

OCTOBER 2023

Swiss Review

The magazine
for the Swiss Abroad



**The Swiss Alps are less
rock-solid than we thought**

**Benches – a ubiquitous piece
of Swiss outdoor furniture**

**Nowhere are Swiss voters more
conscientious than in Schaffhausen**





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Cover photo: Brienz-Brinzauls narrowly escaped a huge rock avalanche in June 2023. The Grisons hamlet had been evacuated beforehand. Photo: Keystone

When continents collide



When we visit the Swiss Alps, we see pastures, glittering mountain streams, steep cliffs and precipitous peaks. What we do not see are two tectonic plates colliding deep beneath our feet. The Alps were formed when the African continental plate came up against the Eurasian continental plate, thrusting the earth's crust upwards. Our present-day view above ground is but a snapshot of this ongoing geological process.

If we lived long enough, we would notice the Matterhorn growing by around 1,500 metres every one million years as the African and Eurasian plates continue to collide. Likewise, we would see how the outside elements shave more or less 1,500 metres off the top of the Matterhorn every one million years. This permanent give-and-take gets lost in the supposed here-and-now of immovable, unyielding, rock-solid Swiss mountains epitomising a country made in their image.

But this image is crumbling. It is not only our Alpine glaciers that are receding in real time. The mountains themselves seem more fragile. Dangerous rockfalls and landslides are a physical symptom of this malaise. They also undermine the myth of permanency and have an acute emotional impact.

We delve into this issue more closely in our lead article, with good reason following the one-million-cubic-metre avalanche of rocks that fell just short of the village of Brienz-Brinzauls this summer – the latest in a line of dramatic landslide events that include Randa in 1991, Gondo in 2000, and Bondo in 2017. Most recently at the end of August, a mass of earth and rock rolled down the slope above Schwanden in the canton of Glarus, destroying or burying more than half a dozen houses and barns – as if we needed further proof that our mountains are moving.

Apropos the Alps – anyone can sit down and enjoy the beautiful mountain scenery from a plethora of benches dotted around our country. Public benches tend to be positioned where the local tourist board thinks the best view is. They are a ubiquitous piece of outdoor furniture. Switzerland boasts myriad benches of different shapes and sizes – from sturdy to rickety, large to small, from bright red to natural and weather-worn – in every possible and impossible place. Read all about it in our article.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"Swiss Review", the information magazine for the "Fifth Switzerland", is published by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.



Swiss Alps less than rock-solid

We like to view our beautiful Swiss Alps as an immovable, unyielding natural barrier, but they are less rock-solid than we thought. The earth seems to be crumbling – literally – under our feet. Our mountains are moving.

JÜRIG STEINER

Brienz-Brinzauls, situated above the Albula Pass in the canton of Grisons, made headlines in early summer 2023 when its 80 or so inhabitants were ordered to evacuate over fears that a huge mass of rocks would tumble down the unstable slopes of Piz Linard and obliterate their small hamlet. Switzerland's media kept close tabs on the situation, with tabloid "Blick" even setting up a live webcam of the unstable mountain.

It made news across the pond. "A Swiss village is warned to flee its shifting mountainside" read a "New York Times" headline. The journalist quoted an inhabitant of Brienz who likened the impending rockfall to a tornado: the rocks would simply choose the path of least resistance, regardless of whether anyone or anything was in the way.

Switzerland's famous Alps were not so immovable after all.

Brienz-Brinzauls essentially had a very lucky, narrow escape on the night of 15/16 June 2023, when a massive landslide – enough rocks to fill around 300,000 lorries – stopped just short of the evacuated village. No one was injured. Residents were able to return to their homes a few weeks later.

The danger remains

But this is not the end of it. Future landslides cannot be ruled out. At the same time the ground underneath Brienz-Brinzauls is wobbly too. The plateau on which the village stands has been slipping away slowly but surely for decades – at a rate of around one metre a year. Buildings

and roads are cracking. Underground pipes are snapping.

This makes it all the more surprising that the authorities in Grisons have no intention of giving up on Brienz-Brinzauls. They are doing everything they can to ensure that the hamlet remains habitable in the long term. Some 40 million Swiss francs worth of drainage tunnels and holes have been earmarked to improve stability underfoot. Both Grisons and the federal government are bankrolling the project, which might allow residents to stay put.

Landslides in Switzerland like the one in Brienz-Brinzauls almost always attract a lot of attention. They have become more frequent in recent years as global warming compromises the geological stability of our Alpine landscapes. Each new incidence is now a media event in itself.

The Alps as an indomitable fortress and a place of refuge

Coverage naturally focuses on the circumstances of each landslide. But the sight of a mountainside crumbling before our eyes also has an acute emotional impact. The reasons for this are historical. Switzerland's redoubt strategy during the Second World War cemented the legend of the Alps as an indomitable fortress and symbol of national resistance. If Hitler's troops had invaded, our government and military commanders would have withdrawn to a network of hidden bunkers in the mountains, from where they would have coordinated the country's defence. Since then, we have regarded the Alps as a place of refuge as well as natural beauty – pro-

vided we can live there and still protect ourselves, our homes and our transport infrastructure. Suddenly, the mountains are moving more than they used to. And not only in Brienz-Brinzauls. They have become less predictable. Must we reassess our relationship with them?

Geological processes "at a tipping point"

Flavio Anselmetti, professor of geology at the University of Bern, says two separate things are taking place here that are commonly intertwined. "Firstly, mountain ranges like the Alps are constantly being pulled, pushed and contorted. Landslides and rockslides are perfectly normal in view of these geological forces," he tells us.

Secondly, the parameters are now changing as a result of global warming. The Earth has a long history of alternating naturally between warmer and colder periods. However, the current era is unusual in terms of how quickly temperatures are rising this time.

And nature is trying to regain its balance amid the tumult, Anselmetti continues. Geological processes that would otherwise be considered normal in the Alps are, in his words, "at a tipping point" because of how quickly the Earth is heating up. Permafrost degradation represents the clearest example. Permafrost is soil and rocky material that stays frozen continuously. In the Alps, it tends to be found above 2,500 metres. Climate change is causing permafrost to thaw more often and for longer periods every summer. Permafrost is the "glue" that helps



hold mountain faces together at high altitudes. When it melts, the risk of sudden rockfall increases.

Then again, we should try not to oversimplify matters and claim that every landslide or rockfall is a result of global warming, he adds. Or that climate change means the risks have automatically become greater.

For instance, scientists have known about and been keeping a close eye on the unstable slope above Brienz-Brinzauls for decades. The hamlet is situated at a relatively low altitude, and no direct link can be made to the rise in temperatures. Yet mountainside degradation in other circumstances could well accelerate if, say, climate change leads to an increase in heavy rainfall events. Or if protective forest is thinned out because certain tree species are unable to cope with a proliferation of droughts.

Millions of francs for monitoring and prevention

Geographer Käthi Liechti is a scientific staff member of the Mountain Hydrology and Mass Movements research unit at the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL). She is in charge of the Swiss flood and landslide damage database, which has been recording damage from debris flows, landslides and rockfalls in ad-

dition to naturally triggered floods for over 50 years.

However, Liechti says she cannot clearly state whether debris flows, landslides and rockfalls in the mountains have become more or less common, not least because you not only have to consider changes in the natural environment but also in how the

We regard the Alps as a place of refuge as well as natural beauty – provided we can live there.

authorities and the general public approach the new realities of life in the Alps.

Switzerland's populated areas are expanding, with infrastructure taking on greater importance. This increases the risk of events like landslides causing major damage. Regardless of whether or not such events are becoming more frequent due to global warming, Switzerland is, in other words, certainly more exposed than before. Having said this, Liechti believes that

Over one million cubic metres of rock thundered down Piz Linard towards Brienz-Brinzauls on the night of 15/16 June 2023. The Grisons hamlet had been evacuated beforehand.

Photo: Keystone

Switzerland's protection and monitoring capabilities have become more advanced from an organisational and technical perspective, incorporating forecasting and early warning systems as well as infrastructure like retention basins and protective walls. "The federal government and the cantons currently spend several million francs a year on mitigating natural risks," Liechti tells us. This has helped to minimise damage, she adds, with the costs incurred from natural disasters not having changed significantly in recent decades.

No longer at the mercy of fate

Put simply, the more the Alps crumble, the more work Switzerland puts in to manage the consequences. We are no longer at the mercy of fate. Whereas the famous landslides of the past often ended in tragedy, we are much more likely now to get a handle on events before they occur.

In 1806, the residents of Goldau (canton of Schwyz) would often hear the sound of tree roots snapping at night on the mountain above. They also began to notice fissures and cracks forming on the slopes. But they did nothing. No one even suggested evacuating. Following heavy rainfall at the beginning of September that year, a huge mass of rock and debris came sliding down the mountain, killing almost 500 people and destroying much of the village.

Some 75 years later, churchgoers attending their September morning Sunday service in the village of Elm heard the sound of rockfall from the nearby mountain, which was being quarried for slate at the time. Unperturbed, the congregation carried on as normal. In fact, some locals even ventured up the slope later to get a better view. An avalanche of rock slid into the valley that afternoon. Over 100 inhabitants perished.



A 40-million-cubic-metre avalanche of rock came hurtling down the mountain towards Goldau on 2 September 1806, killing almost 500 people and leaving a trail of devastation.

Illustration: Franz Xaver Triner (1767–1824) and Gabriel Lory (1763–1840); Schwyz cantonal archives

Goldau and Elm were unavoidable disasters, people said at the time. A God-fearing public mistrusted the fact-based approach to preventing further tragedies.

Spirit of solidarity

But what the major landslides of the 19th century did bring about was a feeling of national solidarity. After the Goldau disaster, there was a countrywide fundraising push – the first of its kind – to help the village get back on its feet. This and other similar humanitarian campaigns uniting the different regions of the country were subsequently “touted as being very Swiss”, according to Christian Pfister, professor emeritus in environmental history at the University of Bern. They helped Switzerland develop its own particular identity and point of difference from other nations, he writes. In neighbouring countries, the catalyst for uniting people was war.

This spirit of solidarity has persisted up to the present day. Following each of the three major Swiss landslides of the 20th and 21st centuries – Randa in 1991, Gondo in 2000, and Bondo (where residents were evacuated in time) in 2017 – the relevant member of the Federal Council visited the disaster area in person.

The message? That the entire country stood shoulder to shoulder with

those affected. But there was also a subtext: we will do everything in our power to defy the mountains. When landslides occur or threaten to occur, Switzerland will not simply give up the fight – not even if global warming makes things more complicated.

