertal, we spent two incredible weeks together with 46 campers in the heart of the Valais mountains. We made the most of the area's well-known and spectacular suspension bridges and hiking routes. As is customary at the Youth Service camps, we treated ourselves to typical Swiss food, including a classic cheese fondue enjoyed outdoors. However, one thing became very clear – classic Swiss cuisine is not for everyone.

A fun way to learn new languages

The second summer camp began at the end of July in Jaun, Fribourg. The 40 participants spent two weeks exploring the Gruyère region. The camp was also a pioneer of sorts as it was combined with a language course for the first time. During the two-week camp, around half of the campers were able to improve their German or French in the morning classes. There was also a range of exciting activities for those who chose not to

attend the language course. The group programme with all campers participating offered a diverse array of highlights including a visit to a chocolate factory, hiking, and a wide variety of outdoor sports such as football, basketball, volleyball, kin-ball and ultim-



mate frisbee. The hours spent around the campfire and sleeping in a tent also provided memorable moments.

A chat with Ignazio Cassis

And last but not least, the popular "Swiss Challenge" camp started on 6 August and crisscrossed all of Switzerland. The 24 participants spent 16 days travelling through seven cantons and all four language regions. This year the itinerary led from Montreux to Berne, then on to Davos and Lucerne and finally ended in Lugano. One of the camp's definite highlights was a meeting with the president of the Swiss Confederation, Ignazio Cassis (see page 27). It was much more than just a photo opportunity as the young people were allowed to ask President Cassis



all manner of questions. The questions ranged from an explanation of Swiss neutrality, to the voting age of 16 and his favourite football club.

ANNEGERT VOIGT
Leader of the Swiss Challenge camp

FABIENNE STOCKER
Youth Service of the OSA

Photos: Danielle Liniger, Adrian Moser, provided



Discussion

In Switzerland, 58 out of 100 people live in rented flats. This figure quoted in the “Swiss Review” 4/2022 led many readers to suspect that the resulting lack of freedom and discontent in daily life must be enormous. We researched and discovered that 11,000 complaints were settled in 2021 – because of a barking dog, a smoking barbecue or a noisy neighbour. That’s 30 grievances per day nationwide out of over five million tenants. We feel it’s safe to say that on the whole, Swiss tenants get on very well.



“Wealthy Switzerland is a country of tenants”

ALAIN SAMSON, SINGAPORE

Great article! I've often wondered why there are so many renters in Switzerland. The observation that a high proportion of renters is an indication of wealth (rather than the opposite) is particularly interesting. I previously lived in the US and UK, where state pensions are small and home ownership is important for a comfortable retirement.

DANIEL GUT, SPAIN

Poor, rich Swiss. Always living with one foot on the street should the rent contract be terminated or the rent raised once again. Constant pressure not to offend the landlady, let alone demand a reduction in rent. And to top it off, there's the horror story of the shared washing machine – yikes!

ANTHONY IGBETA, IRELAND

High renting population is an idea to keep the people at a certain level of abnormality. Owning your house does give the owner a sense of financial rest and the Swiss government and banks have made it so impossible for labourers to be able to afford their own homes. It is so wrong.

WILLY WILLEN, USA

No wonder so many Swiss have difficulties when they reach retirement age since they have to pay a large portion of their pension

to landlords. In the US, retired seniors have paid off their mortgage and are enjoying life.

MATTHIAS NIKLAUS, MEXICO CITY

Switzerland is very densely populated, so the price of land is also tremendously high. That's why high-density living makes sense. It's difficult to draw comparisons with other countries. Many people can't or don't want to take on over a million francs of debt to own their own home. Renting is a good option in Switzerland.

SABRINA MARCHIO STORZ, WA, USA

The psychological state of Swiss tenants is also relevant. How do tenants feel about coming home late at night and not even being allowed to take a shower? I had to go to the USA to be able to experience real freedom, and a large part of that is linked to home ownership.

PAUL GRAF, BRETAGNE, FRANCE

Almost all of us emigrants own a beautiful detached house with a garden and would be completely unhappy back in Switzerland!

Swiss state pension – still a work in progress

SILVIA AMUCHASTEGUI RUDIN, ARGENTINA

Based on my experience of how pensions and retirement schemes work in my country of residence, I believe raising the retirement age is essential. This is the only way to ensure that young people are able to have an adequate pension.

ROLF MÜLLER, PONTEVEDRA, SPAIN

Finally, Switzerland is at least talking about paying out a 13th month of AHV pension. This has long been standard practice in

other EU countries. At the moment, I can still live reasonably well with my pension in Spain – but that's why I had to leave Switzerland.

WILHELM URS SCHÄFERER, SUCINA, SPAIN

In my opinion, the penalties on OASI pensions for couples need to be abolished (abolish the penalties, not the pensions). Today, there are undoubtedly more non-married people living together and who each have access to a full pension!

JEANNETTE SERRE, FRANCE

Pensioners are struggling to get by on their pensions. The reasons are the same in all countries: not enough income because salaries (and therefore the contribution amounts) don't evolve much, pensioners are living for longer, and the number and amount of fixed costs never stop growing.

The top job – on the Jungfraujoch

HARJEET SINGH OBEROI, PUNJAB, INDIA

I got goosebumps while going through the story. I wish I were there at their place. Something really thrilling, adventurous and truly a place to work at. I seriously wish to experience the same in reality.

Visit the online edition of “Swiss Review” at www.revue.ch. Read the latest comments on our articles and join the conversation yourself. You can also share your opinions on the community discussion forum of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA).

Link to the SwissCommunity discussion forum: members.swisscommunity.org/forum

