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“At the age of 15, I returned to Switzerland alone”

The Swiss Abroad Wëndabo André Kientega came back to Switzerland from Africa to attend high school. Here he talks about his experiences at school and later during military service and at the university of applied sciences.

“I was born in the canton of Zug in 1998, but only lived there for a few years before my family moved to Neuchâtel, where I learned French and attended kindergarten and primary school.

Since my parents founded the NGO Wëndabenedo FEED to help women and children in need, we moved to Burkina Faso in 2009. We lived on the outskirts of the city of Bobo Dioulasso. Water and power cuts were the order of the day. It was a real culture shock, but also an enriching experience.

I went to a French school where most of the students were from Burkina Faso, but there were also young people of many other nationalities. Since the school did not offer a high school, I decided, also because of the teaching quality, to return to Switzerland to continue my education and meet up with my childhood friends. So, at the age of 15, I returned alone to the canton of Neuchâtel, where I completed my high school education. During these three years, I lived with family friends. Since I always visited Switzerland once a year during my time in Burkina Faso, I quickly settled in again. Nevertheless, it was difficult at first to be separated from my family.

After graduating from high school, I didn't know exactly what to do next. So, I decided to take a gap year, during which I completed recruit school in Ticino and did various internships to find my way. Finally, I found what really interested me: studying at a university of applied sciences to become an agronomist. To do this, I had to complete ten months of internships with farmers in the cantons of Fribourg, Vaud, and Geneva before I was accepted at the Haute école du paysage, d'ingénierie et d'architecture (HEPIA) in Geneva. I really like the study programme with its diverse and current topics such as Switzerland's food sovereignty, use of pesticides and organic farming.

Unfortunately, I had to extend my studies by one year because I was called up by the army as a medical soldier during the coronavirus pandemic. I was deployed to a nursing home in Lausanne to take care of elderly



Wëndabo André Kientega: “It's good to know who to ask for help or information.” Photo donated

patients in the quarantine zone. I am glad I was able to make myself useful, but it was painful to see these people isolated from their families and friends. It was a time of many uncertainties. Nevertheless, I tried to follow some online lectures on my days off. It was a difficult time, as it was for many other people.

I am now in the process of completing my bachelor's degree. My bachelor's thesis is about the use of ultraviolet radiation to combat pathogens on cultures to be able to do without fungicides. I was undecided whether I should follow the master's programme straight away or do some work first. Now I am starting a master's degree in agricultural sciences with a specialisation in sustainable production systems.

It was mainly thanks to the scholarships from my home canton of Appenzell Auser rhoden that I was able to complete my education. I am very grateful for all the help I received on my way, which was not easy, but I am now on the home stretch.

If I can give one piece of advice to young Swiss people abroad who come to Switzerland for training, it is that they should find locally-based people they can rely on. Especially as a young person, it is not easy to live without your family. It's good to know who to ask for help or information.”

Educationsuisse offers counselling to all young Swiss Abroad on all matters related to education in Switzerland and support with cantonal scholarship applications.



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Four summer camps full of fun, sport, mobility and socialising

In all, 124 young people from 33 countries attended this year's summer camps organised by the Youth Service of the Association of the Swiss Abroad. They were rich in experiences that will make lasting memories.

This year's camping season kicked off with two camps, both of which began on 8 July 2023. Forty participants assembled at Château-d'Œx to do sport, enjoy leisure time together and improve their language skills. There were German and French classes four mornings a week. The young people also enjoyed trips to the Pays-d'Enhaut region. There were a number of hikes scheduled and one of the two-day hikes included sleeping in self-made tents or under the stars. The group also went to Lausanne, where they explored the city with a secret Mr X.

A "Swiss Challenge" full of discoveries

The second camp, held at the same time as the first one, was the first of two "Swiss Challenge" camps. The 24-strong group began their adventure in Savognin. They enjoyed the wonderful Grisons Alpine views and saw glaciers. The journey continued to Bellinzona, with a visit to Verzasca Valley. On their way to the next place, the group stopped in Lucerne and discovered the city on the lake that shares its name, with a photo orienteering expedition. The next stop was Uetendorf, where they again enjoyed the nearby mountains, this time in the Bernese Oberland. The group also managed to fit in a trip to the capital city Berne. The last stop was in Lausanne. Camping on the shores of Lake Geneva provided a fitting end to their tour of Switzerland.