Dodging the rockfalls

Since Goldau in 1806, giving up on landslide-endangered or landslide-affected settlements has never been an option. It has always been about protecting these hotspots more effectively. “Take Brienz-Brinzauls, where they pulled off a quite stunning feat,” says Flavio Anselmetti. In a complex geological environment, they managed to predict the danger correctly and evacuate the village “at just the right time before the event actually occurred”. You cannot really do a better job than that. But it is not always



Residents of Bondo (canton of Grisons) watch as a mudslide rips through their village on 25 August 2017. The event was triggered by a massive rockfall that had taken place two days previously on Piz Cengalo.

Photo: Keystone

such plain sailing. Professional mountaineer Roger Scháli knows what it feels like to have rocks falling around him. He has scaled the north face of the Eiger well over 50 times, often via the original route that traverses the in-

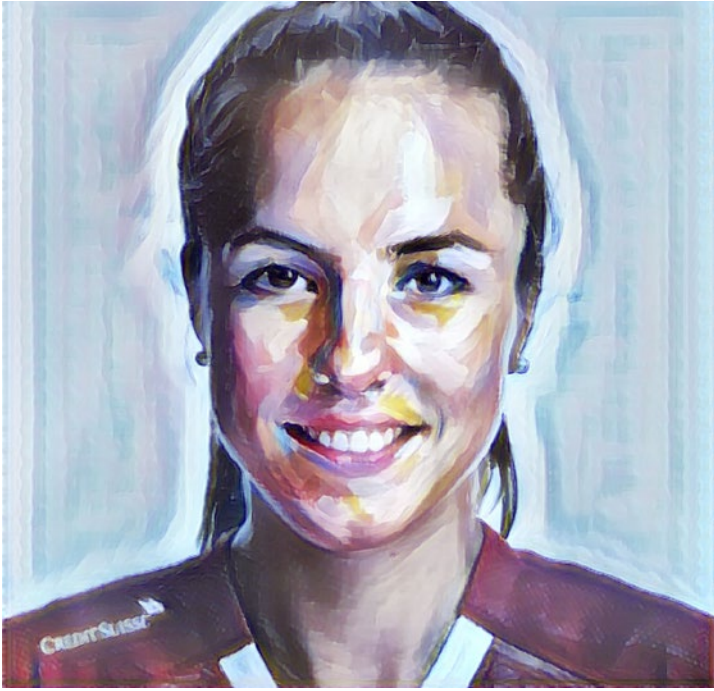
Goldau and Elm were unavoidable disasters, people said at the time. **A God-fearing public mistrusted the fact-based approach to preventing further tragedies.**

famous “White Spider” – a snowfield that now melts completely in summer. “Rising temperatures have taken an unbelievable toll on the Eiger,” he says. “A lot more melted ice runs down the north face. Rockfalls are more serious and more frequent. You are protected to a certain extent during the steepest parts of the ascent, because the rocks simply fly over your head.” Nowadays, the classic route up the north face is only really possible in winter when the weather is freezing.

The problems that a professional like Scháli has encountered can also be an issue for amateurs and tourists. The Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) manages 153 mountain huts in Switzerland, many of which are potentially at risk from global warming. In 2021, for the first time ever, the SAC closed a hut, the Mutthornhütte on the Kanderfirn glacier, due to an acute risk of rockfall. It intends to rebuild the hut in a safe location. The new structure will cost 3.5 million francs.

Defying the mountains can be a costly business.

Lia Wälti



She is the beating heart and driving force of the Swiss women's national football team. Lia Wälti captained the Swiss ladies to first place in their group at the Women's World Cup in New Zealand. However, they then succumbed by a score of 5-1 to eventual cup winners Spain in the first round of the knockout stage. The professional women's game in Switzerland is still rather underdeveloped by international standards. Moreover, this is unlikely to change by the 2025 European Championships when Switzerland will host the tournament for the first time. Nonetheless, Wälti and her fellow players hope the tournament will provide a platform for promoting the next generation of female players and increasing recognition of women's football.

The 30-year-old had to move abroad to realise her dream of a professional career. Wälti currently plies her trade in one of the world's top women's leagues at London club Arsenal. The midfielder grew up in Emmental, where she used to kick a ball around with the boys on the school playground. Following spells with FC Langnau and Berne club Young Boys (YB), she moved to Germany at the age of 20 to join Turbine Potsdam, where Wälti quickly acquired the captain's armband. In 2018 came her big move to Arsenal.

Lia Wälti is not just committed to promoting women's football; she also cares deeply about the values that go with the game, such as tolerance, fairness, and diversity. Wälti wants to convey these values to society "in a positive way", as she recently told newspaper "NZZ am Sonntag". Lia Wälti has many ideas on how to do that, for example a children's book about a young woman footballer. She may not be able to change the world, but she would at least like to "make a difference".

THEODORA PETER

Credit Suisse (I): CS brand to disappear

The demise of big bank Credit Suisse (see also "Swiss Review" 4/2023) continues to make headlines, with UBS bosses announcing at the end of August that Credit Suisse (CS) is to disappear as a brand in its own right by 2025 once UBS has fully absorbed CS's Swiss business. UBS pledged on 19 March 2023 that it would take over the ailing bank, its erstwhile competitor. Back then, it remained unclear whether and in what form CS would be able to continue as an independent entity. (MUL)

Credit Suisse (II): Massive job cuts

At the end of August, UBS CEO Sergio Ermotti halted speculation over the fallout from Credit Suisse (CS), saying the integration of CS into UBS would result in 3,000 job cuts. External banking experts expect this number to be a lot higher, because Ermotti's figure does not include jobs abroad, early retirements or voluntary terminations. The "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" (NZZ) reported that around 27,000 jobs were likely to go, according to financial experts, with thousands of external specialists also set to lose their jobs on top of the many layoffs and departures. With Ermotti having earmarked 10 billion Swiss francs in cost savings, 27,000 job cuts are a minimum estimate, says the NZZ. (MUL)

Credit Suisse (III): UBS notches up a huge profit

UBS also appears to have benefited from its takeover of ailing Credit Suisse (CS), having posted a net profit of 29 billion US dollars in the second quarter of 2023 – the quarter that followed the spectacular buyout. It cost 3 billion Swiss francs for UBS to acquire its struggling competitor. The boost in earnings suggests that the value of CS was much higher. This is also good news for the Swiss authorities, with UBS deciding at the start of August to ditch a public liquidity backstop from the Swiss National Bank that was guaranteed by the federal government. UBS also terminated a 9-billion-franc loss protection agreement with the government. However, the last big bank standing remains an enormous risk for Switzerland given its de facto state guarantee, warn experts. (MUL)

SBB carrying more passengers than ever before

Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) is back in profit for the first time since 2019, having raked in 99 million Swiss francs in the first half of 2023 – a significantly improved result over the corresponding period in the previous year. The latest passenger figures are not only back to pre-pandemic levels, but are even surpassing them. A record 1.33 million people travelled by train in the first half of 2023. (MUL)

EU negotiations: time to try again

The bilateral crisis between Switzerland and the European Union (EU) is not over. A rapprochement may nonetheless be on the cards. The Federal Council aims to have defined a specific negotiation mandate by the end of the year.

THEODORA PETER

It's now over two years since negotiations broke down over an institutional framework agreement with the EU. During this time, Brussels-based Swiss chief negotiator Livia Leu has been examining ways to resolve the main sticking points, such as questions related to wage protection, state aid or access to social benefits for EU citizens in Switzerland.

However, Leu will not be involved in any future negotiations. She vacated the EU job at the end of August for a move to Berlin as the Swiss ambassador to Germany. The time is ripe for change, the 62-year-old said in interviews with the press. The Federal Council approved the parameters for a formal negotiating mandate with the EU at the end of June, while she was still in office. "This is a very important step towards negotiations," asserted the outgoing state secretary. She presided over ten rounds of exploratory talks as well as about 30 technical meetings. However, it's still all to play for: "We've made our move, but we still have to score."

New state secretary on the ball

The metaphorical ball has now been passed to Leu's successor Alexandre Fasel. The new state secretary at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs is the sixth Swiss top diplomat to take on the intricate EU dossier. The 62-year-old Fribourg native has spent almost his whole career in the diplomatic service, including spells as ambassador in London and most recently as special representative for science diplomacy in Geneva. However, he also worked at Credit Suisse at the start of the noughties, where he spent three years in charge of Formula 1 sponsoring. When asked by a journalist whether his passion for speed would find an outlet in the EU negotiations, Fasel answered diplomatically: "I am also enough of a mountain man to realise that steady progress is what takes you furthest."

The red lines

The Federal Council has set out its red lines for new negotiations with the parameters issued before the summer break. The small print is understandably not in the public domain. Nonetheless, the government has clearly confirmed its goal: "To stabilise the current bilateral path and develop it in a customised way." That means the Federal Council does not just want to renew the previous agreements – including free movement of persons – but also to



Outgoing chief negotiator Livia Leu shares a football metaphor:

"We've made our move, but we still have to score."

Alexandre Fasel is the sixth Swiss top diplomat in nine years to take on the intricate EU dossier. Photos: Keystone

conclude new treaties, on the supply of electricity for example. The government also wants Switzerland to rejoin the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, as the country's scientific and research community has



felt the impact of having been downgraded to "non-associated third country" status (see 5/22 October edition of Swiss Review).

By the end of the year, the exploratory talks should be at a stage where the Federal Council can decide whether it wants to resume formal negotiations with the EU from 2024. However, it may well take longer than that to resolve the current bilateral crisis.

[revue.link/europapolitik](https://www.revue.link/europapolitik)

Switzerland and its bench culture

Whether by the woods, lakes, on the mountain slopes or in the city parks: wherever you go in Switzerland, you are never too far from a bench. The bench is not just a handy place to sit; it is also a policy tool. The bench is at the interface between keeping up appearances and having fun in public areas.

DENISE LACHAT

It is reasonable to assume that a person would not spend hours standing on a street corner observing the passers-by. However, a person doing exactly that while sitting on a bench would barely merit a second glance. In fact, this person could even engage in conversation with complete strangers, talk freely and get to know people. That's why older, single people sometimes spend whole afternoons on the bench at the bus stop. "People like to sit near the action," says Sabina Ruff, who is in charge of the social environment in the town of Frauenfeld in Thurgau. She mentions Bullingerplatz in Zurich and the Zollhaus terrace, also in Zurich. "You have trains going there, bicycles, pedestrians and cars too. Sechseläutenplatz in Zurich is another good example: it has lots of chairs for people to place where they wish to sit."

