

SWISS REVIEW

The magazine for the Swiss Abroad
October 2021

The Swiss healthcare system is struggling: the warning signs are there

The village of Uetendorf, far from the Swiss national border and yet marked by boundaries

The controversial hero of Swiss cannabis smokers: Bernard Rappaz, hemp farmer and the bane of authority

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It is a big number as well as being entirely abstract: 82,000,000,000 Swiss francs. This is the sum spent on Swiss healthcare every year. Is it a lot or not that much?

The best way to answer that question is to break down the figure into something more tangible: Swiss healthcare costs 800 francs per person every month. Or 3,200 francs for the average family of four – every month. A significant portion of these costs comes

straight out of the family budget. This makes obligatory healthcare premiums in Switzerland impressively – or, depending on a person's income, depressingly – high. At the same time, Swiss healthcare is not just expensive but also of excellent quality by international standards. Nevertheless, it is still anything but perfect.

The "care" in Swiss healthcare is increasingly falling by the wayside as workers are being pushed ever closer to their limits, something that was the case even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressure has become unhealthy. Moreover, as an ageing society demands more of its healthcare system, this pressure is only going to increase in the future. Healthcare workers are putting their own health at risk, as reported in this edition's Focus article.

A popular initiative calling for an overhaul of the healthcare system will go to a vote on 28 November. The initiative calls for an increase in staffing numbers and a major increase in investment in training for the sector. Hardly anyone claims that the demands are entirely without justification. At the same time, the initiative presents a dilemma: increasing staffing numbers would make healthcare even more expensive – and there is no known remedy to heal all the ailments of the Swiss healthcare system.

Many Swiss Abroad have another adverse development to contend with additionally. Since the Federal Council broke off negotiations with the European Union over a framework agreement, many Swiss Abroad, especially those living in the EU, fear that they will be disadvantaged at some point. This is adding to the resentment that many people in the "Fifth Switzerland" have regarding the difficulties they face when registering their votes in Swiss elections.

Therefore, the message for the newly elected President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, Ticino politician Filippo Lombardi, and for the radically overhauled Council of the Swiss Abroad is clear: their first duty is to deal with a couple of familiar challenges.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Are Swiss 16-year-olds ready to vote?



I know many 16-year-olds whose maturity far exceeds that of people twice their age, including some politicians. I am 70 years old and notice that young people are far better informed about world events than I was at their age. It is young people who are taking the lead on climate change, the most pressing issue of our time. So I fully support the lowering of the voting age to 16.

RICHARD JAKOB-HOFF, NEW ZEALAND

I don't think it's a good idea as young people are more easily influenced the younger they are. This is like manna for extreme political parties looking to win more votes. It would be heading towards a slippery slope which could knock the country into endless political turmoil...

RENAUD WICKY, BALI, INDONESIA

Absolutely it should be lowered. At the very least, at the local and regional level. There is no reason why it can't be implemented, while keeping other things a little bit older, for example, you can do federal participation and running for office when you are also required for military or civil service. All of these things should be reassessed with a view towards the future.

MARC SPARGNAPANI, USA

I think very few people are political at the age of 16. Teenagers like to party, but ask them about politics and they will stare at you blankly. The voting age should remain at 18.

KARIN KRÄUCHI, GRAZ, AUSTRIA

First of all – what a very interesting topic. Giving 16-year-olds the vote is a good idea. People will argue for and against. The most important thing is that young people develop a feeling of responsibility for their country. We must show that we trust them.

ÖNDER ERDOGAN, TURKEY

Absolutely no, I'm from Argentina where they lowered it for one simple reason: underage people don't think about their future and they are easily attracted by ideas that sound good but in practice will doom your country. They are not mature enough to analyse and take decisions over economic and political matters.

AXEL HALLEY, IRELAND

The vote at 16, yes, to take into account the aspirations of younger people. We rely on them to improve on our mistakes. Those who are against it are looking to selfishly protect their own advantages. It would also be interesting to spend more time at school talking about business and companies, political structures, the running of household finances, etc.

JEAN PIERRE MAIRE, SPAIN

Giving 16-year-olds the vote is irresponsible. Young people at that age are not mature enough and can be influenced to an extent that would make fair decisions at the ballot box an impossibility. You need a certain amount of life experience to make important decisions. Democracy at the ballot box not only means looking after your own interests – it also means doing something for the general good.

RENATO BESOMI, JAVEA, SPAIN

Are 16-year-olds really incapable of exercising a political voice? Democratic politics is essentially all about representing the interests of the people. Are we suggesting that the interests of 16-year-olds are less relevant than those of older people? Are they less important? A glance around the globe makes me more inclined to think that the opposite is true, and to wonder whether it would make more sense to have a maximum voting age instead.

ARYE-ISAAC OPHIR, ISRAEL

Was I ready to vote when I was 18, I don't know. Would I have voted at 16 if allowed to, well yes. Would I vote the same way now that I am four times older, likely not. So what could be the objections against voting at 16? The biggest problem I encountered in voting at 18 was the lack of information. Nowadays more information is at hand and there is no reason to say that a 16-year-old person cannot make a rational decision. Is it possible that we are not comfortable reducing the voting right to 16 as it will rock the boat too much? I would support lowering the voting age to 16 any time.

KURT FEHLMANN, AUSTRALIA

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Swiss healthcare on the brink of intensive care

Switzerland has an ageing population with more and more people suffering from complex health issues. This represents an enormous challenge for the country's celebrated health sector. A dearth of well-trained staff exacerbates matters. People in the nursing profession have a lot on their plate – and are struggling to cope.

EVELINE RUTZ

Swiss healthcare is in trouble. Costs are rising, reform is hitting the buffers, and a skilled workforce is in short supply. Nurses had already been voicing concern before Covid, complaining of poor working conditions and a lack of appreciation. After one and a half years of the pandemic, they are now physically and emotionally exhausted (see also "Swiss Review" 4/2021). But the pressure continues to build, as demographic and social factors aggravate the situation. Forecasts predict that the shortfall in nurses is likely to be around 65,000 by 2030. Employee associations and health experts warn of an emergency – which the "Strong healthcare" popular initiative aims to avert. This initiative will be put to the people on 28 November 2021.

Staff attrition

Around 214,200 people work in the nursing profession in Switzerland – mostly at hospitals (45 per cent) and care homes (41 per cent). The remaining 14 per cent work in the home care sector. Many nurses work part-time, because the demands of a full-time position are simply too

great. Shift rotas make it harder for them to have any sort of private and family life. The work is physically and mentally draining. And cost-cutting pressure across the sector has led to minimal staffing and a focus on efficiency above all else. Nurses often have little time to respond to individual needs or make small talk with patients. They find it hard to come to terms with the fact that they are unable to do their job the way they want. Many leave the profession early. A third of those who do so are younger than 35.

Foreign workers plug the gaps

Never before have there been so many job vacancies in the Swiss healthcare sector. HR departments are finding it hard to fill positions and often resort to recruiting people from abroad. At the Children's Hospital of Eastern Switzerland, for example, 42 per cent of doctors are Swiss, 36 per cent are German and eight per cent are Austrian. However, 86 per cent of the qualified nursing staff are Swiss. The university hospitals of Zurich and Lausanne, on the other hand, rely much more on foreign workers, who account for around 60 and 50 per cent



When healthcare professionals are in short supply, the human side of nursing is often neglected. This trend will become more pronounced as society ages. Photo: Keystone

of the nursing staff respectively. It is also becoming increasingly common for private households to employ carers from Germany and eastern Europe. These women work virtually around the clock, earn relatively little, and return to their home countries after a few months.

The practice of plugging staffing gaps with foreign workers is problematic for ethical reasons. Switzerland is relying on people whom other countries have trained – and then lost. It will become harder to recruit workers from abroad in future, because other countries are now doing more to keep their best people. Nevertheless, staffing needs in Switzerland will continue to grow strongly, not least because of an ageing population.

Wealth of knowledge, minimal autonomy

In terms of the number of nurses per 1,000 inhabitants, Switzerland fares well compared to other countries. But according to Rebecca Spirig, professor at the Institute of Nursing Science at the University of Basel, it would be wrong to assume the sector is in a comfortable position: “We need to consider the whole picture. How do we deploy our

nurses?” In Germany, for example, responsibility for wound care moved to the nursing sector only a few years ago, while administering injections and infusions is part of every nurse’s basic training in Switzerland. In the USA, nurse practitioners are responsible for providing primary care to the general public. And the Dutch have established their “Buurtzorg” (neighbourhood care) model, where teams of nurses are more or less free to advise and treat patients and make all the clinical and operational decisions themselves, accessing support from other specialists where necessary.

Predominant doctors

“Switzerland does not lead the way,” says Spirig. Its health system relies heavily on doctors. “Our nurses have great expertise but are rarely able to make their own decisions.” For example, patients in Switzerland even need a doctor’s prescription for minor things like wearing compression tights. Swiss healthcare also has layers of complexity. Anyone living at home with care requirements usually deals with a variety of specialists. Home nurses will change bandages, care for wounds

“Pflege macht krank” (healthcare is bad for you): on 12 May 2021, healthcare professionals marched in protest through the streets of Basel with placards bearing slogans to express their displeasure. Such protests had already been happening on a regular basis before the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: Keystone



The public pays a lot

Healthcare services are expensive in Switzerland and are paid for mainly by the people who use them. In 2018, the bill was 798 francs per capita per month. Private households bore 63 per cent of the costs, with compulsory health insurance premiums covering just under half of the costs. The government covered around 30 per cent, according to the Federal Statistical Office. Health expenditure as a share of GDP has risen significantly in recent decades, accounting for 11.2 per cent in 2018 – one of the highest proportions in Europe. The USA easily topped the list on 16.9 per cent, followed by Germany (11.5 per cent) and France (11.3 per cent). Spain recorded 9.0 per cent and Ireland 6.9 per cent. The fact that costs are increasing is a source of concern for many in Switzerland – healthcare and health insurance consistently rank high on the annual Credit Suisse Worry Barometer. For the record: the highest costs in Switzerland are related to hospital stays, the lowest to preventive medicine. (ERU)

and help with personal hygiene. Doctors will make diagnoses, provide treatment and prescribe therapies. Physiotherapists or occupational therapists will do the rest. “We have a lack of uniform structures and processes in outpatient care,” says Ursula Meidert of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW). There is often insufficient consultation. This can lead to duplication of effort or gaps in care as well as the wrong care.

