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News From The Secretariat

1st July 2002 marked the 10th Anniversary of the introduction of the postal ballot for federal elections and referenda. This milestone had its beginnings in 1986, when then national councillor Mr Georg Stucky from Zug introduced the relevant motion. It's very appropriate that Mr Stucky is now the president of the Swiss Abroad Organisation (SAO).

In a recent interview with Georg Stucky he analysed the first 10 years of participation of voters from abroad. Some interesting results came to light: accordingly the so-called fifth Switzerland has become a very strong component of Switzerland's political scene.

The present 80,000 registered voters have far surpassed the originally expected registrations to the point that they now have become the fourth biggest Canton. It may therefore not be too surprising that the votes from abroad played a very significant outcome in the recent decision to enter the UN. Figures from the Cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Lucerne, where votes from abroad are counted separately, show that the support from the Swiss abroad averaged just under a whopping 80%, while support from within Switzerland itself was only 54.6%. As for the Cantons in favour (Standemehr) this was won by the barest of margins, namely ONE. AN analysis shows that the "Auslandluzerner" carried the day! Even though postal voting had come a long way, administrative problems still have to be addressed and resolved.

Problems such as an automatic voter registry entry, a centralised voter register rather than one based on one's home country (Gemeinde). For countries with poor mail delivery systems, alternatives have to be found. Internet voting is also still under investigation.

Fixed Dates For Federal Referenda

Up until the present, the Federal Government fixed the four dates on which Referenda were to be held on a year to year basis. Following discussions over an "abstract" plan with interested parties, the go-ahead was given and dates are now being set until 2010. I don't want to bore you with the details of this new plan except to say that it's indeed "abstract".

Federal Elections 2003

Wishes of the fifth Switzerland Article 40 of the Federal Constitution promotes the relationship among compatriots living abroad and the home country. The prerequisite is the compulsory immatriculation abroad.

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) through its representatives the (Delegates) represent appr 600,000 registered compatriots, approximately 10% of the Swiss population. In view of Federal Elections on 19 Oct 2003 the OSA will submit the following matters of interest for the legislative 2003/07 to the various political and other interested parties.

1) The promotion of education of young Swiss Abroad. The simplification of acceptance to places of education and learning as well as the recognition of equal foreign diplomas and study times of equal merit and a guarantee of appropriate support for the 17 Swiss schools abroad through the State (Bund) and Cantons. The funding of Swiss schools in places where there is a sufficient scholastic requirement and a qualified need for a Swiss presence.

2) The simplification of the political participation for the Swiss Abroad. Inclusion of the Swiss Abroad in the development of political parties by way of international sections as well as via the Internet. The promotion of Swiss Abroad candidates for the Federal Assembly. The removal of the remaining hurdles in the execution of political rights from abroad. The centralisation of the voter registry at Cantonal level and the rapid realisation of electronic voting.

3) The expansion of the flow of information between Switzerland and its citizens living abroad. Adequate consideration for the needs of information regarding the revision of the Radio and TV legislation, in particular the obligation of the Schweizer Radio Gesellschaft (SRG) for the production of specific programmes, including to have such programmes produced in the respective foreign language. The availability of sufficient finance information for the Swiss Abroad, in particular for those entitled to vote. This information to be made through the Swiss Revue. Increased use of the lines of communication already established with the Swiss communities, namely to inform the leaders of Swiss Societies and other Swiss institutions as to their role of distributors of information concerning the "Fifth Switzerland".

4) Optimising the consular care for

Swiss communities. Realisation of the Swiss Abroad (Project Vera) while retaining sufficient personnel and the absolute safeguarding of personal data. Development of the net foreign representation and provide adequate care for the Swiss communities. The selection of Honorary Consuls familiar with Swiss affairs as well as the local Swiss communities, providing a better job description and adequate instructions as well as an improved control of performance.