The social aspect

The bench is indeed a place for socialising, confirms Renate Albrecher. The sociologist should know – she works as a research assistant at the

Laboratory of Urban Sociology at ETH Lausanne and has founded an association to promote Switzerland's bench culture. This association maps the locations of benches in Switzerland and shares information on benches that people generally don't know about, supported by many like-minded people who upload their photos to the platform. Albrecher says that the first Swiss benches were located at crossroads and stations – in other words, places to watch people coming and going. As tourism grew, benches were placed wherever there was a good view to encourage visitors to come. One of the first tourist benches was at the famous Giessbach waterfalls in the canton of Berne. It enabled people to contemplate wild nature, which was something of a motif for artists at the time. Moreover, as hiking trails emerged in

tandem with the appearance of benches, "the English did not have to soil their fine footwear," notes the sociologist. Nowadays benches are simply part of the scenery in the great Swiss outdoors, whether at lakes, rivers, or in the mountains. Their ubiquity even in the remotest places of the smallest tourist location is also due to the efforts of the many associations working to make their locations more attractive. After all, these associations have two hundred years of experience in the art of bench placement.

The functional bench

In urban areas, by contrast, benches can be found at less attractive locations. No view, street noise – but there's a bench. Jenny Leuba, project manager at Pedestrian Mobility Swit-

From simple to sturdy to futuristic. From lakes and parks to village streets and city centres. Benches in Switzerland come in all shapes and sizes. Photos: Keystone (4), provided (1)



zerland, can explain. The bench may be halfway between the shopping centre and bus stop or on a steep incline. “Some people, especially the elderly, need somewhere to catch their breath and take a break,” explains Leuba, thus alluding to another purpose of the bench: people need to be able to move around town on foot. That includes older people, families with children, the sick, people with injuries or disabilities and the people accompanying them. These pedestrians need somewhere to sit. Benches add cohesiveness to districts and let people recharge their batteries. Renate Albrecher refers to benches as filling stations for pedestrians.

Part of mobility planning

Jenny Leuba has designed bench placement concepts in several cities and municipalities in Switzerland and, in doing so, has come to an astonishing realisation. Although a bench costs between up to five thousand Swiss francs, the authorities do not know how many benches are in their city. She believes this is because of the arbitrary allocation of responsibility for squares, parks and streets. “There is no department responsible

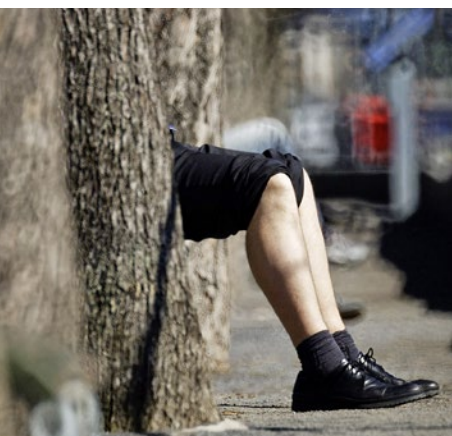


Renate Albrecher, founder and president of the association in support of benches in Switzerland (Verein zur Förderung der Schweizer Bankkultur) finds wood the best material for benches. In fact, most bench users prefer wood. Photo: François Wavre, Lundi13

for public areas, so we’re lacking that overview.” That is also why benches tend to be overlooked in mobility planning. “There is no one to lobby for benches,” laments Albrecher. The three experts agree that most cities have potential for expanding their bench network. Moreover, they argue that benches are not in the places in which they would be most used, for example in residential areas where many old people live: “The further you go from the centre, the fewer benches you find.”

Conflicting needs

Wood is Renate Albrecher’s favourite material. Most people also prefer wood, according to surveys. However, city councils prefer something longer-lasting and resistant to vandalism, and possibly even with the ability to stop cars. Hence the prevalence of concrete and metal. However, it’s hard for senior citizens to stand up when seated on a block of concrete and metal is too hot in summer and too cold in winter. How can public areas, which “by definition belong to everyone”, as Sabina Ruff points out, be accessible to everyone at any time of night or day? The key is participation. Albrecher has developed a straightforward browser app as part of a European research project that has been tested in Munich as well as in other places. It is a success: “People who use benches and don’t normally contribute to things like this also cooperated.” District inspections are being organised in Swiss cities at the instigation of Health Promo-



tion Switzerland. And they are also yielding results. “The authorities are now more aware of the issue,” says Jenny Leuba of Pedestrian Mobility Switzerland.

The outdoor living room

As seating around stations has been removed or made less comfortable in recent years to discourage people from lingering too long, some Swiss cities have developed a trend by bringing a living-room atmosphere to public spaces. This is done by blocking off sections of road or converting carparks. In Berne, for example, part of Waisenhausplatz has had a stage, seating, play areas and green islands during the summer since 2018. As it’s just a temporary arrangement (during summer), there was no need for a long and involved approval process and the project was implemented quickly, says Claudia Luder, project manager for Design and Utilisation at Berne Directorate of Civil Engineering. She also manages the Kompetenzzentrum öffentlicher Raum (centre of competence for public areas),

“We need urban areas with something to offer, so people will enjoy spending time there.”

Sabina Ruff

which promotes cooperation between the different departments in Berne and the locals – a prime example of coordination and participation. Temporary installations also reduce concerns about noise and littering, says Luder, referring to the conflicting uses of an area with facilities on offer. These issues are mitigated either through positive experiences with provisional arrangements, as in Berne, or through some technical tricks, something Jenny Leuba knows about. Two benches facing each other appeal to big groups, as do well-lit places. Niches are also popular. The city of Chur also has a good approach

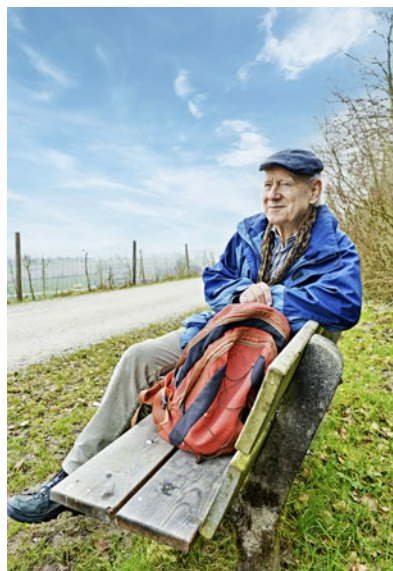
to public seating: shop owners place brightly coloured benches outside during the day and take them in at night, says Leuba.

In conclusion, some Swiss cities and municipalities are on the way – each at their own pace – to organising public areas similar to what Sabina Ruff discovered to her delight in Ljubljana during the summer. That is where Slovenian architect and urbanist Jože Plečnik hailed from. Plečnik celebrated the city as a stage for life, and public areas as a venue for community and democracy, says Ruff. That is what is needed: town planning that focuses on the needs of the people. As Ruff puts it: “We need urban areas with something to offer, so people will enjoy spending time there.”

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Running the gamut – from clean benches and graffitied benches, to weather-worn benches and pristine red benches in Alpine forests.

Photos: Keystone



CBD oil in Switzerland – popular but banned

Since the end of 2022, chemists and other retail outlets in Switzerland have been prohibited from selling edible cannabidiol (CBD) oil, a cannabis-derived product that is said to relieve pain and anxiety. This ban is counterproductive, say some within the medical and pharmacy professions.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

In recent years, people of all ages in Switzerland have become accustomed to going to their local chemist or specialist outlet to buy cannabidiol (CBD) oil, one of the numerous compounds found in cannabis. They use the oil to relieve stress, pain and insomnia. CBD oil can be inhaled, consumed orally or absorbed through the skin. “CBD oil is popular among a wide range of people,” says a Fribourg chemist who specialises in herbal medicine. “For example, I have a mother who buys it for her autistic son. It’s better than taking antipsychotics.”

Yet some retailers decided to stop selling CBD oil at the end of 2022. This was in response to a federal circular prohibiting the sale of CBD oil except with the addition of a substance to make the product unsuitable for consumption – you then apply the oil to your skin instead. CBD oil is now prescription-only. Any doctor who prescribes it must inform the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) every time they do so. In most cases, the cost of the prescription will not be covered.

No nutritional or medical value

The pushback against CBD oil began in Geneva, where the cantonal chemist conducted a series of tests revealing issues related to the amount of CBD and THC (tetrahydrocannabinol, the principal psychoactive constituent of cannabis) in certain products, which was sometimes found to be “above the toxicological reference value”. “These products cannot be sold because they fail to meet nutritional guidelines and are not sufficiently safe,” says Geneva’s cantonal chemist Patrick Eder. “If a product has no nutritional or medical value, we cannot include it in our list,” explains his Neuchâtel counterpart Yann Berger. “As such, there is no need to test it. We have prohibited it, full stop.”

“Little risk of addiction”

The Swiss Association for Rheumatology Patients rejects this view. “How will patients in pain continue to have access to edible CBD oil?” asks spokesperson Patrick Frei. Board member of the Swiss Society of Cannabis in Medicine, Barbara Broers, is a doctor herself: “We must abide by the law, that goes without saying. And what we had was a less-than-perfect situation. But it was a fairly expensive product to buy. People took a few drops before bedtime – there was little risk of addiction. Consuming



CBD oil is probably better than taking benzodiazepines, buying products in shops or online without advice from a chemist, or smoking CBD flowers for that matter.”

CBD producer Frederic Couderc at his cannabis plantation in Sierre. Photo: Keystone

Ignoring the ban

Some are ignoring the ban. The aforementioned chemist from Fribourg continues to order CBD oil from Swiss and German wholesalers, saying he refers to a data sheet to confirm the CBD content in each product he buys. A chemist in Berne says her CBD products will soon be out of stock. She will not be ordering any more, even though she wants to. The vice-chair of the trade association of the Swiss cannabis industry, Cédric Heeb, believes the ban has had a considerable impact on CBD manufacturing in Switzerland. “The people who bought CBD oil were normal people like you and me,” he says. Heeb’s Geneva-based company PhytoXtract is one of the rare businesses to have successfully transitioned to manufacturing a CBD oil approved by Swissmedic, the national authority responsible for the authorisation and supervision of therapeutic products. “The rest of the market is online.”

Meanwhile, a proportion of customers have reverted to smoking CBD. Doesn’t this defeat the object of the ban? “Smokeable CBD is a tobacco product and regulated as such,” says Alda Breitenmoser, who heads the Swiss Association of Cantonal Chemists and tells us she understands the level of feeling on this issue. “But if there is a risk to consumers, we have a duty to act.”

