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Expatriates angered over consular changes

The Council of the Swiss Abroad, founded in 1916, represents the interests of the expatriate community and is considered its official voice. It has called for Switzerland's existing network of consulates across the world to be maintained.

Among the changes at some consulates, services such as long-term and employment visas and services for the Swiss abroad will be handled by other countries. The foreign ministry is also considering setting up mobile consulate services and hiring additional local personnel where required. The reorganisation of Swiss consulates mainly affects countries in Europe, Gerhard Brügger, a senior foreign ministry official, told the assembly.

He said the network was adapting to geographic and demographic needs and would optimise resources. But he did not exclude consulate closures at a later stage.

Several council members harshly criticised the foreign ministry for its plans and the information policy on this issue in particular.

The expatriate assembly has also slammed Swiss banks for imposing high fees for some Swiss abroad keeping an account in Switzerland. The council called on politicians to intervene against what they called "discriminatory treatment".

The assembly also approved a manifesto ahead of October's parliamentary elections and called on the authorities to extend trials for the introduction of electronic voting. It wants e-voting to be in place for Swiss expatriates in all countries of the world by 2015.

There are currently about 700,000 Swiss expatriates (about 10% of the total Swiss population) living mostly in European Union countries. But there is also an important expat community in North America.

The council is made up of 140 members of Swiss expatriates' organisations as well as representatives of institutions and the Swiss public sphere.

Registered Swiss expatriates can take part in nationwide votes and elections since 1977. In 1992 registered Swiss expats were granted the right to vote by postal mail. Trials with electronic voting have been underway since 2005.

To be able to take part in ballots, an expat has to register with the Swiss authorities. The vote counts for the commune she/he lived in before leaving the country; alternatively it is the commune the family originally hails from.

Parliament is set to approve an easing of the registration procedure by October 2011.

Swissinfo received the following feedback from a Swiss living in Switzerland: "And they (the Swiss abroad) pay how much in taxes? If they want it, let them pay for it - not expect us taxpayers to".

Room to grow in Swiss plastic recycling

Switzerland's recycling figures for plastic drink bottles are at an all-time high, but there is no nationwide system for recycling other types of plastic.

The exception is opaque white milk containers, which retailers normally take back along with the omnipresent PET beverage bottles. Packaging for food, cosmetics and other everyday products generally lands in the incinerator.

Plastics are only collected when there's a clear ecological benefit and when it is affordable to do so. The recycled material has to be of a very good quality and it has to be possible to make new products like food packaging.

It is more practical for other plastics to feed the fires of local incinerators. Since 2000, it has been illegal to throw combustible or chemically unstable rubbish into Swiss landfills. All waste is incinerated and so the plastics are contributing mainly to this energy recovery.

Meanwhile, some Swiss communities are making a special effort to recycle a broader range of plastics. The city of Zug has been collecting plastic for several years now. For a while, it experimented with charging residents only SFr1.90 for a 40-litre bag to fill with old shampoo bottles and other plastic waste. That was cheaper than the standard rate for rubbish bags.

However, the pay-to-recycle system never really caught on. So now people can drop off their mixed plastic waste for free. An attendant checks its quality before adding to the pile, which ultimately goes to PlastOil, a local company that makes oil with it.

Bern residents can deposit their plastic waste at eight drop-off points. Last year the city gathered about 250 tonnes of plastic. But with the fluctuating market prices for old plastic it is not always easy for recycling businesses to turn a profit.

A new government-funded study is looking into more ways for Swiss businesses and consumers to recycle plastic.

Redilo, a firm specialising in sustainable resource concepts, is leading the project. In addition to household waste, the project covers industrial items like plastic barrels as well as the plastic sheeting from industry and farmers' silage balls.

The PET project

PET stands for polyethylene terephthalate, a plastic resin and a form of polyester. With an 81% return rate, PET recycling is a success in Switzerland. The motivation is there - a drop below 75% would mean a return to a system of deposits being charged on beverage containers.

However, there is still room for improvement. While 37,543 tonnes of PET bottles were recycled, another 8,806 tonnes either landed in an incinerator or ended up littering the landscape.