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Meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad 2017 in Basel



Federal Councillor Alain Berset giving Opening address

About 116 delegates from all over the world assembled in the historic town hall on Friday 18th August for the constituent meeting of the new Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) for the term 2017-2021.

First on the agenda was the election of members of the board of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA). Following the retirement of several long-serving members, two new members from within Switzerland, National Councillors Laurent Wehrli (FDP/VD) and Claudio Zanetti (SVP/ZH), as well as four new members from Overseas, were elected to the executive. All in all, about 30 to 40% of CSA and around half the members of the OSA executive being new to the task one could clearly feel a sense of excitement and vigour. It was noticeable that most of the newly elected members were much younger and I had the impression that there was a fresh wind blowing. From New Zealand both of us elected members were present and from Australia, Beat Knoblauch was the only one attending from the four elected members.

Changes to Social Security

One of the main political agenda items was 'Altersvorsorge 2020' – proposed changes to the social security insurance (AHV/IV) that Swiss voters will decide on 24 September and which will also affect Swiss Abroad.

This issue caused controversy and outrage among many Swiss Abroad recently after Liberal Party (FDP) President Petra Gössi allegedly called for pension cuts for Swiss Abroad, as many of them paid no taxes in Switzerland.

After a short presentation of arguments by a supporter and an opponent of

the proposal, a majority of 80 CSA recommended approval of the amended social security package, 22 came out against it with eight abstentions.

On the supporting side of the argument, Tim Guldemann, a Social Democrat (SP) Member of Parliament and CSA from Germany, said the proposal was a balanced compromise and would be beneficial to the increasing Swiss Abroad community. He added that the compromise solution approved by parliament in March came with a price, notably for the younger generation and women. But the reform would also result in a slight increase in payments for all new pensioners and additional legal guarantees for certain groups of expats.

"The urgently needed reform would be blocked for years, if it is rejected by voters," he warned. Previous attempts to adapt the social security system to the demographic changes of an aging society have all failed over the past two decades.

Presenting the opposing camp, François Baur of the Swiss Business Federation and a member of the Liberal Party (FDP), said the proposal was not sustainable and too costly. "We will have the same funding problems again in 2035 at the latest," he said.

The money needed for the reform, notably through an increase in value-added tax (VAT), should be used to boost education, according to Baur.

Swiss Banks

The Assembly once again discussed the controversial policy of Swiss banks towards Swiss Abroad clients, following numerous complaints about discriminatory business practices.

Roland Rino Büchel, a Swiss Peoples' Party (SVP) parliamentarian and executive member of the CSA, said it was important to keep up pressure on the government and notably demand that PostFinance, the financial service unit of the state-owned Swiss Post, must offer services to Swiss expatriates under reasonable conditions. He said he was confident that parliament was willing to take action now.

A resolution lodged by a CSA from Hungary calling for legal action against PostFinance for alleged discrimination against Swiss Abroad, was withdrawn in favour of increased political pressure.

At the moment there are a further two motions at parliament, asking the government to reform regulations, providing services, including credit cards of the state-owned Post Finance, with the same conditions as Swiss residents.

The first motion filed on the 16th June 2017 by Senator Filippo Lombardi (CVP/TI) who is vice-president of the OSA and also vice-president of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Council of States, calls for a guarantee that Swiss expats can open accounts with major finance institutions, banks considered "too big to fail". 35 Senators from a total of 46 Senators have signed the motion.

A second motion heading the same way was filed on the 3rd of July 2017 by the National Council's Foreign Affairs Committee on the recommendations and proposal from National Council member Laurant Wehrli (FDP/VD)

Both motions require approval by the two parliamentary chambers. It is the latest political attempt to improve conditions for Swiss citizens living outside the country. The community has been the target of excessive fees over the past decade. The Council of the Swiss Abroad has repeatedly called on the government, the Swiss Banking Association and the banking regulator to find a solution to the problems, the OSA said in a statement. Previous efforts in parliament have failed, prompting outrage among the Swiss Abroad community.