Switzerland's champion voters

Schaffhausen, the most northerly canton in Switzerland, consistently boasts the highest turnout in national elections and popular votes. It is also the only canton where voting is mandatory. But this is not the only reason why people there are so keen to go to the polls.

SUSANNE WENGER

Shortly before arriving in the town of Schaffhausen, we catch a glimpse of the majestic Rhine Falls from the window of our train – a huge torrent of water thundering over the cliffs. This natural wonder and national attraction is Schaffhausen's calling card. The 86,000 people who live in the canton of Schaffhausen have a different claim to fame, albeit one much less well known: nowhere else in Switzerland is voter turnout so high, surpassing the national average by 15 to 20 percentage points for elections and popular votes at federal level.

For example, the three federal votes of 2022 saw an average voter turnout in Schaffhausen of 66 per cent, compared to a paltry 45 per cent across Switzerland. Some 60 per cent of the Schaffhausen electorate exercised their voting rights in the 2019 National Council elections. The average nationwide turnout was only 45 per cent. Switzerland will elect a new parliament in October, coinciding with the publication of this edition of "Swiss Review". Schaffhausen's voters will likely return to the ballot box in droves. Why is turnout in this northerly canton higher than anywhere else in Switzerland?

"In our DNA"

Maybe Schaffhausen's picturesque old quarter can give us a clue. Christian Ritzmann, the deputy chancellor of the canton of Schaffhausen, works here in the government building. He is one of the people responsible for coordinating elections and popular votes in the canton. "Voting is deeply ingrained in Schaffhausen," he says. "It is in our DNA." But there is another factor at play. Voting has been mandatory in Schaffhausen for almost 150



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records.
This edition: The keenest voters of them all.

Schaffhausen is the epitome of a border canton. It shares 152 kilometres of its boundary with Germany and only 33 kilometres with its two neighbouring cantons Zurich and Thurgau.



years. It was also mandatory in other cantons after the creation of the modern federal Swiss state, but only in Schaffhausen does the obligation still apply.

If you miss any vote, you must pay a small fine of six Swiss francs to your municipality. That is unless you have a good excuse, e.g. holidays, professional commitments, illness. Or if you return your blank voting papers no later than three days after the relevant election or popular vote. Hence the obligation to vote is a lot less strict in practice, says Ritzmann. "It is a civic duty, but we are not coercing people."

Schaffhausen, a small canton on the border

Mandatory voting – which does not apply to people aged 65 or over, nor to Schaffhausen natives living abroad – seems to enjoy wide acceptance among the local population. A popular initiative to abolish it was rejected at the ballot box 40 years ago. People view the obligation to vote as a Schaffhausen speciality, says Ritzmann. They are in favour of it, because politics is deeply rooted in Schaffhausen. The canton is relatively small, and there is a greater proximity and familiarity between policymakers and the public. "You can bump into our politicians in the pedestrian precinct, on the bus and in restaurants." Although the mone-



tary penalty is more symbolic than anything else, it may also be playing a role to encourage people to vote, says Hannes Germann, long-time Schaffhausen SVP member of the Council of States. "Who wants to pay the state more than absolutely necessary?" But political awareness is another key factor, he adds, attributable among other things to Schaffhausen's location on the border with Germany. This led to tensions before and during the Second World War in particular. "Consequently, people felt compelled to talk about politics."

Civic duty

"We have a lively political scene with many stakeholders both young and old," says Germann's election opponent Simon Stocker, who is standing as the local SP candidate for the Council of States. Stocker believes that mandatory voting has a positive influence. He says that people also regard their civic duty as a privilege, so they would probably still vote in high numbers even if they were not formally obliged to do so. Not that he would ever want to scrap obligatory voting, he hastens to add. Many others share his view. "Mandatory voting is unique and it belongs to Schaffhausen."

Schaffhausen's weekly market is just a short stroll from the cantonal government building. Among the market-goers are voices both for and against mandatory voting. "It should be optional," says a 42-year-old care provider who insists she would still vote regardless. Many only go to the ballot box to save money, not because they are genuinely interested. Others who wish to vote, like the mentally handicapped, are unable to do so. "Mandatory voting is no bad thing," counters an



84-year-old former railway worker. It means that no one can complain about the result.

Follow Schaffhausen's lead?

Do the many people who vote in Schaffhausen actually feel engaged or slightly pressured? It is a little bit of both, say the experts. Political scientists Eveline Schwegler and Thomas Milic have found that the proportion of blank ballots – without

a yes or a no – is higher in Schaffhausen than in other cantons, suggesting a certain degree of cynicism among voters. Some go to the polls to avoid the fine, and don't bother to read up on the respective proposals. However, Schwegler and Milic also say that voter turnout in Schaffhausen is still the highest even after you deduct the small percentage of these blank ballots.

In other cantons as well as at federal level, there have been various

National attraction and Schaffhausen's calling card – the magnificent, breathtaking Rhine Falls.

Photo: Keystone

motions aimed at copying the Schaffhausen model, the ritual complaint being that not even half of the electorate in Switzerland bother to vote on average – quite a contrast from the halcyon days of the early 20th century, when the turnout in National Council elections was 80 per cent. One of the reasons for the decline in turnout is that people feel less attached to political parties than they used to be. Hence parties are less able to mobilise voters, says

Daniel Kübler, a political scientist at the Aarau Centre for Democracy Studies.

Low turnout can become a problem if the results are not respected, according to Kübler. “But people in Switzerland are good at accepting voting results, regardless of how close the outcome is or how low the turnout was.” The way that the Swiss political system is structured means that election results, in particular, affect the composition of government less than they would in other countries. This also explains our relatively low election turnouts, says Kübler. If you don’t vote in the election, you can still participate in direct democracy several times a year. And when a popular vote is regarded as important, participation can easily

skyrocket. The highest turnout in recent decades was when 79 per cent voted in 1992 on whether Switzerland should join the European Economic

Voting has been mandatory in Schaffhausen for almost 150 years. It was also mandatory in other cantons after the creation of the modern federal Swiss state, but only in Schaffhausen does the obligation still apply.

“Voting is deeply ingrained in Schaffhausen,” says Christian Ritzmann, who is one of the people responsible for coordinating elections and popular votes in the canton.

Photo: SWE

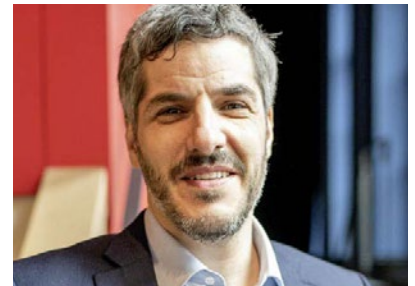


SVP member of the Council of States, Hannes Germann, attributes Schaffhausen’s political culture to the canton’s location on the border with Germany – a source of tension during the Second World War. Photo: parlament.ch



For SP politician Simon Stocker, mandatory voting is a privilege. “It is unique and belongs to Schaffhausen.”

Photo provided



Area. Essentially, it is desirable in any democracy for voter turnout to be as high as possible. Mandatory voting has had an impact in Schaffhausen, but it only goes so far, says Kübler. The level of interest in the issues at hand is, in his view, the main factor shown to affect turnout. Political education at school is, therefore, all the more important. “Switzerland does way too little in this regard compared to neighbouring democracies.”

We gaze again at the foaming Rhine Falls as our train leaves Schaffhausen – a mass of water as refreshing as the canton’s approach to voting.

The picturesque old quarter of Schaffhausen epitomises the diminutive canton, where policymakers and the public enjoy greater proximity. Politicians are often seen around the town. Photo: Keystone

Voter participation among the Swiss Abroad is quite a bit lower than in the canton of Schaffhausen. Visit page 22 for an analysis of voting behaviour in the “Fifth Switzerland”.



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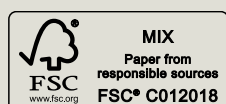
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Emma, Emma & Emma

11,637



When parents call to Emma on the playground in a few years, more than one head will turn: Emma was once again the most popular first name for newborns in 2022. The number of Emmas rose to 11,637. Noah tops the list for boys. And yet, the 82,371 births last year mean there is a huge variety of first names in Switzerland. Source: Federal Statistical Office

5,299

Anyone looking for cooler weather in the Alps this summer would have noticed: the zero-degree line was often well above the highest peaks – on 20 August it was 5,299 metres above sea level, its highest level since records began. Source: MeteoSwiss

622

Switzerland leads the world when it comes to popular votes. The people have decided on 622 issues since 1900. If cantonal votes were included, the number would easily be ten times higher. In second place after Switzerland is New Zealand (117 referendums), then Liechtenstein (115) followed by – would you have guessed? – the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in the Pacific Ocean (110). Source: Centre for Democracy Studies, Aarau

61

Amid the hot weather, the results of a major survey of 57,000 people on the level of satisfaction among the Swiss emerged in election year. The general picture: the majority are basically satisfied. 61 out of 100 respondents said they are doing well. Source: gfs Bern

69

So, what are the flies in the ointment for the otherwise content Swiss? 69% of respondents cited climate change as the main issue. Other hotly debated election issues were met with indifference by many: “wokeness” and “gender” are seen as pseudo-issues. Immigration, neutrality and equality are only of moderate interest in most cases.

1



One last finding from the survey: the vast majority of all respondents wait a month or more before changing their bed linen. What that tells us about happiness in the country is anybody's guess.

Recycling is not the panacea for Switzerland's plastic addiction

Switzerland consumes a million tonnes of plastic every year, a large proportion of which is incinerated. Only a small amount is recycled. Some 14,000 tonnes end up in the environment. Plastic recycling is increasing, but so is plastic consumption.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

According to the environmental organisation Pro Natura, Les Grangettes wetland nature reserve, situated on the old Rhône delta at the eastern end of Lake Geneva, serves as a habitat for a multitude of amphibians and insects. The Association for the Safeguarding of Lake Geneva is a joint French and Swiss NGO that combed 25 different parts of the lake's shoreline and found Les Grangettes to be infested with plastic. "The most ecologically valuable spot on Lake Geneva also happens to be teeming with the most plastic," it said.

"Swiss plastic consumption is high by international standards, so our country certainly contributes to this increasing environmental problem," concluded a report by the Federal Council in September 2022.