5) The promotion of the Swiss presence Abroad. Continuing improving our presence and image throughout the world and keeping in mind the possible repercussions from international decisions. Systematic co-operation with our Swiss abroad and their institutions. The use of infrastructure and connection with schools abroad as platforms for the promotion and care of our presence.

6) Facilitation of international mobility. Inform the general public of the nominal worth of the international mobility as well as about the economic, social, political and cultural significance to the personal freedom for our country. The total and lasting implementation, both internationally and external of the agreement between Switzerland and the EU with regard to personal mobility. The improvement of international mobility



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by way of removing internal hurdles concerning social and health insurance and the recognition of Diplomas and study times and international agreements with regard to pensions and double taxation.

PS: I've tried to translate this latest info from the Secretariat as accurately as possible. For us oldies, today's modern version of the German language doesn't make much sense, particularly when you come up against words such as "zielspezifische Auslandproduktionen" or "Informatisierung" "der Präsenspflege als Antennen und als Multiplikatoren", I'm sure you all understand what I mean!

Yours
Heinz L.

Swiss capital plays host to UN appeal

The flag of the United Nations flew over the Swiss parliament for the first time recently, as part of the UN's consolidated appeal for funding.

Although Switzerland has only been a UN member for two months, Bern was chosen as one of eight cities around the world to help launch the appeal.

Some of the UN's most senior officials, including the deputy secretary general, Louise Fréchette, came to the Swiss capital to call on donor countries to contribute \$3 billion (SFr4.37 billion) next year in order to alleviate suffering

in some of the most impoverished and conflict-ridden areas of the world.

Thirty countries and regions are being targeted, and in Bern special attention was paid to three in particular; the Caucasus, Guinea, and the Israeli-occupied territories.

"Last year we got 57% of what we asked for. This year we do hope for more than 50 or 60%," said Louise Fréchette, United Nations.

The title for this year's consolidated appeal was "Hope for the future", but as field workers in some of the regions explained, keeping hope alive among people who have suffered decades of conflict is very difficult.

Peter Hansen, the UN's senior official in the occupied territories, pointed out that the refugee crisis in the region first began 52 years ago, and that the occupation itself has now lasted 32 years.

"Hope for these people is small, and flickering," Hansen told his audience, "and it needs to be nurtured."

And Frederick Lyons, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for the northern Caucasus, paid tribute to the many dedicated aid workers in the region, who risk their lives to bring relief to people in need.

Some 57 Russian and expatriate aid workers have been abducted in the past few years, Lyons said.

Although the UN is asking for \$3 billion from donor countries in 2003, it is unlikely to raise that much.

"Last year we got 57 per cent of what we asked for", Louise Fréchette told swissinfo.

"This year we do hope for more than 50 or 60%."

But, Fréchette said, one of the problems with funding was that donor countries tended to focus on areas of need which had received a lot of media attention, whereas other regions with equally serious situations were often forgotten.

"I think it is regrettable that the best publicised regions attract more funds," said Fréchette. "But it is understandable that people's compassion is directed towards the situations they are best informed about. I think the media can help a lot here."

Switzerland, even before it became a UN member, was among the world's 12 biggest donors of aid, contributing SFr280 million annually to the humanitarian activities of the UN and to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Now that the country is a full member of the UN as well as a major donor, foreign minister Joseph Deiss believes the Swiss can offer more than just money.

"I think first and foremost we remain a neutral country," Deiss told swissinfo, "and we hope that this will be an asset within the UN system."

"I think there are three main areas where we can bring added value," he continued.

"Human rights in general, peace promotion, and finally development co-operation. There I think we can bring in things that other countries can't necessarily bring in."

Deiss, long a supporter of Swiss membership of the UN, was clearly pleased that the organisation had selected Bern as one of the cities to launch the appeal.

"Yes, it's certainly a great satisfaction for a country which has been a member for two months now," he said. "Especially after the warm reception we received in New York."

"But above all," he continued, "we hope that this launch will be successful."

source: swissinfo.org



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