Quality varies considerably

Like many other aspects of Swiss life, the healthcare sector has a federal structure. Federal government makes the guidelines, which the cantons then implement. The cantons delegate certain tasks to the municipalities, who in turn are partially responsible for long-term care as well as outpatient care for the elderly. Hence the availability of medical and social services varies considerably from place to place, as does the effectiveness with which these services work together.

Prescriptions to avert an emergency



Since the pandemic began, the public has certainly become more conscious of the work that carers put in around the clock. The “Strong healthcare” popular initiative aims to give nurses a shot in the arm. It will be put to the people on 28 November.

For years, nurses have been calling for better working conditions, greater recognition and more autonomy. The Swiss professional association of nurses (SBK-ASI) now wants to take matters into its own hands at the ballot box. “Our health system will be on the brink of intensive care itself if we fail to make our profession more attractive,” says SBK-ASI director Yvonne Ribi. Supporters of the initiative want greater investment in education and further training. For example, they say that apprentice wages need to be increased to boost the number of graduates entering the profession.

The initiative also wants more people working per shift to ensure quality as well as patient safety. Rotas and working hours have to be more family friendly. In future,

nurses need greater scope to prescribe, carry out and invoice certain treatments themselves. “Giving nurses more responsibility will ease the pressure on doctors,” says nursing academic and initiative committee member Rebecca Spirig.

Counterproposal to promote training

Policymakers have lent nurses a sympathetic ear. The federal parliament has approved a counterproposal, favouring a strategy that promotes training. Almost 500 million Swiss francs from the federal coffers has been earmarked for the proposal, with the cantons set to match this amount. That is too little, says the initiative committee. It believes that more is needed if carers are to

have greater job satisfaction and stay longer in the nursing profession. The campaigners also want higher staffing ratios. Hence voters will have the last word on 28 November. The Federal Council and majorities in the National Council and Council of States oppose the initiative. They are unwilling to afford nurses special treatment in the federal constitution. Health insurers also belong to the no camp, unhappy that the initiative would allow nurses to prescribe certain medical services themselves. They warn that this would lead to more frequent treatments and additional costs. The opposite is true, counter supporters. Not having to rely on a doctor’s signature all the time will save time and money, they say. (ERU)

Efforts are being made to make primary care more interconnected and efficient – not least in rural areas, where group practices have sprung up, pooling together different specialist areas. Models involving top-quality home care providers and a seamless interface with inpatient care also exist. These receive a degree of public funding. “We have evaluated some good solutions,” says Spirig. But there is a lack of political will to promote and implement these models across Switzerland, she adds. Meidert shares this view: “Many authorities only act when all other options have been exhausted.”

Stakeholders pursuing their own interests

The complexity of the system makes it harder to form correlations and initiate fundamental reform in the long term. Indecision seems to reign among national policymakers, who often get caught up in matters of principle and are rarely able to compromise. Many proposed improvements fail to get past parliament, where key stakehold-

ers like the Swiss Medical Association, health insurers, and the pharmaceutical industry have a notable lobby. But voters also tend to be sceptical of reform proposals. In 2012, for example, the electorate rejected a plan that aimed to improve the coordination and quality of primary care. Those who oppose innovative solutions warn of higher costs, reflecting a common concern (see adjacent text, “The public pays a lot”). However, studies suggest that uniform structures and efficient processes help to keep the costs in check. Once the various professions work together more effectively, staff will also be happier and remain in healthcare for longer. Rebecca Spirig, who is one of the committee members tabling the popular initiative, hopes that a yes vote will help to boost collaboration. “It would pave the way for reforms not only in nursing but within healthcare as a whole,” she says.

From zeroes to heroes

The sight of Swiss international Xherdan Shaqiri consoling his distraught young teammate Ruben Vargas touched many of us this summer. Standing behind the two was the fatherly figure of Vladimir Petkovic, the national coach already looking as if he had processed what was a painful end to Switzerland's Euro 2020 campaign.

They almost did it. After holding Spain to a one-all draw after 120 minutes of football in the quarter-finals, Switzerland were a penalty shoot-out away from reaching the last four. Alas, it was not to be. Vargas was not the only Swiss player to fail from the spot, but his miss was decisive.

It marked the emotional end of a rollercoaster campaign – for players and fans alike. At the beginning of Euro 2020, the Swiss public was less than enamoured with its multicultural national side. Petkovic's men were derided as pampered, overpaid prima donnas whose expensive cars and dyed hair meant more to them than giving their all on the pitch. Two victories later, and everything was fine. Switzerland managed to knock overconfident favourites France out of the tournament in a pulsating encounter. Back at home, Shaqiri and co. were no longer pariahs but heroes for progressing further in the competition than ever before.

Be that as it may, coach Petkovic – much criticised, now suddenly fêted – stepped down from his post a few weeks later to join French club Bordeaux. By which time Ruben Vargas's tears had probably dried.

JÜRIG STEINER

Granit Xhaka



Xherdan Shaqiri, Vladimir Petkovic

Yann Sommer



Ruben Vargas



Silvan Widmer, Ruben Vargas



Bernard Rappaz, self-proclaimed Winkelried of cannabis

The pugnacious hemp farmer from Valais, Bernard Rappaz, returned to the media spotlight with a brand of legal cannabis. But the adventure was cut short. Having experienced both fame and prison, the rebel has withdrawn to the village of Isérables. The plant to which he has devoted his life is now booming.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

The name Bernard Rappaz was back in the news a few months ago in Geneva, with Holyweed, a brand specialising in the sale of CBD: cannabis without the high. One salesperson was eager to sing the praises of the Swiss organic produce. And to cite the name of the famous Valais hemp farmer as a partner in the company. Upon enquiry, it was found that the commercial interest of the herald of hemp, or the dealer of the century, depending on

your opinion, had come to an end. “I left the company. I asked that my name no longer be associated with this brand,” clarified Rappaz.

Cannabis, which led to the fall of the Valais hemp farmer, is back on the Swiss scene. Hemp production has greatly increased thanks to the release of CBD. Between 2008 and 2020, the area dedicated to this crop has grown from six to 320 hectares, according to the Swiss Farmers’ Union. Ironically, Switzerland is set to begin

testing the distribution of marijuana, which will serve as a further boost to the cultivation of this illegal plant.

Adventurer is the best word to describe this child of Saxon, who comes from an agricultural family, and who transitioned from growing apricots to growing cannabis in the 1990s. Media attention, arrests, prison, trials, appeals: this cannabis sativa activist has lived a wild life. “Rappaz? He’s an excellent agitator,” comments sociologist Gabriel Bender from Valais, men-

tioning a protest during his time in prison because his peers were not receiving enough fruit. “We are deprived of freedom, not dessert,” Rappaz had declared. “He inhales smoke and blows it out as well,” continues the local history expert, setting the Bernard Rappaz saga within the curious history of Saxon. Since the 1960s, this commune has been led by a party that came from the Union des producteurs valaisans (Union of producers in Valais). It set itself apart with its support for union action against the influx of agricultural products from Italy, against fluorine pollution and against the installation of hydroelectric plants on the Rhone River. In the 1970s, in need of workers for the harvest, Saxon saw the arrival of the hippies. The Sapinhaut festival, which was created at this time, brought together people who were against the military, the clergy, etc. “Everything that made conservatives in Valais bristle,” comments Bender. This is the setting in which Bernard Rappaz grew up.

Withdrawal to Isérables

The individual who claimed that cannabis came somewhere between coffee and cigarettes is now living in a two-room home in the isolated village of Isérables, supported by his old-age and survivor’s insurance. His home offers an unobstructed view over the plain where, from the beginning of the 1990s, he began planting and distributing cannabis. “The more THC there was, the better,” admits the Saxon native, who still grows plants on his balcony. “The polite neighbours tell me I have beautiful geraniums,” he says. When he arrived in Isérables in 2016, Bernard Rappaz received a visit from the president of the municipality,

suspicious of the individual. He began by telling him that his car was wrongly parked. Next, the local priest stopped by, accompanied by a sacristan. The men had a drink together, before leaving for mass. Since then, the ex-prisoner has gained acceptance within the community. What does the former organic farmer think of CBD and the attempts to distribute marijuana? “I tried producing cannabis that was low in THC myself, but the profit margin was not high. In Valais, a small portion of vineyards could be replaced by cannabis. It’s a plant which grows easily and without plant protection products. Its production has to remain Swiss and natural.”

Ten years in prison

The hemp farmer highlights the problems with indoor cultivation, which is extremely energy-intensive. “I am go-

ing to write to the Confederation to ask that cannabis grown for clinical trials be stamped as natural Swiss produce,” he declares passionately. Does he miss the media spotlight? “For a supporter of Buddhism like me, ego is the worst enemy,” he answers. What was his experience of prison? “I began at 19, for refusing to pay military tax. All in all, I must have spent ten years in prison. Prison is scary, because it’s the unknown, but I got used to it.” At the Crêtelongue prison in the Rhone valley, the farmer taught prisoners to prune fruit trees. The man has used hunger strikes as a weapon: “I beat all the records, not eating for 120 days.” In his youth, Bernard Rappaz also participated in a raid on a bank. The result: 42 months in prison.

On his farm in Charrat, named l’Oasis (the Oasis), the hemp farmer played with the ambiguities of the law. His hemp went out in the form of



Not his first or last time in handcuffs: Bernard Rappaz on trial in Martigny in 2011.