E-voting

A snapshot of the current state of e-voting was presented. It is expected that for the federal election in 2019, two thirds of cantons will have introduced e-voting for all Swiss voters. So far eight cantons have been approved by the Federal Council to use e-voting (Geneva, Basel-City, Lucerne, Bern, Aargau, St. Gallen, Neuchâtel and Fribourg). Further 'encouragement' will have to be given to some cantons that are lagging behind in developing e-voting for their citizens.

A report analysing the e-voting pilot project to elect the CSA in Australia and Mexico was presented. The project can be regarded as a great success as no notable problems were encountered and the benefits were substantial. Apart from being an important step forward in modernising and democratising the

OSA

election process of the CSA, it also significantly improved the visibility and popularity of the CSA and OSA in those countries.

Cooperation OSA – swissinfo.ch

The OSA and swissinfo.ch have agreed to increase cooperation. A deal between the OSA and the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), the parent company of swissinfo.ch, foresees a regular exchange of editorial content provided by swissinfo.ch and by the Swiss Review magazine, which is published by the OSA.

There are projects to strengthen cross-promotion on social media as well as a joint presence at special events, including for National Day celebrations, to increase visibility for both partners. Synergies could also be used for online marketing, according to a statement by the SBC.

Centenary of the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA)

The Foundation was created in 1917 in order to allow Swiss children living in disaster-torn areas abroad to spend

a couple of weeks respite with host families in Switzerland. The President of FYSA, Philippe Vuillemin, presented an overview of the charity. More details are available under: <http://sjas.ch/en/Congress of the Swiss Abroad>

Around 400 participants attended the annual Congress of the Swiss Abroad on Saturday. Keynote speaker and guest of honour was Interior Minister Alain Berset who highlighted the experience and expertise of Swiss citizens living around the world and pointed out the truth behind Swiss clichés.

“Switzerland doesn’t lose anything if its citizens go and live in another country, on the contrary, Switzerland benefits from its expats and the world benefits from them too,” said Berset. Referring to the OSA, he said it’s crucial to have an organisation, which makes the link with the expat community and understands its special perspective on Switzerland. He also pointed out Switzerland’s traditions, its assets and its values, including its political diversity.

Regarding next month’s nationwide vote on a reform of the old age

pension scheme, Berset highlighted a key political value: The ability to find compromises and seek a consensus between different groups.

Peter Ehrler

Elected Member of the Swiss Abroad Representing New Zealand

Big & Little (Der grosse Sommer)

The great Swiss actor Mathias Gnädinger in his last leading role as “Schwingerkönig”

The Embassy of Switzerland in New Zealand is pleased to announce that on the occasion of the German Film Festival the Swiss movie Big & Little (Der grosse Sommer) by director Stefan Jäger will be screened as follows:

**Dunedin Sunday, 1 October, 12pm
New Plymouth Sunday, 8 October, 4:00pm**

“The film tells – in a humorous and touching way – the story of a struggle between two vastly different characters and how they develop a deep friendship.”

Text: Tellfilm

For further information on venues, tickets and other movies, please refer to our website (Agenda).

The movie is suited for families and will be screened in Swiss German with English subtitles.



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Assistant to the Ambassador and the Counsellor

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- experience in a public administration or a private company in New Zealand
- fluent in English and one Swiss language (G/F/I)
- understanding of a second Swiss language
- strong computer skills including MS Office
- executive support (time/diary / travel / meetings/ dinners / projects / invitations organisation and management)
- preparing correspondence and taking of minutes
- readiness to work irregular hours when required
- Swiss citizenship very welcome, but not a condition
- Applicants should have NZ residency or a valid NZ work visa

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Applications containing a motivation letter and CV must be received by 20 October by **Mr. Jürg Bono**, Counsellor and Head of personnel who is also glad to answer questions regarding this opening.