Data models show that Swiss consumption has increased to around one million tonnes a year, which corresponds to 120 kg of plastic per capita. The Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) does not provide any other comparative European data. Switzerland generates 790,000 tonnes of plastic waste – a veritable mountain – almost half of which

comes from products used for less than one year. What happens to this waste? More than 80 percent of it is incinerated and converted into energy for district heating networks, among other things. A small proportion is recycled or reused (about 15%). Then you have the 14,000 or so tonnes that go missing every year and find their way into the soil, water and air, according to the Federal Council report. Littering alone accounts for 2,700 tonnes of this total. Almost 50 tonnes of macroplastics end up in our soil due to accidental loss during the transportation stage

How clean is Switzerland really? Plastic waste on Lake Geneva's shoreline, in Le Fort nature reserve near Bouveret. (VD). Photo: Keystone





of the waste disposal process, says the same report. Ten tonnes of cotton buds and other hygiene products are thrown into toilets and then released into surface waters. The total also includes microplastics (see box).

New collection systems

Is there a cure for this problem? “Like PET, which is fully recyclable, we need a national plan for plastic, covering the entire life cycle from production to treatment,” says Jasmine Voide, project manager at the Swiss Recycling Association (SRA). As it currently stands, the extremely complex nature of plastics complicates or sometimes prevents recycling. But plastic also has unique properties, says the SRA. These help to protect food, for example.

According to Greenpeace, whenever we recycle a plastic product made from toxic chemicals, their harmful substances can end up in the recycled plastic. Nevertheless, new collection systems for non-PET plastic now allow the processing of items like milk cartons, bottles and crisp packets. InnoGruppe, based in Thur-

gau, says it collected more than 7,000 tonnes of plastic in 2022 across a network of 500 municipalities that are subsidising the collection of household plastic waste. The company, whose customers include Migros and Coop, has a recycling rate of around 63 percent. The rubbish is collected in prepaid waste bags and sent to a sorting and treatment plant in Austria, which turns the plastic back into plastic granules to be sold on to customers in Europe. InnoGruppe intends to build a plant in Thurgau and collect some 20,000 tonnes of plastic every year, says company spokesperson Patrik Ettl. Meanwhile, Migros has confirmed it collected 3,200 tonnes of (non-PET) plastic bottles and 500 tonnes of plastic bags in 2022.

Photo: Keystone

Growth in consumption

“Plastic recycling is increasing, but so is plastic consumption,” says Florian Breider, director of the Central Environmental Laboratory at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL). “Furthermore, the whole process burns energy.” According to FOEN, Switzerland’s plastic carbon footprint accounts for around five percent of its total carbon footprint. “The pullovers, watering cans and other items into which our plastic bottles are recycled cannot be recycled again,” writes Jacques Exbalin, who has published a book on combating plastic waste. Greenpeace questions the fundamental rationale for taking recycling into the private sector. Demand for plastic to feed the recycling process will fuel further plastic production, it says, not least because major oil companies are starting to diversify towards plastics as the world moves towards electric transportation. The

world produces more than 400 million tonnes of plastic every year. Florian Breider: “It is wrong to think that everything will be OK if we separate our plastic waste. We need to be producing things that are designed to last for as long as possible, and are as easy as possible to recycle.” Breider laments the huge waste of single-use plastics, and calls mineral water bottles “pointless” given how clean Swiss tap water is. Greenpeace believes measures to improve waste collection simply amount to greenwashing. It calls for a transition to reusable packaging systems.

Microplastics in the soil, water and air

In Switzerland, tyre abrasion is the largest source of plastics entering the environment (8,900 tonnes a year), according to FOEN. Around 100 tonnes of microplastics also enters the soil via compost every year. The washing and wearing of synthetic clothing is a recognised source of microplastics in the environment, as are cosmetic products, from which three tonnes of plastic microbeads are released annually. Yet it is almost impossible to eliminate microplastic waste – and our wildlife is paying the price. A 2014 study found small amounts of microplastic in the digestive tracts of birds and fish in Switzerland. The effect of plastic on human health is still unknown, says Florian Breider, who is participating in a study to determine how much plastic we actually have in our lungs. Another problem is that plastics contain additives designed to impart certain properties, such as making them softer. But manufacturers only open up to customers on this issue if there is marketing benefit to be gained from doing so, adds Breider. “Trumpeting the virtues of BPA-free dummies for babies is one example.” (SH)

A utopian one hundred years ahead of his time

Jakob Vetsch's 1923 utopian novel "Die Sonnenstadt" anticipates many of the things people want most in today's society.



Jakob Vetsch
(1879-1942)

CHARLES LINSMAYER

A book entitled "Die Sonnenstadt. Ein Roman aus der Zukunft für die Gegenwart" (which translates as "The sunshine city. A novel from the future for the present") was published in Zurich in 1923. The author was a certain "Mundus", who identifies himself at the end of the foreword as "Dr. jur. & phil. J. Vetsch", "in order to immediately provide a provisional rallying point for the desired gathering of like-minded people." Jakob Vetsch was born in Nesslau, in the canton of St Gallen, in 1879. He studied German philology and jurisprudence and became secretary of the Swiss beer brewers' association in 1916. In 1918, he married the daughter of a major shareholder in a brewery. And, as he noted sarcastically, he would have had "an honourable and comfortable old age in a happy family circle, lining his nest with well-paid directorships", if he had not gone down a different path with his novel. The teachers, politicians and priests to whom Vetsch gave his book could not hide their amazement at the helpless rage with which the trustee of a trade association savaged the capitalist economy. They weren't to know that Vetsch had accepted a settlement from his future father-in-law of a million Swiss francs to marry his daughter, who was suffering from a genetic condition, and raise a child (suffering from the same condition) with her...

A global urbanist utopia

Vetsch's Mundism is a global utopia with shades of urbanism. In 2100, the world is divided into the five "countries" of Europe, Asia, America, Africa and Australia, comprising 25,000 cities. The "countries" are each governed by 20 sages and a father of the nation, while the global government

comprises 50 "national" delegates. Sunshine city Zurich is the setting for the novel and the place where life in the utopia is portrayed via a love story. Money has been abolished; people are given what they need. Everyone keeps studying for decades and, in return for the privilege, does temporary work, and no one is expected to do any more than that. Sex-

"Men arose who were horrified by the poverty in the world. And they realised what stood in the way of world brotherhood: money and capitalism. They weren't afraid to say it, even at the risk of being labelled communists. They stood together all over the world and global unity among all people drove them. They called themselves and their supporters 'Mundists' and their aim was global government and global stewardship."

(Excerpt from Jakob Vetsch's "Die Sonnenstadt", most recent edition Ex Libris-Verlag, Zurich, out of print)

uality is independent of marriage, birth control and contraception are organised by the government, and marriage can be dissolved after five years. The working week lasts 25 hours, and the remaining time is for – artistic – development. Nature conservation has priority in uninhabited areas and the huge demand for electricity is met by hydro, solar, wind and tidal power stations. Emancipation has also been achieved to the extent that a woman, whether a mother or not, is guaranteed "the development of her own personality".

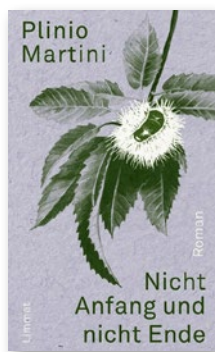
An unfortunate outcome

"Die Sonnenstadt" was evangelistic, but Mundism failed to catch on. The 40,000 books issued triggered a venomous response from the media and Vetsch had to file for bankruptcy in 1924. When his wife's family tried to have him committed for being mentally unstable, he left his wife and moved, first to Liechtenstein and then to Oberägeri in the canton of Zug in 1934, where he was mayor until his death in 1942. He never published another line. "A people without curiosity is like soup without salt," is how Walter Robert Corti, founder of Pestalozzi Children's Village in Trogen, in the canton of Appenzell, described Vetsch's fate. "Curious people suffer more than most, but there is always something to learn from them."

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Die Sonnenstadt" was last published in 1982 in the Ex Libris edition "Frühling der Gegenwart". Second-hand copies are still available.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST BASED IN ZURICH

The tale of a valley



PLINIO MARTINI:
“Nicht Anfang und nicht Ende”, translated from Italian by Trude Fein. Limmat Verlag publisher, Zurich 2023, 240 pages. 32 francs.

Ticino has changed more than any other region in Switzerland over the past hundred years. Once a poor canton, it is now a tourist hotspot. Plinio Martini provides a stark reminder of this divide in “Il fondo del sacco” (1970), which has just been published in German as “Nicht Anfang und nicht Ende”. It is set at the end of the 1920s in Val Bavona, a wild and beautiful lateral valley in Vallemaggia. Few employment prospects and large families often left the young men of the area with no option but to emigrate. Many of them would sing: “America, America, America, / in America voglio andar!” However, not everyone wanted them to go. The older inhabitants were worried that their children would never return because they would be successful somewhere else, or because they would not be successful and would feel too ashamed to return. Martini’s narrator Gori Valdi is one of

the emigrants. He signed an employment contract before he and his sweetheart Maddalena could declare their love for each other. He leaves home with a heavy heart.

Eighteen years later, Gori returns. Maddalena died shortly after his departure. He made money in America but is left disillusioned. Plinio Martini, who stayed in the region all his life, uses Gori to show how poor the people are in Val Bavona. Martini pulls no punches with his vivid and precise presentation of the poverty, always framed within the context of Gori’s quiet longing to return to his roots. There were some positive sides to being poor: the strong sense of community and melancholy songs, some of the things Gori missed in America. When he returns he finds the place rather stale. One of his first observations: “I’m still cursing the train that took me away.” A deep sorrow pervades his narrative as he yearns for the old days. “I began to realise that happiness can come out of nothing, and that I had lost this nothing that makes people happy.” Martini’s novel is a wonderful tale of longing as well as a touching romantic drama. However, it is first and foremost a splendid tale of time gone by. The book is replete with marvellous characters, captivating stories and twists and turns of fate, “most of which actually happened”. It was Martini’s prerogative as the author to develop some stories as dictated by his own imagination, and he did.

BEAT MAZENAUER

The music of a mid-life free of crisis



JAËL:
“Midlife”.
Phonag, 2023.

She can’t escape her musical past. Whenever Jaël releases a new solo album, a not insignificant portion of the public hope for a return to her musical roots – something reminiscent of the trip-hop created by Jaël’s successful band Lunik in its early days.

Lunik split up ten years ago. The band’s former lead singer, who was born in Berne, has now released her third album under her own name. It’s called “Midlife” and – as the title suggests – is about the life of a 43-year-old woman going through middle age. There is no hint of crisis in this album: the mother of two is content with her lot. She is married, has a good family life and is at peace with herself. In fact, she is doing much better than in her mid-thirties, as she has said in recent

interviews. The depression and panic attacks of yesteryear have been brought under control.