Archive photo: Keystone

The Confederation is to test the dispensing of marijuana

The Confederation is in the process of supervising the implementation of pilot trials in the distribution of cannabis for non-medicinal purposes. In 2020, the decision sparked resistance from SVP and CVP senators. "Cannabis is more harmful than tobacco and the number of people dependent on it is constantly on the rise," argued Peter Hegglin (CVP/ZG). Public bodies will participate in this cannabis distribution under the umbrella of the Federal Office of Public Health. In Geneva, for example, the university has been mandated to lead trials planned to commence in 2022.

The studies will notably provide information on the effects of controlled access to cannabis on the physical, psychic and social health and well-being of consumers. Tons of cannabis containing THC will be required. The Confederation aims for Swiss products, organic "if possible", cultivated thanks to legal exemptions. (SH)

hemp, for a total revenue of five million Swiss francs. Rappaz also possessed a "gigantic" stock of hemp in a factory in Chavalon, around 52 tons, with a market value of 35 million francs. The sentence was upheld on appeal.

A seemingly strict sentence

The former conscientious objector disputes the court verdicts and regrets nothing. "I have dedicated my life to defending a plant which has been made illegal for the wrong reasons, and to testing and demonstrating its multiple uses: therapeutic, recreational and industrial," he says. For Aba Neeman, his lawyer since 1995, "the courts in Valais wanted to get rid of him by giving him a long sentence, because each time he completed a period of imprisonment for hemp growing, he started with cannabis again". At that time, a liberal wind was softening attitudes towards cannabis, "but judges apply the law, and do not take account of political considerations".

For someone who claims to be inspired by Gandhi, the accusation of bodily injury seems surprising. Neeman confirms that the event appears to have consisted of a few slaps given to a young girl whilst Rappaz was on a trip to Laos with a female friend. Was his client drunk on money? His lawyer considers that "he is not venal; he is an idealist. He was constantly in debt and he was negligent with his business."

Gabriel Bender notes that, "Rappaz was imprisoned for years for cannabis, whilst the Valais wine producer Dominique Giroud, convicted for tax evasion, has not served a single year. It is an archaic system. In order to sanctify someone who drinks wine, you have to sacrifice someone who smokes cannabis." A journalist from Geneva who interviewed the hemp farmer recalls a character who was very focused on himself. "Rappaz was isolated", he considers. "I put myself out in front, a bit like Winkelried," says Rappaz, comparing himself to the legendary Swiss hero.

cushions, infusions, oils and fibres. Doctors signed prescriptions for the purchase of products containing THC. But things changed in 2006. The Valais farmer was condemned to five years and eight months imprisonment by the district court of Martigny for serious breach of the Narcotics Act, as well as for bodily injury, money laundering, serious breach of road traffic rules and breach of various social security laws. Between 1997 and 2001, according to the prosecutor, writes "Le Nouvelliste", the Saxon farmer, who was "the biggest cannabis trafficker in Switzerland", had set up a "colossal" drug trafficking system. During this period, he had illegally sold five tons of recreational

Pensioner Rappaz at home in Iséables. Not surprisingly, he prefers cannabis to geraniums on his balcony.

Photo: Stéphane Herzog



“Window into a more civilised world”

In his 1967 work “Das Boot ist voll” (The boat is full), Alfred A. Häsler shone a light on the shameful way in which Switzerland treated refugees between 1933 and 1945.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Alfred A. Häsler, who was born in Wilderswil (canton of Berne) on 19 March 1921 and died in Zurich on 7 April 2009, would have been 100 this year. Like no other Swiss author of the 20th century, he used the media of newspapers and television to highlight great role models who epitomised the free and ethical thinking that constitutes the essential foundation of any credible democracy. Häsler was a well-known figure for different generations – thanks to his interviews in the newspaper “Tat” and on Swiss television with such personalities as Karl Barth, Jeanne Hersch and Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker.

The fate of refugees

However, Häsler’s greatest legacy was “Das Boot ist voll” (The boat is full) – the 1967 work based on a series of articles in “Tat”, in which the author recounted the fate of refugees who fled the Nazi regime but were turned away from Switzerland in many cases – telling their stories in a way that hit the national psyche with palpable force. Moreover, by no means was Häsler one of those who only criticised Switzerland’s inhumane refugee policy after the event. Back in 1939, the then 18-year-old typographer’s apprentice published passionate pleas for his country to rediscover its humanitarian tradition of providing asylum. Häsler founded his own clandestine newspaper, “Stimme der Wahrheit” (Voice of Truth), in 1943 after growing tired of censorship. And he became one of the first Swiss to visit the Auschwitz concentration camp after the borders reopened – an experience that shook him to the core.

Career as an interviewer

Häsler soon had the opportunity to practise what he preached, accompanying repeated aid shipments to Eastern Europe – where he met his wife Zofia Pawliszewska, a woman who had saved many Jews from the Nazis during the Warsaw Uprising. The circumstances that led to him being arrested for embezzlement of donations and made a communist scapegoat in a highly politicised court case in 1948 are still unclear. But instead of disappearing with-

out a trace, Häsler was able to launch his career as an interviewer for “Tat” – thanks to the newspaper’s chief editor Erwin Jaeckle.

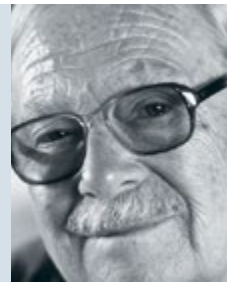
Learning from history

Everything that Häsler subsequently wrote, thought and campaigned for was founded on a promise that he made to himself in 1946 in the horrific aftermath of the Nazi atrocities. He said in 1997: “At Auschwitz, I made a pact with myself to do everything in my power as a writer and speaker to prevent a repeat of what happened – and what we let happen – in 20th-century Christian Europe due to too many states and nations, Switzerland included, looking the other way. It is a pact we should all make.”

Häsler, armed with nothing more than a primary school education, rubbed shoulders with the leading intellectuals and thinkers of his time. But he always remained true to himself. “I never intended to write academic biographies or become a cultural critic. All I wanted was to give contemporary figures a platform and, if possible, provide a window into a more civilised world.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Das Boot ist voll” is available from Diogenes as a paperback.

For years, literary scholar and journalist Charles Linsmayer’s pieces in this magazine have focused on Swiss authors abroad. Linsmayer is now expanding his range to cover Swiss-based writers as well.



“We must always remember the past. It should be a part of our lives. This is what history is all about, isn’t it? Of course, we must consider what the past means in the here and now – in the knowledge that events such as the Holocaust, or the Second World War with the enormous devastation that it caused, also hinge on people like you and me to a certain extent. In other words, do we say yes or no? Can we reject destruction and open our hearts to the creative forces in this world?”

Alfred A. Häsler speaking to newspaper “Der Bund” on 6 May 1995

The weather extremes of climate change

Hail and floods instead of hot and sunny – summer 2021 was a wet affair in Switzerland. Climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme weather events.

THEODORA PETER

While southern Europe sweltered in a heatwave, it rained almost non-stop in Switzerland this summer. The downpours – torrential at times – caused streams, rivers and lakes to burst their banks. Emergency services were on continuous alert, putting out sandbags and erecting barriers to keep the worst of the floods at bay. Switzerland was spared the brunt of the July floods that devastated entire valleys and claimed hundreds of lives in Germany and Belgium. However, the weather resulted in damage running into several hundreds of millions of Swiss francs. Farms were badly affected, as vegetables rotted on flooded fields. Hail ripped through entire vineyards and fruit plantations within a matter of hours. The only plus side was that the constant rain replenished reservoirs such as Lac de Brenets in the Jura, which had dried out completely in 2020. Forests were also able to recover from the effects of previous droughts.

Warning from the IPCC

From torrential rain to heatwaves – extreme weather will become more frequent and even more extreme in future. This is the conclusion reached by more than 200 scientists from 66 countries, including Switzerland, in the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was published in August. Since the previous report in 2014, the effects of human-induced climate change have become even more evident as global warming continues to accelerate. Global temperatures have risen by 0.2°C in the last seven years alone. This may not seem like a lot, but every tenth-of-a-degree increase leads to even more extreme weather around the globe. Switzerland is especially affected by climate change, as temperatures here are rising almost twice as quickly as the global average. Back in 2018, the “Climate Scenarios for Switzerland” report provided detailed indications of how unchecked climate change may affect Switzerland, citing more frequent and intense heavy rainfall as one of the consequences. Since 1901, the level of precipitation associated with extreme rainfall events in Switzerland has increased by 12 per cent. This is because warmer air can hold more moisture – equating to some six to seven per cent more water for every degree Celsius rise in temperature.



These properties were in the lake instead of next to it in July: heavy and sustained rainfall raised water levels to record highs, such as in Lake Biel.

Photo: Keystone

CO₂ emissions must fall

As we know, greenhouse gases drive climate change. According to the IPCC report, CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere in 2019 were 47 per cent higher than at the beginning of the industrial age – and higher than at any other time in the last two million years. Only if CO₂ emissions fall sharply in the coming years and reach net zero by 2050 will it be possible to keep global warming under the two-degree threshold set out in the Paris climate goals, warn experts. However, even just a 1.5°C increase will likely lead to more frequent heavy rain events as well as “unprecedented” heatwaves.

How serious is the international community about delivering on climate action? We will find out in November, when the next UN climate conference takes place in Glasgow.

[revue.link/climatescenarios](https://www.revue.link/climatescenarios)
www.ipcc.ch

Borders far away, borders in the mind

No other municipality in Switzerland is situated further from an international border than Uetendorf near Thun in the canton of Berne. Moreover, this typical Swiss suburban municipality lies on the urban-rural divide.

JÜRIG STEINER

As if preordained by Mother Nature some 14,000 years ago, there is something unique about Uetendorf's geographical whereabouts. When the Aare Glacier slowly receded at the end of the last Ice Age, it left behind a landscape of small hills that today look like natural viewing platforms offering a view over Uetendorf and across the levels of the Aare Valley to Thun. Look



The Eichberg feudal country estate of the noble Bernese von Fischer family

up and you will see the rugged peaks of the Stockhorn massif. The Bernese Alps beyond Lake Thun round off the impressive scenery on clear days.

