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Address by Pascal Couchepin

Address by Pascal Couchepin, President of the Confederation, on the occasion of the Swiss National Day

Dear fellow citizens,

On behalf of my colleagues in the Cabinet and myself, I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all on the occasion of our national celebration.

We all know the importance of these moments of togetherness and I'm very happy to be able to share this particular moment with you.

You are here today because you are closely connected to your country. This link is deeply felt and strong; in this vast, open world in which we live, we all have the need to find our roots.

The world is changing. Science, technology, economy and relationships are all being called into question. These fundamental changes also affect Switzerland. Many citizens are worried about their future and are harking back to the past to what they see as Switzerland's golden era, for answers. But that is a dead-end route.

Switzerland cannot escape big social changes. No one knows better than those of you living abroad that Switzerland has at its disposal all the tools necessary to deal with these changes.

You represent a country, which manages to hold its place in this world fairly well. Seen from the economic point of view, for example, Switzerland is one of the ten most important investors in the world economy. It also strengthened its political position when the Swiss people and the cantons voted in favour of becoming a member of the United Nations.

In Switzerland itself, we have a solid and generous social system. Unemployment

remains low compared with other countries and the education provided in our schools and high schools is excellent.

Switzerland has the power to surprise, even when it is least expected. I can't help but think back to the marvellous achievement of the Alinghi team, who won the America's Cup in the face of competition from many seafaring nations.

Switzerland is a country that is still doing well but it needs to face reforms, especially in the social field. I hope that we can discuss problems freely and without haste. The federal elections this autumn offer a good opportunity for us to have a more in-depth debate.

I want to use this occasion to encourage you to participate in this discussion. You may not live in Switzerland but the problems we face also concern you...

...and you're aware of this fact - more and more of you have been voting by post. In 1991, there were 14,000 Swiss nationals living abroad who were registered on the Swiss electoral register. By 2002, representatives of the 'fifth Switzerland' numbered more than 82,000.

I hope that even more of you will exercise your democratic rights this autumn. As a group, you carry some political weight, because the 600,000 Swiss abroad rank fourth in terms of size after the cantons of Zurich, Bern and Vaud which have the largest populations in Switzerland.

Your participation in the elections is therefore of great significance and will contribute to building a Switzerland that is creative, open and shows solidarity. I hope you enjoy the celebrations.

Introduction to Switzerland for our younger readers or 2nd, 3rd, 4th generation Swiss

Switzerland, for long one of the world's greatest tourist countries, contains within a relatively small area an extraordinary abundance of natural beauties and other attractions, and at the same time, in spite of the country's varied geographical pattern and difference in language, religion and way of life among its inhabitants, offers an admirable example of unity in diversity. The 4000m (13,124ft) peaks of the high Alps and the lesser summits of the Pre-Alpine regions began to attract the first modern tourists - mainly British - during the 19th century; but Switzerland has developed since then into a mecca for visitors of every nationality and every age and condition, who find here accommodation to suit every taste from modest to luxurious, modern tourist facilities and a hospitable welcome.

Geographically, Switzerland is made up of three very dissimilar parts. The south-eastern half of the country consists of the Alps; to the north-west are the Jura Mountains; and between these two mountain regions is the lower-lying Mittelland, extending from Lake Geneva in the south-west, where the Jura beyond the rift valley of the Rhine abuts on the Alpine chain, to Lake Constance in the north-east, beyond which lies the German Alpine foreland region. The total area of the country is divided fairly equally between the Jura and Mittelland on the one hand and the Alps on the other - one half well cultivated and densely inhabited, the other offering the grandeur and beauty of the high mountains.

Source: Baedeker's Switzerland