The third camp followed close on the heels of the first two. On 22 July 2023, 36 young people travelled to the Bernese Oberland to spend two weeks at Gsteig, near Gstaad. Here too, the youngsters were able to try out all kinds of sports: orienteering, hiking, frisbee, volleyball, football, mini golf and swimming. Trips to Thun and Montreux also featured on the programme.



A typical Swiss encounter at the sport and leisure camp in Gsteig.



Visit to Verzasca Valley, the young people at the first of this year's two "Swiss Challenge" camps.



"International Food Day" when young people bring specialities from their home countries to share. Photo: Youth service/provided

Basel–Lausanne–Bellwald–St. Gallen

The last camp of the summer season – "Swiss Challenge" number two – began on 5 August in Basel. On the way to Lausanne, the second stop, the 24-strong group went to Berne to see the Federal Palace. They even took a seat in the venerable chamber of the Council of States, where politicians make the important decisions. In Lausanne, the highlight was a visit to the Olympic Museum. On the way to Bellwald, the group saw the subterranean lake in St Léonard. The next days were spent deep in the Valais mountains, with a visit to the Aletsch Glacier and a perfect starry night for the many shooting stars, the Perseids, that were expected. Following a few wonderful days in the mountains, the group journeyed to Ticino, where their camp location was in Losone, the ideal place to enjoy the beautiful bathing weather in Switzerland's sunniest corner. The last destination was St. Gallen, for more activities including mini golf and a water park visit. And just like that the camp was over as the new friends bade each other goodbye.

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad looks forward to welcoming more new and familiar faces for the next summer and winter camps.

FABIENNE STOCKER



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The Council of the Swiss Abroad wants more political participation for the “Fifth Switzerland”

The Council of the Swiss Abroad, referred to as the “Parliament of the fifth Switzerland”, devoted its August meeting to the question of how political participation can be improved for Swiss expatriates. A new working group has been set up to look for answers.

The 89 delegates of the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) had reason to be happy even before their meeting on 18 August 2023. Two days previously, the Federal Council had decided that the e-voting system developed by Swiss Post would remain available to Swiss Abroad eligible to vote in Basel-Stadt, St Gallen and Thurgau, meaning that Swiss expatriates in these cantons will be able to vote online in the federal elections on 22 October 2023. This will be a litmus test for the new e-voting platform, given that elections are much more complex than popular votes involving a simple yes or no. The highest body of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, the CSA, believes that e-voting not only makes it easier for the Swiss Abroad to exercise their political rights, but also increases voter participation in the “Fifth Switzerland”. It remains to be seen which other cantons intend to pilot e-voting from 2024.

Increasing political participation

However, e-voting in itself is not enough to sufficiently increase political participation in the “Fifth Switzerland”. This is the conclusion of a report by CSA delegates, which was presented at the CSA meeting. Only around 36 per cent of the over 630,000 Swiss Abroad of voting age were entered in the electoral register at the end of 2022. Of this 36 per cent, only a quarter actually vote. The report proposes various measures to strengthen expatriate engagement in Swiss political life. Consequently, the CSA meeting approved the establishment of a permanent working group to look more closely into whether statutory parameters can be improved with the aim of increasing political participation. Essentially, the CSA would like the federal government to be obliged to support organisations that are helping to promote political participation.

In addition, the CSA expressed support for the OSA's efforts to ensure that the federal government's new cultural message takes proper account of the Swiss Abroad. Delegates at the meeting, which took place in St Gallen, also underlined how important it was for Swiss education to be accessible abroad through Swiss schools.

The “Fifth Switzerland” and Swiss politics

The CSA meeting in St Gallen featured a panel discussion between six representatives of the six main political parties, who gave their own reasons as to why the



“Fifth Switzerland” should be encouraged to participate in Swiss political life – and why more needs to be done to break down barriers to their doing so.