At the end of the 18th century, the patricians who ruled the city of Berne – back then Europe's most powerful city state – were attracted by Uetendorf's favourable location.

One of Berne's noble families, the von Fischers, built the Eichberg feudal country estate on one of Uetendorf's hillocks, thereby giving Napoleon Bonaparte the slip at a time when the French emperor was in the process of curtailing the powers of Berne's city aristocrats.

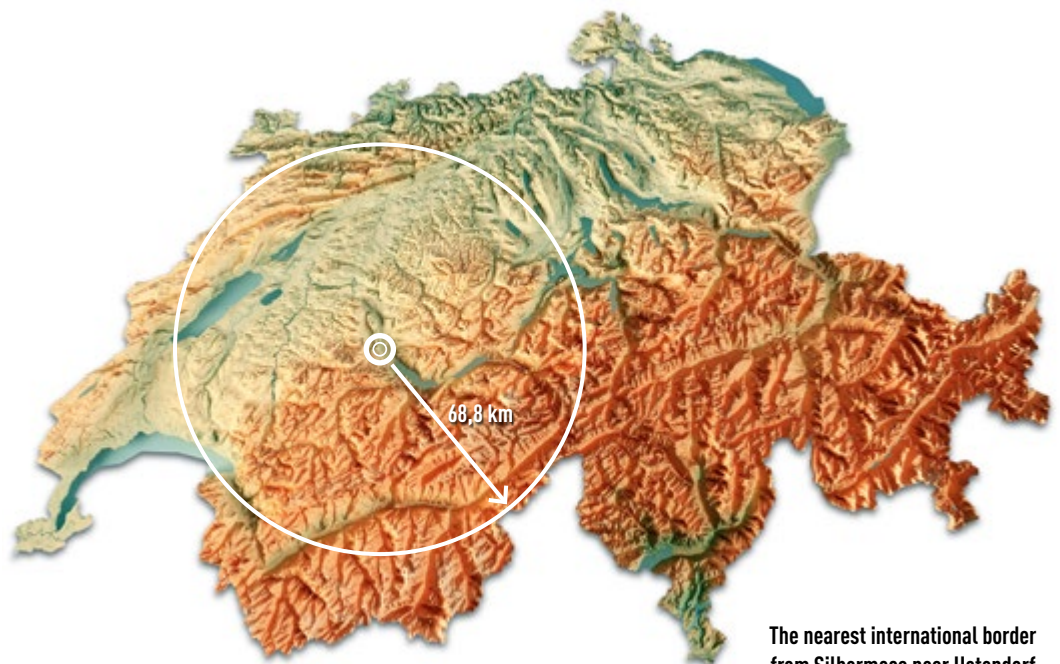
The remaining piece of Switzerland

Around 200 years later, it was pure coincidence when the Federal Office of Topography announced that Uetendorf enjoyed exclusive status as the furthest place from any of Switzerland's international borders – belated confirmation, so to speak, that the von

Fischers had good intuition when they chose Eichberg as a secluded hideout. The nearest international border from Uetendorf is 69 kilometres away as the crow flies – further than from any other point in Switzerland. Imagine you peeled away the “layers” of Switzerland like an onion, starting from its international borders and going inwards. Carry on and you would be left with Uetendorf. Or, to be precise: Silbermoos in Uetendorf. An unassuming agricultural field would be the last dot on the Swiss map if the rest of the country melted away evenly from its perimeter. A restaurant called “Réduit” is situated not far from Silbermoos. This is the name of the strategy



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? Looking for those Swiss records with a difference. Today: a visit to the place in Switzerland that is located furthest from any of the country's international borders.



The nearest international border from Silbermoos near Uetendorf is 68,880 metres away as the crow flies.

“redoubt strategy” in English) that the Swiss army would have used in the Second World War in the event of an attack: retreat from the borders and regroup in the mountains.

Psychological divide between urban and rural

This geographical quirk is a nice gimmick for Uetendorf and its 6,800 inhabitants. But look closer and you will see a village that epitomises Switzerland’s Central Plateau region. Survey the tidy rows of houses in this tax-friendly municipality from one of the hillocks and you will recognise many of the fault lines of modern Switzerland: scarce agricultural land on the one hand, burgeoning residential zone on the other; quiet farming village rubbing shoulders with busy industrial estate; rural conservatism and urban vibrancy staring each other out. Uetendorf, far away from Switzerland’s borders, is at the intersection of



the urban-rural divide – the psychological gulf that has become a dominant factor in the country’s political conversation.

Local politician Hannes Zaugg-Graf treads this sensitive terrain. He



Uetendorf is very neatly arranged: residential zone, industrial area, farmland, Alps in the distance. And he – Hannes Zaugg (left) – has kept Uetendorf in the news. Photos: z.arts.ch

has been a member of Berne’s cantonal parliament since 2010, but he also served as Uetendorf’s mayor for 12 years. Zaugg now represents the Green Liberal Party. When he was elected as mayor of Uetendorf in 2001, he belonged to the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP). Some in the otherwise conservative-leaning village “feared the worst”, says Zaugg, who was only 30 at the time. But when the new man engaged with constituents and eventually proved his worth, vil-

lagers began to feel quite proud of having such a young mayor.

Railway for the landowners

Uetendorf might seem a sedate place, where foreigners account for seven per cent of the population (well under the national average of 25 per cent), but it has felt the winds of change on other key occasions. Take the River Kander, which originally flowed past Uetendorf into the River

Aare. The waterway flooded constantly, bringing well-chronicled poverty and strife to the village. Berne's cantonal government decreed in the mid-18th century that the Kander should be redirected into Lake Thun. This helped to drain the Uetendorf marshes and turn the village into a prosperous settlement with prime farming land.

The next boost came from the construction of a railway line through the Gürbetal valley at the beginning of the 20th century. Trains were actually meant to have run from Berne to Thun via the Stockental valley, but it was particularly down to the influence of the landowners at Eichberg that the line was altered to run through Uetendorf.

Culture of greeting

The railway line would later fuel a local boom. With economic growth picking up after the Second World War, Thun-based metal processing company Selve wanted to expand. Uetendorf with its industrial zone was the perfect location to do so. When Selve

ceased operations at the beginning of the 1990s after its owner (financier Werner K. Rey) went bankrupt, the shock waves lasted only a short while. Convenient for commuters, not least because of the nearby motorway junction, Uetendorf's industrial area bounced back immediately – and has been busy ever since.

“Although Uetendorf belongs to the Thun conurbation, it has retained its village feel,” says Zaugg. In his opinion, this is also because local politicians manage to bridge the ideological gap between conservative and progressive. For example, their municipal planning approach favouring increased density towards the centre of the village protects farming land but it also restricts population and tax revenue growth. According to Zaugg, the local cultural concept includes greeting each other in the street.

The Calimero of Uetendorf

Roland Eberhart, founder and band leader of the Calimeros, well-known exponents of the “Schlager” music genre, appreciates Uetendorf's neat



They hail from Uetendorf, although they dream of more distant, exotic locations: Schlager band Calimeros with frontman Roland Eberhart.

Photo: PD

interpretation of the urban-rural divide. Eberhart grew up in the village. He first performed as a singer during a variety evening at the local ice hockey club in 1976 – the beginning of a spectacular career spanning over 40 years. The Calimeros still release a new album practically every year. Themes on their latest LP include jetting off to exotic holiday destinations like the Bahamas.

The band's recording studio is located in the heart of Uetendorf's industrial estate. Heavy goods vehicles come and go next door. Every year, the Calimeros give their legendary open-air concert out in the car park. Creative linchpin Eberhart likes the place for its hustle and bustle. But when he gazes out of his office window or rides around on his bike, he also enjoys the tranquil cornfields, the trees rustling in the breeze, and the majestic Alpine peaks in the distance: “This contrast inspires me immensely.” No borders or divides to speak of.

Reminiscent of an old, rural Bernese church, it's actually relatively modern having been built in 1954: the church in Uetendorf.

Photo: www.uetendorf.ch



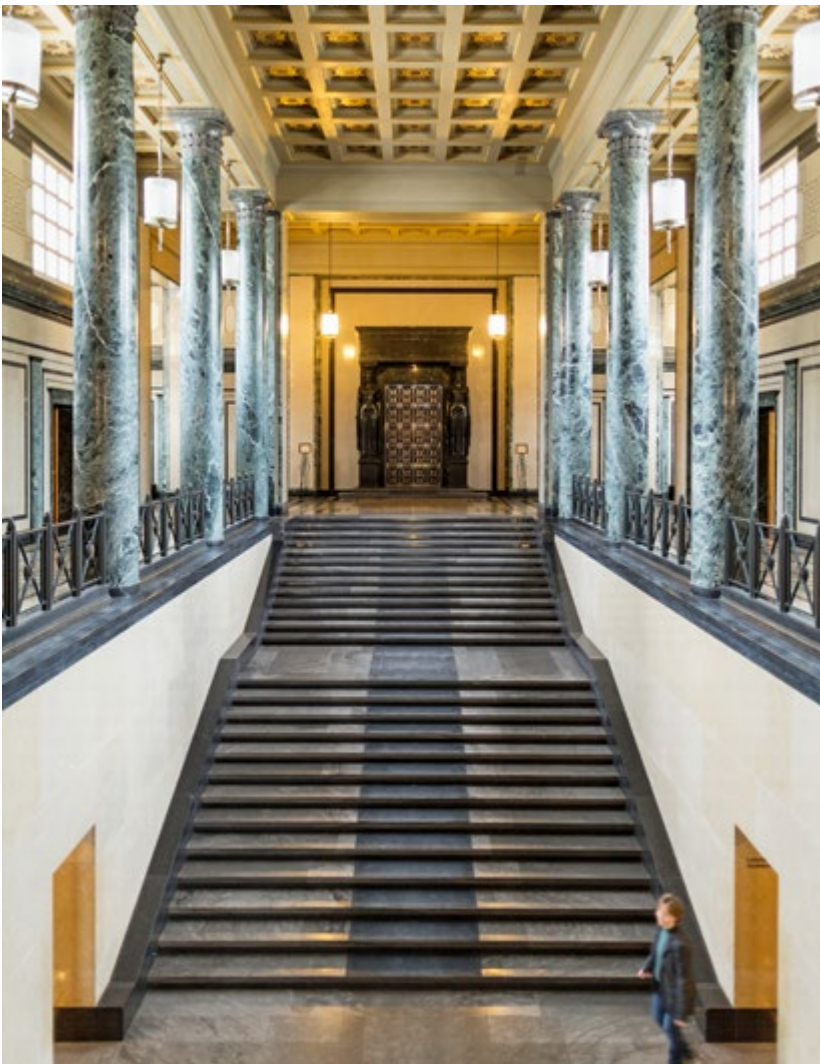
Independence of the judiciary under scrutiny

Anyone who wants to become a federal judge in Switzerland must join a political party. This has raised concerns about the separation of powers within the federal structure. The Justice Initiative wants radical change. It will be put to voters on 28 November.

