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OSA – Meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad

The Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA), met for its biennial meeting at the town hall in Bern on the 10th of March 2018. The meeting followed on an informal exchange with Swiss parliamentarians on Thursday afternoon where a first update on the political issues with relevance for the Swiss Abroad was given.

At the Council meeting the political issues discussed were the unexpected parliamentary proposal to limit welfare benefits, the ongoing difficulties to maintain a Swiss bank account and the delay with the introduction of e-voting. Further agenda items related to procedures and finances of the Organisation of the Swiss abroad and measures to improve communication and representation of the OSA.

Cut to welfare benefits

An agenda item only added a week prior to the meeting was the proposal of a committee of the House of Representatives linking welfare benefits (Ergänzungsleistungen) to 10 years uninterrupted residence status in Switzerland before being able to apply for benefits. 'Ergänzungsleistungen' are benefits paid to Swiss residents in addition to the AHV if the latter (and other income) is not sufficient to guarantee a minimum income. The proposal potentially affects all Swiss in pension age returning to Switzerland from a short or long stay abroad.

In a unanimously adopted resolution the assembly called on parliament to reject the proposal. According to the Council the proposal is not only a breach of legal equality set down in the constitution but also contradicts the increasing international mobility of Swiss citizens. It was also noted that the proposal is not at all in the interest of the Swiss economy, notably the export-oriented sector and companies with subsidiaries abroad. There was some urgency to the resolution as the House of Representatives was due to discuss this proposal a week after the meeting in Bern.

The House of Representatives adopted the proposal of the committee with slight changes on March 15th: In their version, the payment of welfare benefits would not require 10 years uninterrupted residency prior to the request for 'Ergänzungsleistungen'. Required are however 10 years of AHV payments in total. Since a change needs the approval of both chambers the proposal will be discussed by the Council of the States in one of the next parliamentary sessions.

Bank accounts: Agreement with the Cantonal Bank of Geneva

The OSA board announced that the Geneva Cantonal Bank agreed to offer bank accounts to all Swiss expatriates who comply with international regulations. The Geneva

Cantonal Bank has branches not only in the canton of Geneva but also in Zurich. Details for Swiss Abroad are in a separate article and will also be communicated on the OSA website. There is hope that the deal with the Geneva Cantonal Bank will set an example for the whole sector according to OSA president Remo Gysin. He also said that the five major Swiss financial institutions were willing to boost cooperation with the OSA and the government, posting essential client information on the OSA and foreign ministry websites and appointing specialists for Swiss Abroad within their banks. All in all, the political pressure built up over the last years is beginning to pay dividend and some progress after years of deadlock has been made. "The end of the road hasn't been reached yet" said OSA President Remo Gysin and Filippo Lombardi, OSA Vice-President and Member of the Federal Parliament for the canton of Ticino promised that new and amended motions would be launched in parliament if the overall situation does not improve for Swiss expat banking clients in the short future.

Voting recommendations by OSA board or CSA?

A topic intensively discussed between both board and council members was the question whether the board should be able to issue voting recommendations or if this should be in the power of the CSA delegates. The board justified their recommendation for the "NoBillag" initiative, saying there was no time to wait with a recommendation until the council meets. Due to different submissions from the delegates on how to handle this situation in the future further investigations will be made and presented at the next CSA meeting.

Increased concerns about E-Voting

Electronic voting has been a recurring topic at the meetings. Until three years ago, the OSA appeared to be on track with more than half the Swiss cantons offering e-voting. But in August 2015 the government blocked the use of one particular e-vote system due to flaws in guaranteeing voting secrecy. Two years later, in April 2017, the government gave the green light for two systems to be used.

Currently Swiss expats from eight cantons are able to cast their vote online. Due to security issues being raised again several times in parliament over the last few months a debate pro and contra e-voting had been put on the meeting agenda. A lively discussion developed concerning security and the possibility that e-voting could also be hacked in the future. It was also pointed out that no digital system is 100% secure.

The delegates seemed to agree in majority with proponents of e-voting. Support was also given by Federal MP and OSA committee member Carlo Sommaruga. He said that at this stage the majority of the parliament still seems to be in favour of continued efforts to introduce e-voting. He also pointed out that the first trials with e-voting were launched in 2004 in canton Geneva and hacking or manipulation had not been an issue to date. The OSA board reinforced their will to do everything possible for all Swiss expatriates to be able to elect members of the House of Representatives via e-voting in the next parliamentary elections in October 2019.

Automatic Information exchange

Hans-Georg Bosch, South Africa, held a short presentation about the worldwide introduction of the automatic information exchange. Financial institutions pass on personal details of Swiss with residence abroad whereas tax authorities can access this information. The exchange of information goes both ways.

Between Switzerland and New Zealand, information has been collected since 01.01.2018 and should be exchanged as of 01.01.2019.

I have copied a link published by the Swiss Government especially for Swiss living in New Zealand which might be of interest.

https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/countries/countries-content/new-zealand/en/Merkblatt%20AIA_Neuseeland_DE.pdf

Improved representation and communication

Franz Muheim, delegate from the UK and OSA board member, presented findings of his working group to increase representation of the OSA. Topics investigated are inclusion of virtual groups such as Facebook Groups, the integration of the multiple existing communication channels into one platform, cooperation with the Department of Foreign Affairs and the goal to improve image of and goodwill for the Swiss Abroad.

Fondation pour l'histoire des Suisses dans le monde

The Foundation for the History of the Swiss Abroad aims to study and publicize the history of relations between Switzerland and the world. Near Geneva, it has established the Institute and Museum of the Swiss Abroad, the Edouard Marcel Sandoz Centre for Research and Documentation and the Restaurant of the Château de Penthes.

More information available on the website: <http://www.penthes.ch>

The above has been printed with the courtesy and approval of Carmen Trochler, Australian ASO Delegate.
Peter Ehrler Elected Council Member of the Swiss Abroad representing New Zealand.