The tone of “Midlife” is thus positive and relaxed. It’s about holding on and letting go and much more besides. In “She Only Sings When She’s Drunk”, Jaël addresses alcohol abuse, and “Paralyzed” is about a sexual assault that she herself suffered. In “Only Human”, she sings again about being a mother: mothers shouldn’t be too hard on themselves. After all, they are only human.

Jaël’s voice remains as crystal-clear and high as ever, although it has a more mature edge to it now. The fragile song “Midlife” has a strong piano and acoustic guitar component, but its light, warm production is rich in depth and range.

No, “Midlife” does not sound like Lunik – despite “To Miss You”, a song Jaël wrote with her former fellow band member Luk Zimmermann and immortalised by including it on the album. And that’s alright. “Midlife” is a standalone, chilled, harmonious and mature pop album all rolled together. “IiTii” is the only exception: it’s about how the singer sometimes feels like an extraterrestrial in this world. “IiTii” is also Jaël’s first song in her local dialect to appear on a regular album. Moreover, “Midlife” comes in two parts. The studio production with 11 new songs is followed by live recordings from the last acoustic tour. Whether that really adds something is a matter of taste.

MARKO LEHTINEN

Expatriate voters double down or deviate – but they never tip the scales

How have the Swiss Abroad voted in the last four years? We have analysed the results of the last 36 federal popular votes – and our findings are nuanced.

MARC LETTAU UND THEODORA PETER

The “Fifth Switzerland” confounded many with its distinctly green voting in the 2019 elections, which saw the Green Party make big gains among the domestic electorate but perform twice as well among expatriate voters. However, elections are a different proposition to the many popular votes that take place at federal level during a legislative period. Which begs the question: how have the Swiss Abroad voted during the last four years? How have they influenced the national result of each vote? And is it possible to identify definitive patterns in their voting behaviour? To get the big picture, “Swiss Review” took a closer look at the detailed results of the last 36 popular votes. In over a third of these votes – 14 out of 36 – the expatriate result was very similar to the domestic result, with just a few percentage points separating both. There was no significant difference. It is a simple and banal statement to make, but the “Fifth Switzerland” often thinks the same as Switzerland as a whole. We subsequently turned our attention to voting results showing a difference of five or more percentage points. This is what we found:

Doubling down

The “Fifth Switzerland” likes to double down. In 14 out of 36 proposals, it underscored the domestic vote by voting yes or no much more emphatically than the domestic electorate. This was particularly the case on social and ethical issues. For example, a much higher proportion of Swiss Abroad voted yes to paternity leave (+18.2 percentage points), the revised Transplantation Act (+16.2), an increase in the OASI pension age for women (+7.5), and “Marriage for all” (+7.1). The Swiss Abroad doubled down on the domestic no vote when they voted against the initiative to limit immigration: their rejection was a good 15 percentage points higher than the domestic result. They went with the tide – and then some – on all the above issues.

Deviating

A quarter of all votes – nine out of 36 – revealed a clear difference of opinion between domestic and expatriate voters, with a resounding yes in the “Fifth Switzerland” contradicting a no back at home – or vice versa. This is where we can make the link to the 2019 elections, in that the Swiss Abroad provided a “corrective” counterview mainly on green, environmental issues. Unlike Switzerland as a whole, they said yes to the Clean Drinking Water Initiative, yes to the CO₂ Act and yes to the initiative to end factory farming. Their biggest deviation was on the CO₂ Act, which failed at the ballot box in 2021. A whopping majority of the expatriate electorate, 72.2 per cent, approved the legislation – almost 23 percentage points more than the overall yes vote.

Conclusion no. 1: the Swiss Abroad vote in three different ways

After evaluating the 36 votes that took place during the most recent legislative period, we can safely say the following: the Swiss Abroad know what they want (and what they don’t want), but they are not an unpredictable, exotic or contrary electorate. They vote in three different ways: they confirm, they double down, or they deviate. They double down on social and ethical issues, and swim against the domestic tide of scepticism on environmental proposals.

Conclusion no. 2: the “Fifth Switzerland” never tips the scales

Expatriate voters never tip the scales either way. And none of the 36 votes of the last four years proved to be an exception to this rule. Their voice is simply too weak. The registered voters of the “Fifth Switzerland” account for only around four per cent of the entire electorate. If their yes or no vote is emphatic, they can have a marginal influence on the overall result – about 0.5 percentage points. But the expatriate vote usually has much less weight than that: only about 0.2 percentage points on average, based on all 36 votes.

Conclusion no. 3: Toeing the government line

Government-submitted voting proposals often meet with more approval in the “Fifth Switzerland” than in Switzerland itself, it has long been argued. The results of the last 36 votes show nothing to suggest otherwise. However, if we take voting recommendations by the Federal Council as our starting point, Swiss at home and abroad both toe the government line more or less to the same extent. The domestic electorate rejected Berne’s recommendation in 12 out of 36 votes. Voters abroad did so 13 times.

Conclusion no. 4: the Swiss Abroad are gaining political weight

Its influence may be relatively limited, but the “Fifth Switzerland” is gaining political weight. The number of Swiss Abroad on the electoral register is steadily increasing – and, in relative terms, increasing three times faster than the total number of Swiss Abroad. According to the Federal Statistical Office, 227,000 expatriates were eligible to vote on 31 December 2022. The “Fifth Switzerland” is, therefore, on the way to outstripping the canton of Ticino in political weight.

For background information on our analysis, visit revue.link/vote



Switzerland moves one step closer to NATO

The Federal Council wants to join the European Sky Shield air defence system. This goes beyond simply contributing to the procurement of air defence systems. Critics argue it jeopardises the principle of neutrality.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought home to European countries how ill-prepared they would have been for such an attack. The war has demonstrated how important it is to defend airspace. In autumn 2022, 15 European states launched the European Sky Shield initiative in response to a proposal by Germany. The project aims to strengthen European air defence systems and close any gaps.

In the summer of 2023, Defence Minister Viola Amherd signed a declaration of intent to join the procurement initiative. The federal councillor told the media the aim is to coordinate procurement and achieve "interoperability", i.e. maximise compatibility among systems. Switzerland is free to decide to what extent it will participate. The idea is to avoid Swiss airspace forming a gap in the air defence umbrella.

Russia's war of aggression has called into question the conventional wisdom in Switzerland. It has made the Swiss realise that their national security depends on some level of cooperation with their allies, and not for the first time either. At the start of the Second World War, General Guisan ordered cooperation with the French army in the event of a German invasion.

Federal Council on shaky ground

By participating in Sky Shield, the Federal Council is on shaky ground with regard to neutrality. Defence Minister Amherd emphasised that Switzerland will not intervene in other countries' conflicts. Switzerland also included caveats under neutrality law in a supplementary declaration explicitly excluding any involvement in international military conflicts. Austria, another neutral country, is also planning to join the initiative.

However, this declaration does not appease the critics. The SVP is concerned that Switzerland is taking another step closer to NATO through its involvement in the programme and warns that Swiss neutrality may be at stake. Sky Shield does indeed bring Switzerland closer to NATO. The participating states hope to strengthen the European pillar of the Western defence alliance through the programme. It will be integrated into NATO structures. Furthermore, interoperability means that Switzerland and NATO member states are developing their ability to conduct joint operations. That amounts to more than a simple purchasing consortium to acquire weapons under improved conditions.

Those in favour of a less rigid interpretation of neutrality approve of Amherd's plans. They are firm in their con-



The plans revealed by Defence Minister Viola Amherd and Chief of the Armed Forces Thomas Süssli are taking the country a step closer to NATO.

Photo: Keystone (archive image 2020)

viction that Switzerland cannot stand alone in the event of a major conflagration. The country already benefits from NATO protection despite having made no tangible contribution to security on the European mainland during the biggest crisis in decades.

The future direction of the armed forces presented a few weeks later by Chief of the Armed Forces Thomas Süssli runs along similar lines. The focus is now on defence against military invasion – the same as during the Cold War but adapted to the current reality.

If Switzerland is at war, it is no longer bound by neutrality law. The country needs to be prepared for that scenario, according to the report on the fundamental reform of the armed forces by 2031. Switzerland must be ready to defend itself and that includes working with other forces. As standing alone is not an option, international cooperation is unavoidable, and that includes procurement.

No doubt the plans outlined by the defence ministry will lead to some lively debate about the armed forces and neutrality over the coming months.

Working for Switzerland: two reports from Haiti and Venezuela

Hanoi one day, maybe London the next. Moving among countries and cultures comes with the territory for Swiss embassy and consular staff. Every year the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) is on the lookout for professionals and managers to apply their skills in the service of their country.

Switzerland has a global presence with about 170 representations and 250 people working in “consular affairs, operations management and finance” (KBF). What makes these positions stand out is that employees change location every three to four years. Ariela Kraska (Port-au-Prince) and Pascal Sollberger (Caracas) share their experiences and talk about the challenges of a KBF career below.

“I’ll be ready for an interview at midday (CET), which is 6 a.m. in Haiti.” Setting up a phone call is not so easy when there is an entire ocean between you and your interlocutors. Ariela Kraska is on the other side of the Atlantic. Her interest in other cultures led her to embark on a career with the FDFA, which houses consular affairs, operations management and finance under its international cooperation programmes. She has been based in Port-au-Prince since July 2021, where she is head of finance, HR and administration at the Swiss Cooperation Office in the Republic of Haiti. She will stay in Port-au-Prince until 2024 and then either transfer to another Swiss representation abroad or return to the head office in Berne. “Every two to four years I have the opportunity to discover a new country and interact with people from a different background, tradition and with a different mentality. That is both enriching and challenging at the same time. The challenge is evident: the harder the setting, the more unpredictable is the course of daily business.”

Training and required skills

Most KBF employees work outside Switzerland. That can be difficult, for example if the person’s partner can’t find work locally, freedom of movement is restricted or there is a low standard of living. Adaptability and intercultural competence under what can be precarious circumstances come with the job. “The days are long and sometimes hectic. You need to be able to stay calm and maintain an

overview of all the different areas including finance, human resources and security,” says Kraska. “I recall visiting a prisoner being held in degrading conditions and working on

cases of child kidnapping.” Candidates undergo a selection process and complete a 15-month training programme. It starts with two months of theory in Berne. Then comes one year of practical training in the FDFA’s external network. The last part is another month of theory and final evaluation by the admissions committee in Berne. The training prepares employees to work towards Switzerland’s foreign policy aims and priorities: peace, security, poverty reduction, prosperity, sustainability and digitalisation.