THEODORA PETER

The Federal Supreme Court (FSC) in Lausanne is Switzerland's highest court. It provides final rulings on the legitimacy of verdicts reached by lower courts as well as on points of law that affect the lives of millions of people in Switzerland. As the third branch of the federal state, the FSC is subordinate only to the law. The United Federal Assembly representing both chambers of parliament elects the FSC judges. When doing so, it deliberately takes account of the respective strength of the parliamentary parties to ensure that the FSC adequately represents society and has democratic legitimacy.

The marble entrance to the Federal Supreme Court in Lausanne: will the judges climbing these steps be decided by the luck of the draw in future?
Photo: Keystone



However, this unwritten rule – a sort of gentlemen's agreement – means that anyone who wants to sit on the bench must join a political party. Judges must pay an annual subscription fee to "their" party, of between 3,000 and 10,000 Swiss francs depending on the party (federal judges earn a salary of 365,000 francs). This idiosyncrasy has long been the subject of criticism abroad. The Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) – the Council of Europe's anti-corruption body – believes the fee violates the principle of judicial independence. One of the arguments given by Switzerland to justify the tradition is that its political parties receive no public funding, unlike in other countries.

Unpopular judges voted out

Another GRECO criticism is that the federal judges have to be re-elected by parliament every six years. In its opinion, this procedure risks judges being voted out on political grounds. Indeed, punitive action against unpopular judges is not uncommon in Switzerland. In autumn 2020, the SVP recommended its own federal judge Yves Donzallaz for deselection because Donzallaz had contradicted the party line. In 2015, he had been involved in an FSC decision that saw the Swiss-EU Agreement on the free movement of persons take precedence over the "Stop mass immigration initiative" that the SVP had successfully put to the people. In the end, Donzallaz was comfortably re-elected by parliament – albeit without any votes from "his" party.

The "crucifix case" made headlines in the 1990s, when the FSC established the principle, specifically with regard to primary schools, that crucifixes were contrary to religious neutrality. Catholics thought this verdict was discriminatory. The federal judges involved were re-elected but received a relatively low number of votes as punishment.

Drawing lots

Businessman Adrian Gasser has long been one of the critics of this intertwining of politics and the judiciary. Gasser is the author of the Justice Initiative being put to voters on 28 November – a radical proposal that calls for federal

judges to be appointed by drawing lots, and not through election by parliament. Judges would have greater independence by no longer being bound to any party. A specialist committee appointed by the Federal Council would only scrutinise the professional suitability of candidates. Through this change in the system, Gasser hopes to prevent the courts from “slowly but surely becoming party political instruments”. He says the method of drawing lots was common back in Ancient Greece as a means of counteracting bribery and influence.

Policymakers are sceptical of Gasser’s proposal. Both the Federal Council and parliament are unanimous in recommending that the popular initiative be rejected, full stop. Leaving the appointment of judges to chance would weaken the democratic legitimacy of the courts and erode public confidence in the decisions they make, argue opponents. The current system is far from perfect, admits the chairman of the parliamentary judicial committee, FDP member of the Council of States Andrea Caroni (canton of Aargau). But the “institutional immune system”, as he calls it, has always helped to avert possible manipulation. Caroni puts forward the Donzallaz case as a recent example.

Those at the centre of the debate – the judges – also reject the idea of drawing lots, although the Swiss Judges’ Association (SJA) believes that the situation could nevertheless be improved. For example, by being elected just once, judges could be spared the party political pressure associated with re-election. This already happens in the canton of Fribourg, where judges and prosecutors are elected for an indefinite period but can still be dismissed on serious grounds. Abolishing party subscription fees would also “boost judicial independence”, says the SJA. However, the Federal Council and parliament refuse to consider any form of counterproposal. Voters will now have the last word.

Daddy time

78

Swiss fathers enjoy devoting lots of time to their children – if you believe what most of them say. And we want to believe them. However, 78 per cent of fathers with children aged three or younger work full-time in Switzerland. In practice, only two per cent devote maximum time to childcare as the bona fide house husband.

97

It is easier for partners to share childcare duties when both receive the same salary for the same amount of work. According to the University of St Gallen, women receive equal pay at 97 per cent of Swiss companies. However, the university only surveyed companies with 100 or more employees – and these businesses were allowed to prepare the relevant salary data themselves.

1512

Hence, we should possibly think twice before dismissing the statistics provided by the Federal Office for Gender Equality. These paint a different picture: the average full-time wage in Switzerland is 7,968 francs for men but 6,456 francs for women. Most of this 1,512-franc difference is “inexplicable” – in other words, due to discrimination.

25

Not many people know this, but orders for photo books were up by as much as 25 per cent in 2020 (depending on which photo book company you ask). We all had plenty of time to reminisce during last year’s lockdown. The same companies now say that orders have plummeted. This is because wedding and holiday photos were a rarity in 2020.

13

With a total of 13 medals, Switzerland ended the Tokyo Olympics in 24th position on the table. To put a much better spin on this: Switzerland would be ranked 15th if its athletes’ performances were judged in relation to population size. That is one medal for every 660,000 Swiss.

From student to skilled worker

educationsuisse provides advice to young Swiss Abroad who come to Switzerland to further their education. Melina Mutti is one such expatriate. She talked to us about her experiences after arriving in Switzerland.

“I grew up in France, not far from my country of birth. I used to be able to see Switzerland on the other side of Lake Geneva from my bedroom window! Growing up on the “wrong” side of the border is strange, because you never really feel at home, however much you identify with either country. But it also throws up opportunities and gives you plenty of life experience.

As the daughter of German- and French-speaking bilingual parents, I was able to maintain a connection with my home country because I could speak Swiss German. I left Switzerland and the canton of Berne when I was seven – and returned in 2015 at the age of 21. After studying for two years in France without any great conviction, I wanted to do something meaningful as a career. I felt I wanted to use my hands to make things that were aesthetically pleasing and worthwhile. I therefore decided to learn a trade and ended up



“Coping with change is always a challenge, and you often need a helping hand,” says Melina Mutti.

Photo provided

Six years on since returning to Switzerland, and I still have no regrets about coming back. Coping with change is always a challenge, and you often need a helping hand. Over the years, my family and I have always been supported by Swiss institutions and the Swiss community abroad.

I am now proud to be teaching clothes design at the same school at which I did my apprenticeship. Thanks to grants from my home canton of Berne and to the people from educationsuisse who assisted me during those years, I was able to complete my training and find my own purpose in life with a career that suited me. I now enjoy helping to train young men and women and giving them a chance to strike their own path.”

Testimonies from young Swiss Abroad are regularly published on the educationsuisse Facebook page and at www.educationsuisse.ch.

 educationsuisse
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at a fashion school in Valais to do an apprenticeship as a clothes designer specialising in women’s fashion. This after studying Arabic linguistics! At first glance, the work seemed fairly straightforward for an “egghead” like me. But I really had to put everything into getting a qualification at the end of my three years there. Afterwards, I decided to go one step further and do a textile diploma at a college of higher education. I had two options: Zurich or Lugano. Without speaking a single word of Italian, I chose Lugano – or the STA Lugano fashion school (Scuola specializzata superiore di abbigliamento e design della moda), to be precise. It was certainly one of the best but also one of the most difficult decisions of my life. Luckily, I was able to fit very easily and quickly into Ticino life. At the end of my two years there, I was completely bilingual and had a group of Italian-speaking friends.



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Filippo Lombardi succeeds Remo Gysin

Remo Gysin stepped down from his role as president of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) at the end of August. The Council of the Swiss Abroad elected former Ticino member of the Council of States Filippo Lombardi as his successor.

MARC LETTAU

The Council of the Swiss Abroad, the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, left no room for doubt following its meeting on 20 August: it emphatically backed the election of Filippo Lombardi from Ticino as the successor to former National Councillor Remo Gysin (SP, BS), who stepped down from his role as president of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) after six years. The new president is well known to the OSA: as the former OSA vice-president, Lombardi is familiar with its current agenda; and as one of the pioneers of the Swiss Abroad Act in force since 2015, he knows all about the issues relating to the 776,300 Swiss passport holders who live outside the country. Lombardi is currently a city councillor for Lugano. Until 2019, he represented the CVP, since renamed “Die Mitte” (The Centre), in the Council of States, of which he was a member for ten years.

Switzerland-EU relationship is still a challenge

In his farewell address, outgoing President Remo Gysin talked about gratitude. He expressed his thanks for the enriching meetings with all the Swiss Abroad, who impressed him with their “fascinating mix of feeling Swiss and openness to the world”. In addition, he said he was not just leaving “an OSA that is on track” to his successor. There are also major challenges to face. For example, Lombardi will have to establish what the failed negotiations over a framework agreement with the European Union mean for the 434,000 Swiss who live in the EU. Gysin’s verdict: “I am missing a strategy from the Federal Council.” It is unclear, “just what the Federal Council now wants”. Filippo Lombardi said the Switzerland-EU relationship would undoubtedly shape the beginning of his presidency. He doesn’t see it as his role to tell the Swiss government how to orient its EU policy. However, he will demand that the government approach the situation of the Swiss who live in the EU with due seriousness. Otherwise expatriates will suffer the consequences sooner or later. In fact, Switzerland is already experiencing the first



not inconsequential restrictions in the field of education (Erasmus) and research (Horizon). Lombardi sees the second key issue as e-voting: many Swiss Abroad will be unable to vote in Switzerland without it. That would lessen the voice of the “Fifth Switzerland”. According to Lombardi, the Council of the Swiss Abroad also needs to become more representative. Again, e-voting is the answer.

