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IT experts warn against digitisation for the sake of digitisation

Switzerland needs to go digital to keep up with the times.

Critics are warning against doing so at the expense of users' rights and requirements.

People must still be able to do things offline, they argue.

EVELINE RUTZ

Many people buy books, groceries, clothes and theatre tickets online now. Even moving house, requesting planning permission or paying taxes increasingly entails digital contact with the relevant offices. All sorts of business can now be done conveniently by phone or computer. There is considerable potential for official services to run online – potential that Switzerland has not really tapped into yet. Currently placed 31 in the annual European Union rankings, it lies below the EU average.

The number of online services is quite small. There is no national E-ID (see “Swiss Review” 6/2022). Many of the current IT systems are mutually incompatible; data is rarely gathered in line with set standards. That complicates the seamless exchange of information as well as the use of information for planning, administration and research. The general public realised this when the Confederation had trouble acquiring a real-time overview of the spread of infection during the coronavirus pandemic. It wasn't unusual for medical practices to fax infection numbers to Berne. This provoked a major outcry: administration, politics and the economy pressed for more commitment and urgency. Switzerland had to accelerate its digital conversion to keep up, so they said.

Public administration is coming under pressure to make up the lost ground. “We have no more time to lose,” said Anne Lévy, Director-General of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), when she announced a national funding programme for early 2025. The question is not whether we need to push digitisation in the health sector, “but how quickly we can progress with it and how we can get everyone on the same page”. The Confederation plans to invest 392 million Swiss francs by 2034 solely for digitisation. Other projects are ongoing. The principle “digital first and digital only” is to be implemented consistently at all three state levels.

The smartphone must remain a tool, and not become the only option

However, as calls grow to pick up the pace, other voices are calling for restraint. For example, plans by public transport bosses to make bus and rail ticket sales exclusively digital from 2035 have met with resistance. Many older people do not have a smartphone, as the association of active senior citizens and self-help organisations in Switzerland (Vasos) points out. They need to be able to buy non-digital tickets, with cash. There are also the



hearing and visually impaired to think about. The needs of children and young people must not be forgotten either, asserts youth organisation Pro Juventute. The youngest public transport users need to have the option of buying single journeys offline.

Monica Amgwerd, General Secretary of the Zurich Pirate Party, agrees. “It's not right to force children to buy tickets by smartphone.” The cash option must not be abolished. After all, people may also not want to give out their data all over the place. “Unlike analogue data, digital data can be gathered, evaluated and misused on a large scale,” argues Amgwerd. People need protection against that.

The Zurich Pirate Party wants to enshrine the right to live offline in the cantonal constitution. In August, it put forward the popular initiative “for a basic right to digital integrity”. People in the digital space must be informed and able to act with self-determination. They must not be

Pay for a rail ticket in cash without leaving a data trail? Even the IT savvy are arguing that this should still be possible.

Photo: Keystone

monitored and analysed without their consent. They must not be evaluated by machines and they must be able to count on their online activity being forgotten at some point.

Balancing the pros and cons

It may initially seem surprising that the call for the right to live offline comes from a party with many IT experts in its ranks and that is seen as having a close affinity with technology. “We want people-centric digitisation, which is why we base our approach on fundamental rights – not trends or hype,” says Amgwerd: “It’s in our DNA.” The aim is not to stop digitisation, but it must follow democratic principles. It must serve the people and not individual companies. It takes rules to do that. “We aren’t applying the brakes,” stresses the party general secretary. “We are intervening to raise awareness of human rights.”

Upholding these rights while making digital progress is not impossible, confirms Erik Schönenberger, executive director of the Digital Society. “You can use and protect data – the two are not mutually exclusive.” The idea is to consider all population groups when planning digital projects. As a positive example, Schönenberger recalls how a new concept for an electronic identity was created after the people rejected the original proposal in 2021. The responsible federal office conducted a participatory process to define the new concept. “All perspectives were taken into consideration, so individual actors would not profit financially or assume too much influence.” If everything goes to plan, the E-ID will be introduced in

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Monica Amgwerd, General Secretary of the Zurich Pirate Party



2026. Erik Schönenberger approves of digital projects going to a vote in Switzerland. Fundamentally, it is parliament’s job to meet the needs of the people. But a popular vote triggers important debates and carries more weight: “It has another impact when the people can decide.”

Geneva is the first canton to introduce regulation

Voters in the canton of Geneva have already come out strongly in favour of “constitutional protection in the digital space”. The proposal won 94 per cent of the vote. Digital integrity has also come up in the Federal Palace, with Samuel Bendahan backing national regulation. The aim is to uphold basic rights in the digital sphere, stressed the SP national councillor from the canton of Vaud. It is often unclear how artificial intelligence works and handles sensitive data. It enables new forms of control, monitoring and influence. “People need protection against the different applications of the new technologies.” The federal parliament turned down Bendahan’s motion, but it is still working towards digital integrity. The aim is to enshrine digital integrity in law sooner rather than later.

Monica Amgwerd hopes the Zurich initiative will make its presence felt beyond the canton: “We want the people to engage with the issue and recognise its significance.” In addition, companies, authorities and organisations have to rethink their digitisation strategies, she says. Ultimately, solutions are needed at a national level, “in order to progress digitally in a way that benefits the people first and foremost”.

A delegation from Zurich’s Pirate Party submits their initiative, which calls for the right to live offline to be enshrined in the constitution.
Photo: Keystone