“The harder the setting,
the more unpredictable
is the course of
daily business”

Ariela Kraska

Representing Switzerland throughout the world

KBF employees are indispensable to Switzerland being in a position to fulfil its mandate abroad. “I’ve been with the FDFA since 2014 and have worked on almost every con-



Ariela Kraska began her career in the hotel industry and subsequently completed a course in business administration. Photo provided, Charly Amazan, Getty Images (photomontage)



Pascal Sollberger is a qualified insurance economist and spent over ten years in the private sector working in insurance and process management prior to joining the FDFA. Photo provided, Pascal Sollberger, iStock (photomontage)

continent, in countries like Indonesia and Lebanon. I've been in Venezuela since 2021. The Swiss embassy in Venezuela also covers seven other Caribbean countries, including Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago," explains consul Pascal Sollberger. The staff at the representations are responsible for representing Swiss interests in all aspects of international diplomacy. KBF staff coordinate operations and act as a hub for all the departments in the foreign representation. On a day-to-day basis, that involves combining plannable and ad-hoc activities. "An embassy is both a Swiss and a local employer. Operations management, security and crisis management bring me into close contact with Swiss and Venezuelan staff, external service providers, other embassies and in-

"I've been with the FDFA since 2014 and have worked on almost every continent, in countries like Indonesia and Lebanon"

Pascal Sollberger

ternational organisations, for example the International Committee of the Red Cross." Responding quickly to critical situations is part of the KBF employees' remit. Pascal Sollberger remembers the explosion at Beirut port in 2020, which caused serious damage to the embassy. "The employees play a key part in dealing with events like that, in my case as head of crisis management. What happened that day will stay with us for a long time." Another important task is to ensure the provision of high-quality consular services for Swiss people living abroad and Swiss tourists (intercultural marriages, issuing passports, repatriations etc.) in close cooperation with the professional staff at the consulate.

FDFA

Jobs for people who like variety

The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) is looking for Swiss who are ready to apply their skills and experience in the service of Switzerland.

They will work on a relocatable basis, as employees are obliged to transfer every two to four years. The following paths are offered:

- Career "Consular affairs, operations management and finance"
- Career "International cooperation"
- Career "Diplomacy"
- Consular specialist

Would you like to offer your abilities and experience to serve Switzerland? Further information is available at www.eda.admin.ch/karriere



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The app for the Swiss abroad



swissintouch.ch



2023 federal elections

The general elections to both chambers of the federal parliament took place on 22 October 2023. For the election results plus information, explanatory videos and interactive charts about the elections to the National Council and the Council of States, visit www.ch.ch/en/wahlen2023, a service brought to you by the Federal Chancellery, the Parliamentary Services, the Federal Statistical Office and the cantons.

This information including the election results, will also appear on the Federal Chancellery app VoteInfo. To download the app, visit: revue.link/voteinfo

Due to the abovementioned federal elections, there are no further voting dates in 2023. The next voting date is 3 March 2024. The Federal Council determines voting proposals at least four months before the voting date.

Everything you need to know about these 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.

Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiatives had already been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for the collection of signatures in brackets):

- Federal Popular Initiative “For food security – by strengthening sustainable domestic production, more plant-based food and clean drinking water (Food Initiative)” (13 December 2024)
- “No to a Switzerland of 10 million! (Sustainability Initiative)” (4 January 2025)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in German at <https://www.bk.admin.ch/> > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen

Please note

Provide your Swiss representation with your email address(es) and mobile telephone number(s) and/or any changes thereto and register online (link on FDFA homepage www.eda.admin.ch or via www.swissabroad.ch), to choose the edition of “Swiss Review” and any other publications you would like to receive. Please contact your representation if you have any problems registering.

You can read and/or print the current edition of “Swiss Review” plus all editions going back to 2006 at any time at www.revue.ch. “Swiss Review” (or “Gazzetta Svizzera” in Italian) is available electronically (via email, free of charge) or in print to all Swiss Abroad addresses and by iOS-/Android app.

“At the age of 15, I returned to Switzerland alone”

The Swiss Abroad Wëndabo André Kientega came back to Switzerland from Africa to attend high school. Here he talks about his experiences at school and later during military service and at the university of applied sciences.

“I was born in the canton of Zug in 1998, but only lived there for a few years before my family moved to Neuchâtel, where I learned French and attended kindergarten and primary school.

Since my parents founded the NGO Wëndbenedo FEED to help women and children in need, we moved to Burkina Faso in 2009. We lived on the outskirts of the city of Bobo Dioulasso. Water and power cuts were the order of the day. It was a real culture shock, but also an enriching experience.

I went to a French school where most of the students were from Burkina Faso, but there were also young people of many other nationalities. Since the school did not offer a high school, I decided, also because of the teaching quality, to return to Switzerland to continue my education and meet up with my childhood friends. So, at the age of 15, I returned alone to the canton of Neuchâtel, where I completed my high school education. During these three years, I lived with family friends. Since I always visited Switzerland once a year during my time in Burkina Faso, I quickly settled in again. Nevertheless, it was difficult at first to be separated from my family.

After graduating from high school, I didn't know exactly what to do next. So, I decided to take a gap year, during which I completed recruit school in Ticino and did various internships to find my way. Finally, I found what really interested me: studying at a university of applied sciences to become an agronomist. To do this, I had to complete ten months of internships with farmers in the cantons of Fribourg, Vaud, and Geneva before I was accepted at the Haute école du paysage, d'ingénierie et d'architecture (HEPIA) in Geneva. I really like the study programme with its diverse and current topics such as Switzerland's food sovereignty, use of pesticides and organic farming.

Unfortunately, I had to extend my studies by one year because I was called up by the army as a medical soldier during the coronavirus pandemic. I was deployed to a nursing home in Lausanne to take care of elderly



Wëndabo André Kientega: “It's good to know who to ask for help or information.” Photo donated

patients in the quarantine zone. I am glad I was able to make myself useful, but it was painful to see these people isolated from their families and friends. It was a time of many uncertainties. Nevertheless, I tried to follow some online lectures on my days off. It was a difficult time, as it was for many other people.

I am now in the process of completing my bachelor's degree. My bachelor's thesis is about the use of ultraviolet radiation to combat pathogens on cultures to be able to do without fungicides. I was undecided whether I should follow the master's programme straight away or do some work first. Now I am starting a master's degree in agricultural sciences with a specialisation in sustainable production systems.

It was mainly thanks to the scholarships from my home canton of Appenzell Auser rhoden that I was able to complete my education. I am very grateful for all the help I received on my way, which was not easy, but I am now on the home stretch.

If I can give one piece of advice to young Swiss people abroad who come to Switzerland for training, it is that they should find locally-based people they can rely on. Especially as a young person, it is not easy to live without your family. It's good to know who to ask for help or information.”

Educatiosuisse offers counselling to all young Swiss Abroad on all matters related to education in Switzerland and support with cantonal scholarship applications.



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Four summer camps full of fun, sport, mobility and socialising

In all, 124 young people from 33 countries attended this year's summer camps organised by the Youth Service of the Association of the Swiss Abroad. They were rich in experiences that will make lasting memories.

This year's camping season kicked off with two camps, both of which began on 8 July 2023. Forty participants assembled at Château-d'Ex to do sport, enjoy leisure time together and improve their language skills. There were German and French classes four mornings a week. The young people also enjoyed trips to the Pays-d'Enhaut region. There were a number of hikes scheduled and one of the two-day hikes included sleeping in self-made tents or under the stars. The group also went to Lausanne, where they explored the city with a secret Mr X.

A "Swiss Challenge" full of discoveries

The second camp, held at the same time as the first one, was the first of two "Swiss Challenge" camps. The 24-strong group began their adventure in Savognin. They enjoyed the wonderful Grisons Alpine views and saw glaciers. The journey continued to Bellinzona, with a visit to Verzasca Valley. On their way to the next place, the group stopped in Lucerne and discovered the city on the lake that shares its name, with a photo orienteering expedition. The next stop was Uetendorf, where they again enjoyed the nearby mountains, this time in the Bernese Oberland. The group also managed to fit in a trip to the capital city Berne. The last stop was in Lausanne. Camping on the shores of Lake Geneva provided a fitting end to their tour of Switzerland.

The third camp followed close on the heels of the first two. On 22 July 2023, 36 young people travelled to the Bernese Oberland to spend two weeks at Gsteig, near Gstaad. Here too, the youngsters were able to try out all kinds of sports: orienteering, hiking, frisbee, volleyball, football, mini golf and swimming. Trips to Thun and Montreux also featured on the programme.



A typical Swiss encounter at the sport and leisure camp in Gsteig.



Visit to Verzasca Valley, the young people at the first of this year's two "Swiss Challenge" camps.



"International Food Day" when young people bring specialities from their home countries to share. Photo: Youth service/provided

Basel–Lausanne–Bellwald–St. Gallen

The last camp of the summer season – "Swiss Challenge" number two – began on 5 August in Basel. On the way to Lausanne, the second stop, the 24-strong group went to Berne to see the Federal Palace. They even took a seat in the venerable chamber of the Council of States, where politicians make the important decisions. In Lausanne, the highlight was a visit to the Olympic Museum. On the way to Bellwald, the group saw the subterranean lake in St Léonard. The next days were spent deep in the Valais mountains, with a visit to the Aletsch Glacier and a perfect starry night for the many shooting stars, the Perseids, that were expected. Following a few wonderful days in the mountains, the group journeyed to Ticino, where their camp location was in Losone, the ideal place to enjoy the beautiful bathing weather in Switzerland's sunniest corner. The last destination was St. Gallen, for more activities including mini golf and a water park visit. And just like that the camp was over as the new friends bade each other goodbye.

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad looks forward to welcoming more new and familiar faces for the next summer and winter camps.

FABIENNE STOCKER


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The Council of the Swiss Abroad wants more political participation for the “Fifth Switzerland”

The Council of the Swiss Abroad, referred to as the “Parliament of the fifth Switzerland”, devoted its August meeting to the question of how political participation can be improved for Swiss expatriates. A new working group has been set up to look for answers.

The 89 delegates of the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) had reason to be happy even before their meeting on 18 August 2023. Two days previously, the Federal Council had decided that the e-voting system developed by Swiss Post would remain available to Swiss Abroad eligible to vote in Basel-Stadt, St Gallen and Thurgau, meaning that Swiss expatriates in these cantons will be able to vote online in the federal elections on 22 October 2023. This will be a litmus test for the new e-voting platform, given that elections are much more complex than popular votes involving a simple yes or no. The highest body of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, the CSA, believes that e-voting not only makes it easier for the Swiss Abroad to exercise their political rights, but also increases voter participation in the “Fifth Switzerland”. It remains to be seen which other cantons intend to pilot e-voting from 2024.