The new Council of the Swiss Abroad has approved two resolutions (see next page): it demands a “clear, transparent strategy” from the Swiss government to maintain the “achievement of freedom of movement” between Switzerland and the EU. It also wants all the vaccination certificates issued abroad to be recognised within Switzerland, provided the vaccine is recognised by the WHO.

[revue.link/euresolution](https://www.osa.ch/revue/link/euresolution) and: [revue.link/impfresolution](https://www.osa.ch/revue/link/impfresolution)

Filippo Lombardi, the new OSA president, considers Switzerland-EU relations and the reintroduction of e-voting as priority issues.

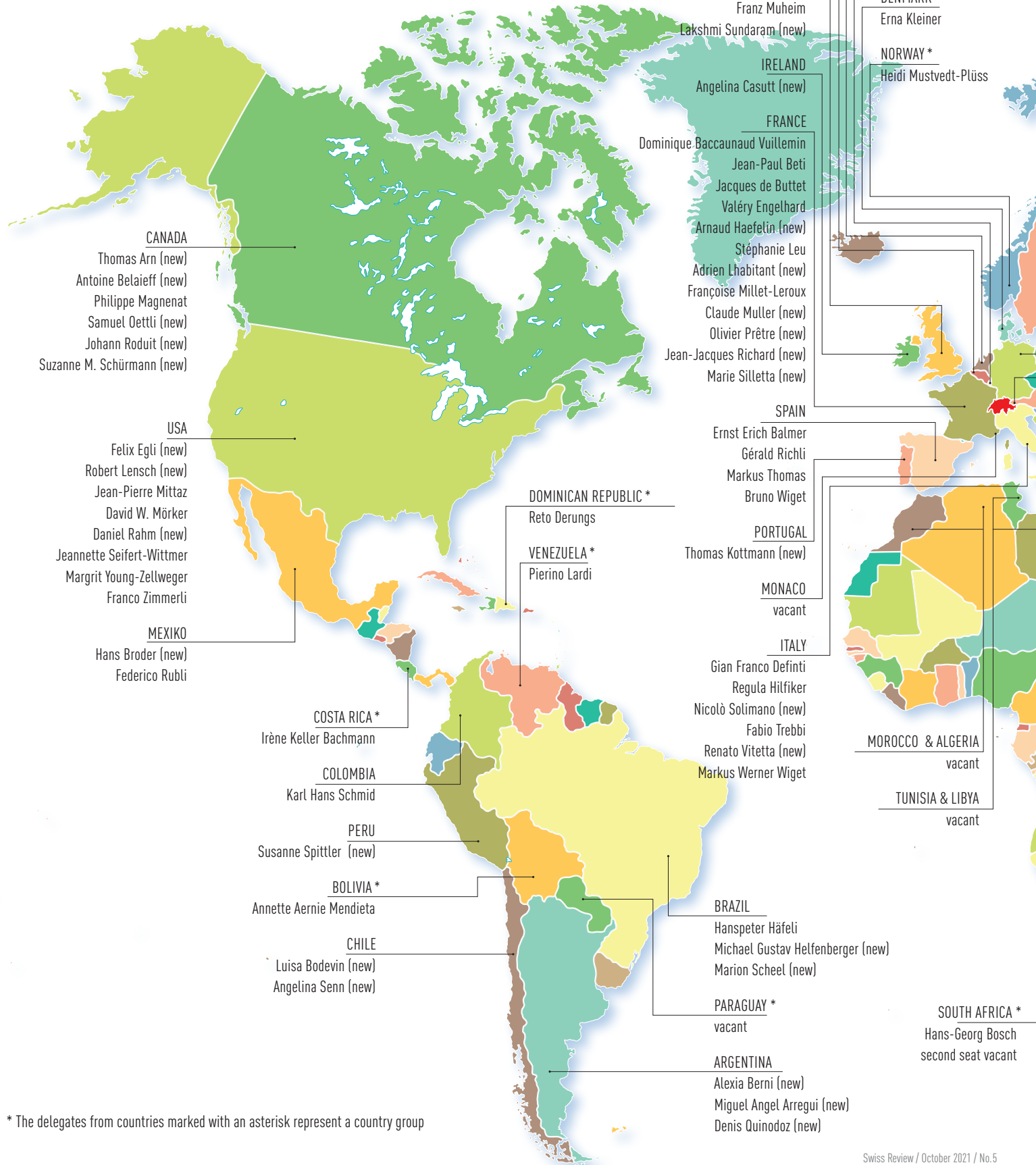
Photo: Marc Lettau

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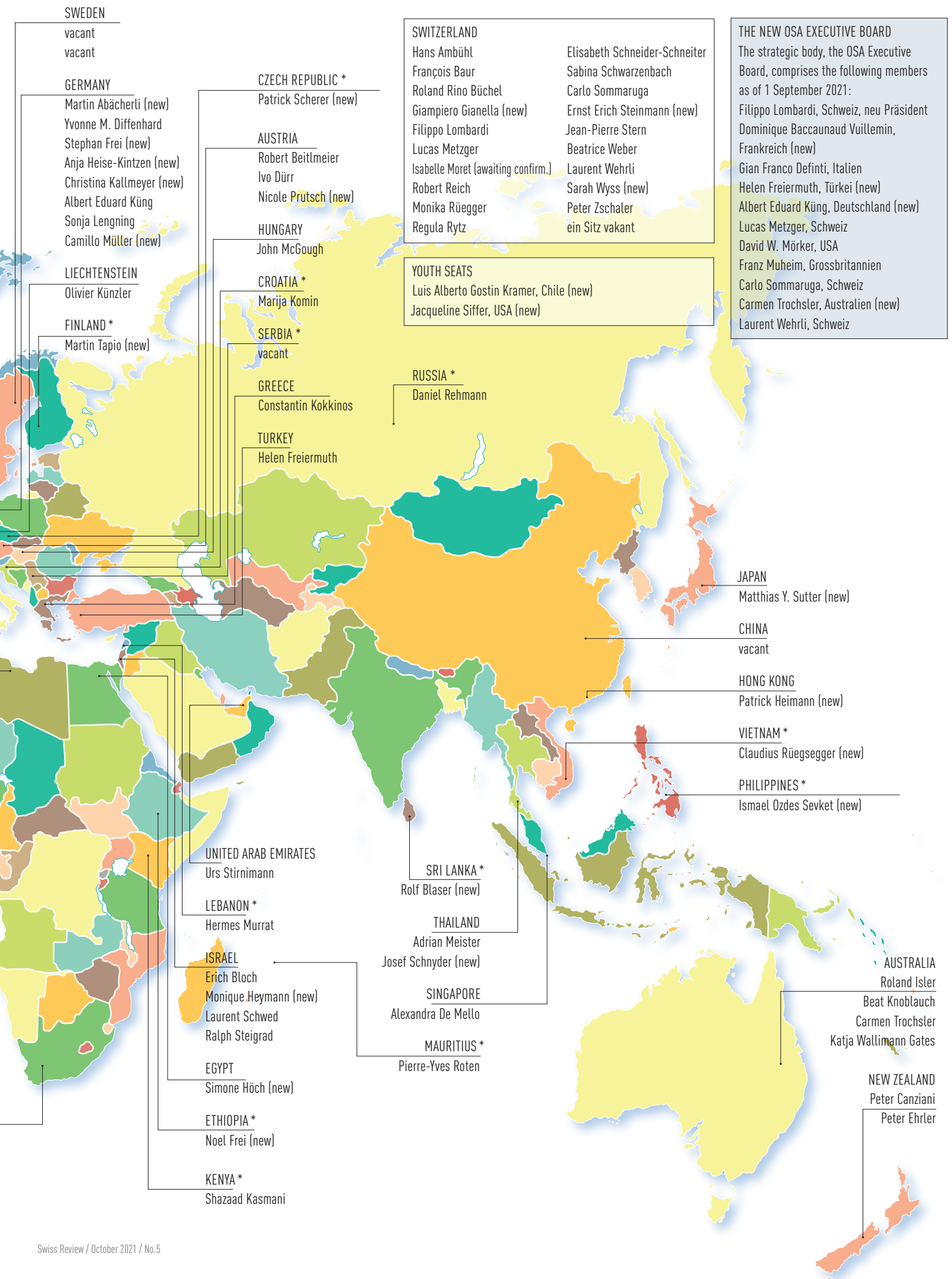
**Swiss
Community**

The new Council of the Swiss Abroad

They are the political voice that represents the interests of the “Fifth Switzerland”: the members of the Council of the Swiss Abroad elected for the 2021–2025 term. A good third of the members are new to the Council. And once again, just under one third of them are women.



* The delegates from countries marked with an asterisk represent a country group



The voice of young Swiss Abroad

Educational opportunities in Switzerland were discussed at the very first Congress of Young Swiss Abroad. Characterised by lively debate, the event showed that many young people in the “Fifth Switzerland” are interested in political participation.

MARC LETTAU

Participants in the first-ever Congress of Young Swiss Abroad naturally would have had nothing against meeting each other in person. But the event took place online – as is routine these days. However, the virtual format proved a hit. Teenagers and young adults from every corner of the world – from France to Australia, from Sri Lanka to Chile – were able to engage with each other without eye-watering travel expenses blowing a hole in their budget.

Focus on voting at 16

Political participation was a key discussion point at the Congress, which was held on 15 July and organised by the Youth Service of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) in collaboration with the Youth Parliament of Swiss Abroad (YPSA). YPSA President Jacqueline Siffer (USA) opened proceedings with a question that dominated the last “Swiss Review”: are 16-year-olds ready to vote?