Here are their answers: because the Swiss Abroad offer “a different perspective from which Switzerland as a whole can benefit” (National Councillor Nicolas Walder, Greens, Geneva); because “mobility is increasing and more Swiss are now living abroad for differing lengths of time (National Councillor Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter, Centre, Basel-Landschaft); because “there is only one Swiss passport and, therefore, only one type of Swiss citizenship” (National Councillor Laurent Wehrli, FDP, Vaud); because the Swiss Abroad “sometimes know the value of Swiss direct democracy better than anyone else” (National Councillor Roland Büchel, SVP, St Gallen); because it is precisely the Swiss Abroad who epitomise “the importance of e-IDs in addition to e-voting” and how crucial it is that “young people feel enfranchised” (Franz Muheim, GLP, Edinburgh, UK); and finally, because “political decisions made in Switzerland affect everyone, including Swiss living abroad and non-Swiss living in Switzerland” (Fabio Molina, SP, Zurich). This is why “as many people as possible need to be involved in the democratic decision-making process”.

The CSA overwhelmingly approved efforts to increase political participation for the “Fifth Switzerland”. A permanent working group has been set up for this purpose.

Photo: Nicolas Brodard

SMILLA SCHAER, MARC LETTAU

A more democratic “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”

The elections to the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA), the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, are to proceed in line with contemporary, democratic principles in future. A working group is busy bringing in the required changes by 2025. The group’s steering committee advised on the next steps in August 2023 in St. Gallen.

In the words of Noel Frei of the democratic CSA elections steering committee, they are working “out of pride for our country and its democratic system”. This system based on democratic principles allows people to continue initiating referendums. The “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA), only partially meets these requirements, says Frei: elections to the CSA have not been transparent in all countries for a long time, nor have they met democratic principles. Moreover, the CSA in no way represents all Swiss Abroad, and the portion of them it does represent is too small.

This is nothing that hasn’t been said before. However, the working group has resolved to change the situation and set an ambitious goal: all countries and constituencies are to have the technology for a direct election and the required instructions in time for the 2025 CSA elections. That includes evaluating a suitable e-voting tool. The rationale is to give as many Swiss Abroad as possible the right to vote in the CSA elections. The prospect of initiating such a major improvement really motivates the working group, says Frei.

The project is currently starting to take shape. The information materials are being created and the announcement of the project is imminent. The next phase – from early 2024 – involves the technical implementation, testing the new tool and the specific preparation of the 2025 CSA elections.

According to Frei, the project will increase the significance and legitimacy of the Council of the Swiss Abroad. He mentions that this is not the first attempt to improve the election procedure. However, now, calls for change are more strident than ever: “Pretty much the whole CSA have recognised the signs of the times.” The signs of the times – and the expectations of the authorities: the FDFA expressly supports efforts to improve the democratic legitimacy of the CSA. This official support is most welcome, says the working group: “An improved electoral system is the only way to ensure the CSA will be even more legitimate as a voice of the Fifth Switzerland,” says Frei. (MUL)

Working group email: workgroup.osa@outlook.com

Swiss culture – an international success story

Apart from this year’s federal elections, the overriding theme of the 99th Congress of the Swiss Abroad in St Gallen was the role of culture across the international divide.

Can Swiss culture be considered an export commodity like other products? The Congress of the Swiss Abroad on 19 August 2023 in St Gallen addressed this very question. Held at the University of St Gallen, the event not only provided an insight into the rich cultural heritage of the “Fifth Switzerland” but also explored the role of Swiss Abroad in enhancing cultural dialogue worldwide. Nor did it shy away from the tricky question of what exactly Swiss culture is in the first place. The interim head of Presence Switzerland, Alexandre Edelmann, gave delegates food for thought, saying that hardly anyone ever mentions culture when asked to think of words to describe Switzerland. Mountains (23%), chocolate (18%) and beautiful landscapes (17%) were the most popular descriptors. He recalled artist Ben Vautier’s provocative installation at the 1992 World Expo in the Spanish city of Seville, which caused an outcry with the catchline “Suiza no existe” (Switzerland does not exist). Edelmann said he still regards the slogan as an invitation for us to consider our own identity and the cultural identity of our diverse country. The second element of Vautier’s installation at the Expo ’92 Swiss pavilion – the less controversial “Je pense donc je suisse” (I think, therefore I Swiss) – did exactly that, he added.