Increasing political participation

However, e-voting in itself is not enough to sufficiently increase political participation in the “Fifth Switzerland”. This is the conclusion of a report by CSA delegates, which was presented at the CSA meeting. Only around 36 per cent of the over 630,000 Swiss Abroad of voting age were entered in the electoral register at the end of 2022. Of this 36 per cent, only a quarter actually vote. The report proposes various measures to strengthen expatriate engagement in Swiss political life. Consequently, the CSA meeting approved the establishment of a permanent working group to look more closely into whether statutory parameters can be improved with the aim of increasing political participation. Essentially, the CSA would like the federal government to be obliged to support organisations that are helping to promote political participation.

In addition, the CSA expressed support for the OSA’s efforts to ensure that the federal government’s new cultural message takes proper account of the Swiss Abroad. Delegates at the meeting, which took place in St Gallen, also underlined how important it was for Swiss education to be accessible abroad through Swiss schools.

The “Fifth Switzerland” and Swiss politics

The CSA meeting in St Gallen featured a panel discussion between six representatives of the six main political parties, who gave their own reasons as to why the



“Fifth Switzerland” should be encouraged to participate in Swiss political life – and why more needs to be done to break down barriers to their doing so.

Here are their answers: because the Swiss Abroad offer “a different perspective from which Switzerland as a whole can benefit” (National Councillor Nicolas Walder, Greens, Geneva); because “mobility is increasing and more Swiss are now living abroad for differing lengths of time (National Councillor Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter, Centre, Basel-Landschaft); because “there is only one Swiss passport and, therefore, only one type of Swiss citizenship” (National Councillor Laurent Wehrli, FDP, Vaud); because the Swiss Abroad “sometimes know the value of Swiss direct democracy better than anyone else” (National Councillor Roland Büchel, SVP, St Gallen); because it is precisely the Swiss Abroad who epitomise “the importance of e-IDs in addition to e-voting” and how crucial it is that “young people feel enfranchised” (Franz Muheim, GLP, Edinburgh, UK); and finally, because “political decisions made in Switzerland affect everyone, including Swiss living abroad and non-Swiss living in Switzerland” (Fabio Molina, SP, Zurich). This is why “as many people as possible need to be involved in the democratic decision-making process”.

The CSA overwhelmingly approved efforts to increase political participation for the “Fifth Switzerland”. A permanent working group has been set up for this purpose.
Photo: Nicolas Brodard

SMILLA SCHAER, MARC LETTAU

A more democratic “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”

The elections to the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA), the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, are to proceed in line with contemporary, democratic principles in future. A working group is busy bringing in the required changes by 2025. The group’s steering committee advised on the next steps in August 2023 in St. Gallen.

In the words of Noel Frei of the democratic CSA elections steering committee, they are working “out of pride for our country and its democratic system”. This system based on democratic principles allows people to continue initiating referendums. The “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA), only partially meets these requirements, says Frei: elections to the CSA have not been transparent in all countries for a long time, nor have they met democratic principles. Moreover, the CSA in no way represents all Swiss Abroad, and the portion of them it does represent is too small.

This is nothing that hasn’t been said before. However, the working group has resolved to change the situation and set an ambitious goal: all countries and constituencies are to have the technology for a direct election and the required instructions in time for the 2025 CSA elections. That includes evaluating a suitable e-voting tool. The rationale is to give as many Swiss Abroad as possible the right to vote in the CSA elections. The prospect of initiating such a major improvement really motivates the working group, says Frei.

The project is currently starting to take shape. The information materials are being created and the announcement of the project is imminent. The next phase – from early 2024 – involves the technical implementation, testing the new tool and the specific preparation of the 2025 CSA elections.

According to Frei, the project will increase the significance and legitimacy of the Council of the Swiss Abroad. He mentions that this is not the first attempt to improve the election procedure. However, now, calls for change are more strident than ever: “Pretty much the whole CSA have recognised the signs of the times.” The signs of the times – and the expectations of the authorities: the FDFA expressly supports efforts to improve the democratic legitimacy of the CSA. This official support is most welcome, says the working group: “An improved electoral system is the only way to ensure the CSA will be even more legitimate as a voice of the Fifth Switzerland,” says Frei. (MUL)

Working group email: workgroup.osa@outlook.com

Swiss culture – an international success story

Apart from this year’s federal elections, the overriding theme of the 99th Congress of the Swiss Abroad in St Gallen was the role of culture across the international divide.

Can Swiss culture be considered an export commodity like other products? The Congress of the Swiss Abroad on 19 August 2023 in St Gallen addressed this very question. Held at the University of St Gallen, the event not only provided an insight into the rich cultural heritage of the “Fifth Switzerland” but also explored the role of Swiss Abroad in enhancing cultural dialogue worldwide. Nor did it shy away from the tricky question of what exactly Swiss culture is in the first place. The interim head of Presence Switzerland, Alexandre Edelmann, gave delegates food for thought, saying that hardly anyone ever mentions culture when asked to think of words to describe Switzerland. Mountains (23%), chocolate (18%) and beautiful landscapes (17%) were the most popular descriptors. He recalled artist Ben Vautier’s provocative installation at the 1992 World Expo in the Spanish city of Seville, which caused an outcry with the catchline “Suiza no existe” (Switzerland does not exist). Edelmann said he still regards the slogan as an invitation for us to consider our own identity and the cultural identity of our diverse country. The second element of Vautier’s installation at the Expo ’92 Swiss pavilion – the less controversial “Je pense donc je suisse” (I think, therefore I Swiss) – did exactly that, he added.

Preceding Edelmann came prominent guest speaker Martin Candinas, the president of the National Council. Candinas, who likes to converse in Romansh, believes that multilingualism is of huge cultural importance in Switzerland. “I have never heard anyone say they should speak one less language,” he said, adding that political commitments had taken him abroad on numerous occasions this year. The Swiss expatriates he had met on his travels had impressed him, leading him to conclude: “Swiss culture is an international success story – not just a simple commodity.”

Incidentally, the next Congress of the Swiss Abroad will include a new cultural element when the Square of the Swiss Abroad in Brunnen foundation relaunches its “Artist in Residence” project. Swiss artists from abroad can apply for a month-long residency in Brunnen (canton of Schwyz), the first of which begins at around the time of the 2024 Congress of the Swiss Abroad on 13 July 2024.

Swiss expatriate culture will also be expressed in the form of postage stamps next year. While devoting time to the theme of Switzerland and its culture, participants at this year’s youth camps (hosted by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad) produced drawings that will now serve as inspiration for a commemorative stamp by the Pro Patria foundation in 2024.

The first part of this year’s Congress focused entirely on the federal elections, which take place on 22 October 2023 – more or less coinciding with the publication of this edition of “Swiss Review”.

MARC LETTAU

Discussion: comments on the “Swiss Review” election survey



Representing art at the Congress – textile designer Stéphanie Baechler



In good spirits – OSA President Filippo Lombardi and OSA Director Ariane Rustichelli



Alexandre Edelmann quoted Ben Vautier: “Je pense donc je suisse”.



The president of the National Council, Martin Candinas, believes that language diversity is culturally important.

Photos: Nicolas Brodard

WERNER IMHOLZ, MADRID, SPAIN

Thank you very much, and hats off, for your “big election survey”. I have no idea how you could have done a better job. As a pensioner who has been living in Spain for almost ten years, I am an active and committed advocate of Swiss direct democracy. I always receive the relevant voting papers from my most recent municipality of residence, Frenkendorf (Basel-Landschaft). Given that the time we have to return these papers before each vote is very limited, I would be delighted if the Swiss embassy took responsibility for this process in future.

JOHANN RUDOLF ROGENMOSER,

ILHA MOSQUEIRO, BRAZIL

I have now been living for seven years on the island of Mosqueiro in northern Brazil. E-voting is the only option that would work for me. The documents for the most recent vote arrived three weeks too late. The idea of receiving voting papers by email and returning them by post would not work, given that postal delivery takes three to four weeks.

JEAN THOMAS WEBER,

SAINT-GENGOUX-LE-NATIONAL, FRANCE

Thank you for your comprehensive survey of the main political parties, which serves as a good guide to the upcoming elections. However, please allow me one comment. In answer to the question “Do we need to take other concrete steps to ensure that the Swiss Abroad can exercise their political rights?”, the SVP is quoted as follows: “No. Compared to other countries, our expatriates have generous voting rights. The Swiss Abroad can take part in elections and popular votes at municipal, cantonal and federal level.” Since deregistering 20 years ago, we have only been eligible to vote in Zurich at federal and cantonal level. Who has made the error here? The SVP or “Swiss Review”? Or have we been mistaken all this time?

Visit the online edition of “Swiss Review” at www.revue.ch. Read the latest comments on our articles and join the conversation yourself. You can also share your opinions on the community discussion forum of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA).

The SwissCommunity discussion forum (members.swisscommunity.org) currently includes the following threads:

- Bank accounts for Swiss Abroad
- Affordable ways to use public transport in Switzerland
- Military service for young Swiss Abroad (further to our webinar on the same subject)

Link to the SwissCommunity discussion forum: members.swisscommunity.org/forum



Fact check

Several readers responded to one of the answers in our election survey (“Swiss Review” 4/2023). We quoted the SVP as follows:

“Compared to other countries, our expatriates have generous voting rights. The Swiss Abroad can take part in elections and popular votes at municipal, cantonal and federal level.”

We have fact-checked this and can say the following: all Swiss Abroad are eligible to vote at federal level. Ten cantons – Basel-Landschaft, Berne, Fribourg, Geneva, Grisons, Jura, Neuchâtel, Schwyz, Solothurn, Ticino – have gone further and allow Swiss Abroad to vote on cantonal matters as well. Participation in municipal votes is only open to Swiss Abroad in the cantons of Basel-Landschaft, Neuchâtel and – to a certain extent – Ticino. (MUL)

Source: Federal Council report of 17 March 2023 on the exercising of voting rights from abroad;
Link: <http://revue.link/stimmrecht>



We need autumn for our senses.



Films, Graubünden, ©Switzerland Tourism / Nicola Fürer



We need Switzerland.

Discover autumn now: [MySwitzerland.com/senses](https://www.myswitzerland.com/senses)
Share your best experiences [#INeedSwitzerland](https://twitter.com/INeedSwitzerland)