This is a much-debated issue in Switzerland at present, where voting at 16 is already permitted in the canton of Glarus. Any nationwide lowering of the voting age from 18 to 16 would also apply to young Swiss living abroad. But whether the electorate would approve it in a plebiscite is still anyone’s guess.

A broad range of views were aired at the Congress – very much reflecting the discourse among young people in Switzerland. Undoubtedly, there is a great deal of interest in political participation. Those at the Congress in favour of voting at 16 argued that young



Jacqueline Siffer
expertly moderated the
discussion



Marie Bloch
thinks the event was a
success



Melanie Oesch
gave a yodelling mas-
terclass



Mona-Lisa Kole
helps young people
understand the issues
before every federal
vote

people today have already been engaged in politics for quite some time – the issue of climate change is one example. Listen to young people’s voices, and society would have a more complete representation, they said: “Teenagers often see things differently.” Political decisions taken now will have a particular bearing on their futures. The difference in maturity between a 16-year-old and an 18-year-old is negligible, so why not lower the voting age, they asked.

Others at the Congress were less than convinced, saying there was no comparison between their experiences and those of their Swiss-based counterparts. Many live in countries where there are no regular plebiscites – in contrast to Switzerland with its four voting days every year. Many also feel unready to vote on complex issues, referring to their lack of maturity and the risk of being easily swayed by other people.

Vote if you want to vote

However, the final consensus was that lowering the voting age is a good thing, because voting in Switzerland is optional. If something interests you, you vote. If it doesn’t, you don’t. One conclusion was that lowering the voting age would probably make young people more interested in exercising their political voice as such. “It would encourage them to learn more about important issues.” Voting proposals are often quite complex, but then people who reached adulthood decades ago often say the same thing.

Help from Easyvote

Swiss voting papers are certainly not the clearest. Mona-Lisa Kole told the Congress about her involvement in Easyvote, a project that aims to make politics easier for 18- to 25-year-olds. Not only is Easyvote a useful resource for Switzerland’s youth parliament, the project also publishes a brochure containing easy-to-understand information on the issues at stake before every federal vote.

Education in Switzerland

During the Congress, the Education-suisse managing director, Barbara Sulzer Smith, also gave an insight into innovative, wide ranging and accessible gateways to education in Switzerland, while students from Junior Enterprise Genève provided tips on entering the world of work – e.g. “how to write the perfect job application in Switzerland”. Then something completely different: Melanie Oesch of Swiss folk group Oesch’s die Dritten spoke to the Congress and shared some of the secrets of yodelling. She and her family delighted everyone with their music.

Marie Bloch, head of the OSA Youth Service, thinks the event was a great success. “We deepened our ties with these young people and noticed their interest and enthusiasm,” she said, adding that preparations for 2022 were already under way.

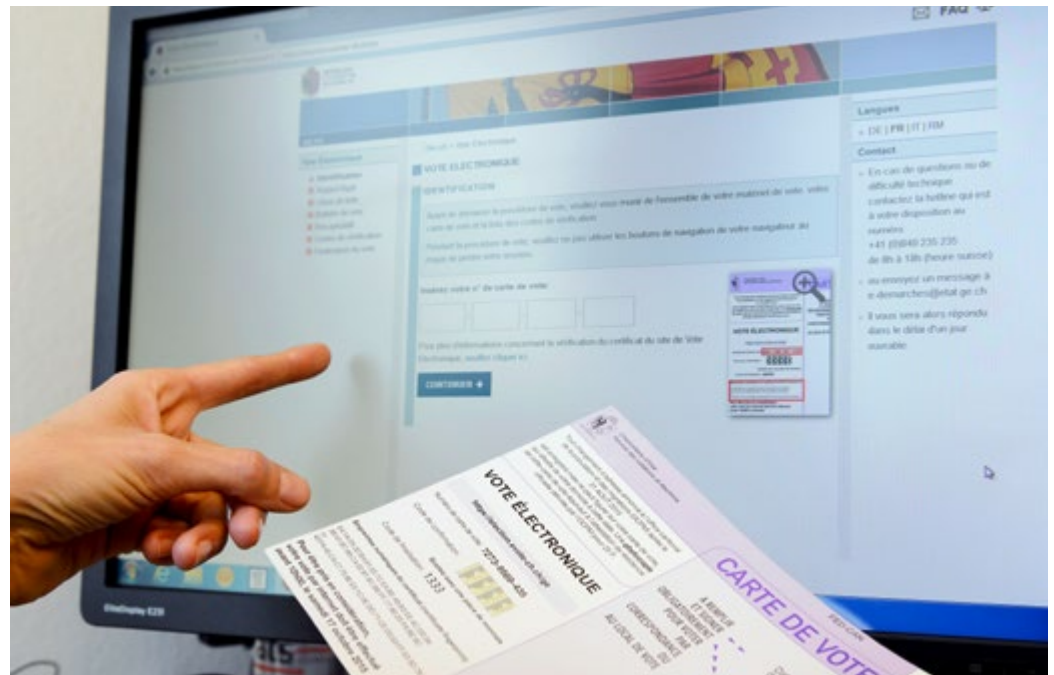
E-voting – reorientation process currently ongoing

Since mid-2019, Swiss voters have no longer been able to vote electronically. Swiss Abroad have been particularly affected by the suspension of e-voting. However, work to reorient the e-voting testing process is currently ongoing. Security and transparency are the watchwords in this regard.

Federal legislation is now being revised in relation to e-voting, after the Federal Council conducted a consultation. The resumption of testing will be subject to new standards along with the implementation of measures to improve security.

Academic experts have been involved in the reorientation as part of a broad dialogue. In future, members of the public will be encouraged to report cracks in the country's e-voting systems on an ongoing basis, using publicly accessible information for this purpose (source code; documentation; test reports; details of identified vulnerabilities). Anyone who provides a useful tip-off may receive a cash reward in return. The federal government will commission independent experts to check whether security standards are being maintained. The aim is to facilitate continual improvements. There will be additional collaboration with experts to help cement this process.

Furthermore, only fully verifiable e-voting systems will be used in future. Up to 30 per cent of voters per canton and up to 10 per cent of the nationwide electorate will be allowed to



participate in e-voting pilots. Swiss Abroad as well as voters with physical or mental impairments will be given preferential treatment, in other words they will be able to take part without being included in these quotas.

The Confederation, cantons and the system provider Swiss Post are already implementing the new standards with a view to resuming the testing process as soon as possible. The revision of federal legislation will have no effect on the distribution of powers, so the cantons will still be free to

decide whether to offer e-voting as well as which e-voting system they want to use, while the federal government will set the statutory parameters and act as the authorising body. (BK)

How it used to be: access card with code for the Geneva e-voting system discontinued in 2019. **Now the Confederation is revising its approach to e-voting.**

Photo: Keystone

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New ways to send voting papers?

Swiss Abroad can only vote if the relevant voting papers arrive in time. But sending voting papers is a major logistical challenge, further exacerbated by the pandemic. The federal government and three cantons are therefore looking at new ways of delivering these documents.

To find out how voting papers can best arrive on time, the 13 June 2021 popular vote coincided with a pilot project that trialled the dispatch of voting papers via diplomatic courier. A survey was also conducted at the same time. The Federal Chancellery and the Consular Directorate of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) were involved, as were three cantons – Aargau, Ticino and Geneva. The pilot project was based on a postulate by Zurich FDP National Councillor Andri Silberschmidt.

Around 1,600 Swiss Abroad in Australia, Brazil and Thailand registered to vote in the cantons of Aargau, Ticino and Geneva were invited to participate in the survey. One half received their voting papers via Swiss Post as before. On a trial basis, the other half received the documents via their local Swiss representation abroad. Everyone returned their voting papers the conventional way, i.e. directly to their home municipality in Switzerland and not via their local representation.

Some 20 per cent of voters took part in the survey. Their answers as well as the feedback provided by the authorities involved must now be collated and analysed. Comparing the two methods of dispatch will provide an insight into the effectiveness and cost of sending voting papers via diplomatic courier. Following evaluation of the results, a decision will be made on whether to conduct further trials as part of the pilot project.

The Silberschmidt postulate envisages that the Federal Council not only trial the use of diplomatic couriers in a pilot project, but also that it ascertain whether the dispatch of voting papers to Swiss Abroad for elections and popular votes at federal level should be changed in any other way. The Federal Council will assess the pilot project in detail and address the possibility of making other improvements – in the form of a postulate report by spring 2023 at the latest. (BK)

In the bag

The bid to find new ways of sending voting papers (see main text) extended to the use of diplomatic couriers in June. But what is a diplomatic courier?

Diplomatic couriers are the people who carry documents and other items between the head office of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) in Berne and Switzerland's representations abroad. The activities of diplomatic couriers are governed by the Vienna Convention of 18 April 1961 on Diplomatic Relations, which came into force in 1964.

Diplomatic bags carry official correspondence between diplomatic representations abroad and the foreign ministry of the sending state as well as between other missions and consulates of the sending state. They enjoy inviolability and must not be opened or held by enforcement authorities during transit.

Diplomatic correspondence is put into diplomatic bags – and declared as such – at the FDFA's head office in Berne. Under the terms of the Vienna Convention, a diplomatic bag may only contain diplomatic papers or items reserved for official use. A diplomatic bag must have a seal attached and be marked as a diplomatic consignment. It is then sent abroad by conventional mail or via courier services such as DHL.

The diplomatic courier in Berne processes over 18,000 incoming and outgoing diplomatic consignments every year. All these consignments together account for a total weight of 160 tonnes. (KD)



❶ The FDFA courier hall where the diplomatic correspondence is carefully packed.

❷ It's a major administrative task: all the outgoing missives are collected.

❸ The diplomatic dispatch packed in a green bag has a seal attached and is marked as a diplomatic consignment. Photos provided



Federal votes

The Federal Council determines voting proposals at least four months before the voting date.