Preceding Edelmann came prominent guest speaker Martin Candinas, the president of the National Council. Candinas, who likes to converse in Romansh, believes that multilingualism is of huge cultural importance in Switzerland. “I have never heard anyone say they should speak one less language,” he said, adding that political commitments had taken him abroad on numerous occasions this year. The Swiss expatriates he had met on his travels had impressed him, leading him to conclude: “Swiss culture is an international success story – not just a simple commodity.”

Incidentally, the next Congress of the Swiss Abroad will include a new cultural element when the Square of the Swiss Abroad in Brunnen foundation relaunched its “Artist in Residence” project. Swiss artists from abroad can apply for a month-long residency in Brunnen (canton of Schwyz), the first of which begins at around the time of the 2024 Congress of the Swiss Abroad on 13 July 2024.

Swiss expatriate culture will also be expressed in the form of postage stamps next year. While devoting time to the theme of Switzerland and its culture, participants at this year’s youth camps (hosted by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad) produced drawings that will now serve as inspiration for a commemorative stamp by the Pro Patria foundation in 2024.

The first part of this year’s Congress focused entirely on the federal elections, which take place on 22 October 2023 – more or less coinciding with the publication of this edition of “Swiss Review”.

MARC LETTAU

Discussion: comments on the “Swiss Review” election survey



Representing art at the Congress – textile designer Stéphanie Baechler



In good spirits – OSA President Filippo Lombardi and OSA Director Ariane Rustichelli



Alexandre Edelmann quoted Ben Vautier: “Je pense donc je suisse”.



The president of the National Council, Martin Candinas, believes that language diversity is culturally important.
Photos: Nicolas Brodard

WERNER IMHOLZ, MADRID, SPAIN

Thank you very much, and hats off, for your “big election survey”. I have no idea how you could have done a better job. As a pensioner who has been living in Spain for almost ten years, I am an active and committed advocate of Swiss direct democracy. I always receive the relevant voting papers from my most recent municipality of residence, Frenkendorf (Basel-Landschaft). Given that the time we have to return these papers before each vote is very limited, I would be delighted if the Swiss embassy took responsibility for this process in future.

JOHANN RUDOLF ROGENMOSER,

ILHA MOSQUEIRO, BRAZIL

I have now been living for seven years on the island of Mosqueiro in northern Brazil. E-voting is the only option that would work for me. The documents for the most recent vote arrived three weeks too late. The idea of receiving voting papers by email and returning them by post would not work, given that postal delivery takes three to four weeks.

JEAN THOMAS WEBER,

SAINT-GENGOUX-LE-NATIONAL, FRANCE

Thank you for your comprehensive survey of the main political parties, which serves as a good guide to the upcoming elections. However, please allow me one comment. In answer to the question “Do we need to take other concrete steps to ensure that the Swiss Abroad can exercise their political rights?”, the SVP is quoted as follows: “No. Compared to other countries, our expatriates have generous voting rights. The Swiss Abroad can take part in elections and popular votes at municipal, cantonal and federal level.” Since deregistering 20 years ago, we have only been eligible to vote in Zurich at federal and cantonal level. Who has made the error here? The SVP or “Swiss Review”? Or have we been mistaken all this time?

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).

The SwissCommunity discussion forum (members. swisscommunity.org) currently includes the following threads:

- Bank accounts for Swiss Abroad
- Affordable ways to use public transport in Switzerland
- Military service for young Swiss Abroad (further to our webinar on the same subject)

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



Fact check

Several readers responded to one of the answers in our election survey (“Swiss Review” 4/2023). We quoted the SVP as follows:

“Compared to other countries, our expatriates have generous voting rights. The Swiss Abroad can take part in elections and popular votes at municipal, cantonal and federal level.”

We have fact-checked this and can say the following: all Swiss Abroad are eligible to vote at federal level. Ten cantons – Basel-Landschaft, Berne, Fribourg, Geneva, Grisons, Jura, Neuchâtel, Schwyz, Solothurn, Ticino – have gone further and allow Swiss Abroad to vote on cantonal matters as well. Participation in municipal votes is only open to Swiss Abroad in the cantons of Basel-Landschaft, Neuchâtel and – to a certain extent – Ticino. (MUL)

Source: Federal Council report of 17 March 2023 on the exercising of voting rights from abroad;
Link: <http://revue.link/stimmrecht>

