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Momentum is gathering for an official electronic ID

With extensive political support, the foundations are currently being laid in Switzerland for the introduction of an electronic identity card (E-ID). An E-ID would make e-voting easier, amongst other things

EVELINE RUTZ

Voluntary, secure and straightforward – this is the model for the electronic ID card (E-ID) currently being launched by the Swiss government. The process is moving at an impressive pace. After the Swiss population rejected in March 2021 a solution backed by private providers, a new version is now under consultation. The key aspect is that the state itself will manufacture the E-ID, and be responsible for developing and running the trust infrastructure.

An explanatory video is currently available to show the public how the future E-ID should work. The app can also be tested in seven cities: "This gives people an initial glimpse of how it will be implemented visually and technically," Urs Paul Holenstein from the Federal Office of Justice (FOJ) said recently. Reactions from testers have been mixed: some are sceptical, whereas others are curious and open-minded. Holenstein evoked the concept of a 'digital rift'.

He explained how people would obtain an E-ID in the future. The first step is to consult the federal authorities online and submit proof of identity, such as a selfie. If the picture of the person's face matches the image in the federal identity register, they will be issued with an electronic identity card. This ID is then added to their electronic 'wallet'. From then on, they will be able to identify themselves digitally online and in everyday situations. They can enjoy the convenience of doing all their 'official admin' online, such as requesting a copy of their criminal record or filing their taxes.

The only personal data they will need to disclose is the data relevant to the specific situation. For example, if they have to prove that they are over 18, only this information will be communicated. Their date of birth and their first name and surname will not be shared. "You will be able to add additional documents to your 'wallet' in the future, such as your driver's licence," said Urs Paul Holenstein. "The E-ID will form the basis for a whole range of applications."

A crucial element for e-voting

E-voting stands to benefit from this as well: the entire process could be organised electronically. The authorities could provide all relevant documents and access data to the voting population online. This would accommodate the over 200,000 Swiss Abroad who are entitled to vote. They would no longer have to be told that they would receive their PIN in good time in the post, as was the case for the trial schemes to date. The entire proce-



The concept of the digital official identity card is explained in a video from the Swiss government. Photo: supplied

dure could be paperless. "This would make it easier for the Swiss Abroad to exercise their political rights," said Ariane Rustichelli, Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.

The fact that a new solution is already available in the wake of the population's No vote in 2021 is testament to the broad political consensus that Switzerland needs an E-ID. "This is undisputed," says FDP National Councillor Marcel Dobler. The left/right debate is of no importance when it comes to digital topics. This makes it easier to reach a cross-party agreement. The members of the Swiss parliament were already in agreement when the motion's defeat at the polls became evident: they quickly decided on the benchmarks for a new law. This exerted 'constructive pressure' on the Federal Council, said Green politician Gerhard Andrey, who launched the initiative.

The solution currently under discussion is built on three principles. The state will provide the basic service. Data will be saved sparingly and locally (privacy by design). Finally, the users themselves will decide when and to whom they disclose their data (self-sovereign identity). The Swiss government will design the E-ID to ensure it is compatible with the EU's services. "We are in contact with the EU and various other countries with a view to ensuring the E-ID is compatible internationally over the long term," said Rolf Rauschenbach, spokesperson for the FOJ. The official explanatory video sums up the objective as follows: "Your digital life should become easier and more secure."