Everything you need to know about voting proposals (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by Parliament and the Federal Council etc.) is available at www.admin.ch/votes or via the Federal Chancellery's VoteInfo app.

The Federal Council has decided that the following federal proposals will be submitted to the people on 28 November 2021:

- Popular initiative “For better nursing care (Nursing Care Initiative)”
- Popular initiative “Appointing federal judges by random selection (Justice Initiative)”
- Amendment to the Federal Act on the Statutory Principles for Federal Council Ordinances on Combating the COVID-19 Epidemic (COVID-19 Act) (Hardship Cases, Unemployment Insurance, Childcare, Creative Artists, Events)

Popular initiatives

No new popular initiatives have been launched.

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in German, French and Italian at

www.bk.admin.ch > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen

Consular services

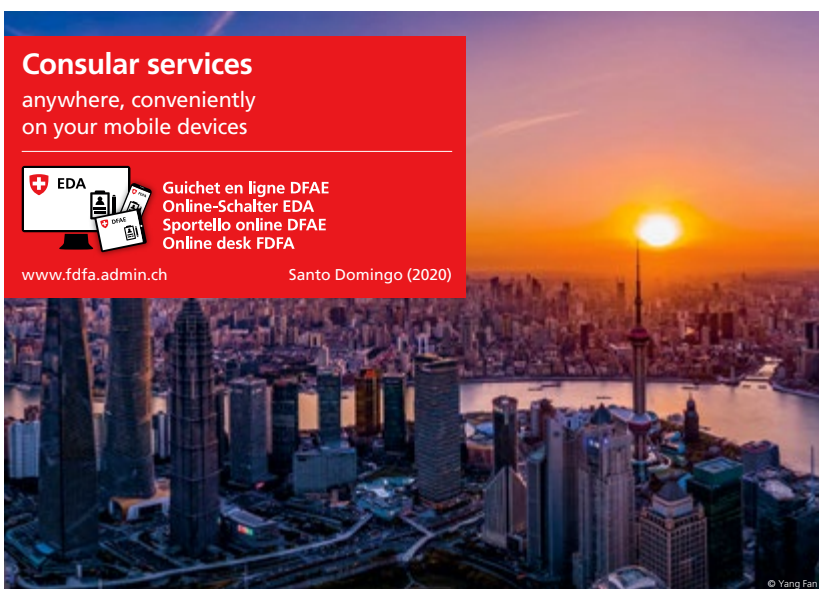
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Santo Domingo (2020)



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A look back at Covid-19, in snapshots



PATRICK CHAPPATTE:
"Au cœur de la vague"
Chappatte & Éditions
Les Arènes Paris, 2020
123 pages, 36 CHF
Available in French only

What were we doing when the first news of a virus which attacked the respiratory system arrived from China, at the end of January 2020? How did we handle the information about the first case in Switzerland, detected in February 2020? And when was the first death announced? What was our vision of the future when the country was swept into almost complete lockdown on 16 March? This illustrated report by Genevan Patrick Chappatte, released in October 2020, enables us to rediscover our original feelings through the tale he illustrates of the first wave of Covid-19. His approach is both private and public. He draws his own seclusion, with his family in the

mountains. And then his anxiety when he experiences a strong fever, forcing him to isolate for a week. A serological test completed later showed that he had indeed contracted the virus. At that time, only those experiencing serious symptoms had access to tests. The country was not yet advocating masks. "Au cœur de la vague (In the eye of the storm)" recalls the key moments of this world which was hurtling towards the unknown. Every reader will find something to relate to.

The other angle of the report is dedicated to the inner workings of the Geneva University Hospitals (HUG), the largest medical institution in Switzerland. From his place of seclusion in the mountains, Chappatte converses with Professor Didier Pittet, director of the Infectious Diseases Division at HUG, by phone. From 7 March, the inventor of hydroalcoholic gel began passing on information firsthand. The Genevan illustrator describes the strategy implemented by HUG to cope with the approaching wave of patients. Once recovered, Chappatte enters the heart of the machine: the intensive care unit, led by Professor Jérôme Pugin. He describes the contact with death. The tears of carers for those who die and whose families have not been able to see them. He gives the floor to a nurse, who tells of her 12-hour working days. He passes the microphone to the cleaning staff, some of whom volunteered to go to disinfect the "dirty" rooms in which those infected with the virus were treated. He shows the impact of the crisis on undocumented migrants and the response in Geneva to look after those living in the most precarious situations. Each of the five chapters of this work, documented with care and filled with empathy, holds the illustrations of Chappatte published during the period they describe.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Enjoyable retro kitsch



BURNING WITCHES:
"The Witch Of The North"
Nuclear Blast, 2021

They certainly haven't decided to reinvent the wheel. On the contrary, Burning Witches play a very traditional not to say old-fashioned type of heavy metal. Be that as it may, the Swiss combo have a certain something. On the one hand, they are an all-women band – still something of a novelty in their particular genre. Without doubt, this has turned heads. But they also market themselves very cleverly, portraying themselves as timeless fantasy heroines, maiden warriors, and witches – strong female characters whose powers are as striking as their looks.

This well-executed image combined with a catchy, highly choreographed, accomplished heavy metal sound was what initially won Burning Witches a major record deal with Nuclear Blast – quite the coup for guitarist Romana Kalkuhl's band. Appearances then followed at huge festivals like Wacken Open Air. Their fourth album "The Witch Of The North" has now catapulted the girls high up the charts in many countries, reaching number six in Switzerland for example and – much more importantly – number 16 in Germany. Very respectable indeed. And as if to underscore the band's arrival in the big time, Kalkuhl even ended up appearing on the cover of Switzerland's best-known tabloid.

With this new LP, the quintet have quite evidently satisfied their broad fan base. "The Witch Of The North", produced by Marcel Schirmer of Destruction and V.O. Pulver of Gurd, is a concept album devoted to Nordic mythology, in which Burning Witches are unafraid to explore the clichés of retro metal both lyrically and from an overall aesthetic point of view. Once again, the five witches have taken inspiration from the traditional metal sound of the 1980s. Ballads like "Lady Of The Woods" are juxtaposed with high-energy numbers like "Nine Worlds". We also have kicking, biting refrains ("We Stand As One" and "Thrall"). And as if it wasn't obvious enough already where their musical roots lie, Burning Witches have thrown in a cover of a track by US power-metal stalwarts Savatage for good measure.

MARKO LEHTINEN

Natallia Hersche



Prison no. 4, Gomel, Belarus – this is where 51-year-old Natallia Hersche from St Gallen has been incarcerated since being convicted of “violent resistance against a law enforcement officer” over an incident that happened during a women’s demonstration in Minsk at the end of 2020. Hersche was detained but reportedly “resisted arrest”. She ripped off a police officer’s balaclava, causing “slight damage to the garment in the area of the eye slit”. Many who have protested against the Belarus president, Alexander Lukaschenko, have been deprived of freedom. But why did Hersche leave her comfortable neighbourhood near Lake Constance to demonstrate in Minsk? Switzerland played a big part in her decision. Her adopted home is a democracy that guarantees the right to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. The Swiss-Belarus dual citizen wishes the same were true of her country of birth, making her “a symbol of our revolution” in the eyes of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. The Swiss ambassador in Minsk, Claude Altermatt, is doing all he can to help Hersche. However, the Swiss diplomat has to tread carefully. When Switzerland opened its embassy in Belarus as recently as 2020, one of its stated goals was to deepen economic ties with the country, which Lukaschenko rules with an iron fist. In contrast, Hersche is in no mood to compromise. She could have asked Lukaschenko for a pardon in April, but didn’t. “I will never plea to this regime for anything,” she says. Who knows what price she is paying for her tenacity.

MARC LETTAU

Olympic medal bonanza for Switzerland

Switzerland ended the Tokyo Olympics on 13 medals – the biggest haul by the nation’s athletes since 1952. Three of these were gold, thanks to Belinda Bencic in the tennis, Nina Christen in the shooting, and Jolanda Neff in the mountain bike event. Neff’s podium ceremony was particularly gratifying, as the gold medal winner was flanked by two other Swiss riders, Sina Frei (silver) and Linda Indergand (bronze). Switzerland’s previous medal sweep came 85 years ago in gymnastics, at the 1936 Berlin games. (MUL)

Taliban catch Switzerland unawares

The Taliban’s seizure of power in Afghanistan wrong-footed the Swiss authorities, who were saying at the beginning of August that they would be proceeding with the repatriation of failed Afghan asylum seekers. Only days later came the U-turn. The same asylum seekers can now apply for hardship support and the right to stay. Furthermore, Switzerland is considering taking in refugees in particular need of protection. It has also withdrawn its aid workers from Afghanistan. (MUL)

Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis visits Thailand

Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis visited Thailand in August as part of his tour of South East Asia. Swiss expats used his visit to complain that they are still waiting to be vaccinated. According to media reports, Cassis said he was going to recommend to the Thai authorities that they allow foreign nationals to get vaccinated – as is the practice in Switzerland. The Swiss embassy in Thailand took a pragmatic approach by organising vaccination appointments at a private hospital. (MUL)

The new man at the FDP helm

Thierry Burkart is set to become the new leader of the FDP in Switzerland. The 45-year-old Aargau member of the Council of States is the only candidate for the post. He is due to be elected in October. Burkart will succeed Petra Gösli, who tried to give the FDP a greener image. Gösli resigned after the electorate rejected the CO2 Act – a piece of legislation that she had supported. Burkart is no friend of Gösli’s climate policies and belongs to the conservative wing of the party. (MUL)

Murat Yakin is the new Switzerland coach

Murat Yakin is the new Swiss national football team coach. He succeeds Vladimir Petkovic, who surprisingly stepped down from the post this summer (see page 10). Yakin is well known in Swiss football. As a player, he had spells in the Bundesliga as well as a very successful stint at FC Basel. Teams that he has coached include FC Thun, FC Luzern, FC Basel and Spartak Moscow. (MUL)

We need golden moments.

Fafleralp, Valais, © André Meier



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