



Organisation of the
Swiss Abroad (OSA)

Council of the Swiss Abroad: Delegates Report Summer 2021 Meetings

UK CSA delegates present:

Andreas Feller-Ryf, Loredana Guetg-Wyatt, Michelle Hufschmid, Franz Muheim, Lakshmi Sundaram

Report:

The Council of the Swiss Abroad met twice in August 2021 virtually, replacing the planned conference in Lugano due to the pandemic. It was the first meeting of the 2021-2025 legislature and the Council members had to be ratified. The Council of the Swiss Abroad consists of 120 members living abroad as well as 20 members representing politics and economy in Switzerland. The first part of the conference consisted in confirming the elected Council members as well as electing the executive committee and president of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA). From a UK perspective, we are delighted to announce that our delegate, Franz Muheim, was successfully re-elected into the executive committee which gives the UK a very privileged position in the OSA. Congratulations to Franz. For the local executive committee members, Laurent Wehrli (FDP/PLR) was re-elected, Carlo Sommaruga (SP/PS) was newly elected, and Lucas Metzger was confirmed as our competent treasurer. Monika Rüeegg (SVP/UDC) withdrew her candidacy. The OSA also elected its long-time vice-president Filippo Lombardi as its new president. Mr. Lombardi was a Swiss senator for Ticino for over 20 years and is a distinguished expert in foreign policy. He has been an active defender of the rights of Swiss citizens abroad and has achieved considerable success in parliament. Mr. Lombardi will replace Remo Gysin, whom the Council appointed honorary president. The commission of the "Swiss Review" was also elected and Mr. Lombardi emphasised its instrumental role in delivering crucial information to the Swiss community around the globe, which shall be supported in the upcoming legislature.

Mr. Matyassy and Mr. Perriard from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) joined the conference to give an update on core topics. Jan Atteslander (economiesuisse), Sarah Wyss (SP/PS), Roger Köppel (SVP/UDC), and Vincent Maître (Mitte/Centre) also attended the conference to discuss the CH-EU relationship after the failed negotiations of the framework agreement.

The following core topics were addressed during the conference:

- **Pandemic/vaccination**

All Swiss abroad now have the option to receive the vaccine in Switzerland. Regarding the vaccine certificate, Laurent Wehrli (FDP/PLR) announced that it should now be relatively easy to obtain a Covid certificate if vaccinated with a vaccine approved by Swiss authorities (Moderna, Pfizer). Parliament is currently working on the acceptance of other vaccines (AstraZeneca and others) together with Swissmedic and the Federal Office for Public Health to allow a facilitated access to a Covid certificate. More information will follow in due course.

- **Voting/E-voting**

Andreas Feller-Ryf underlined the flaws in the current voting process with voting material being delivered too late. The OSA has already reacted to the issue by sending out questionnaires in 2021 and 2022 to all delegates after each election in order to identify whether voting issues occurred in countries of residence or cantons. In addition, a larger questionnaire will be sent out once a year to all subscribers of the OSA newsletter (2,000+) to collect further data.

In 2020, the Federal Council decided to relaunch new e-voting trials and it can be expected that a new test phase will be initiated in 2022. The OSA published an official statement in 2019 asking the confederation to introduce an e-voting system for the federal elections in 2023, and urged all cantons to adopt appropriate legislation to ensure the introduction of an e-voting system by 2023. Franz Muheim underlined the importance of involving all political parties in this process. There is an active interest coming from both Michelle Hufschmid and Franz Muheim to start a specific taskforce to ensure the success of e-voting.

- **Social security**

Andreas Feller-Ryf inquired about the progress for the option to make voluntary OASI/AHV/AVS payments for all Swiss citizens post-Brexit. Currently only Swiss citizens who moved to the UK after 1 January 2021 have this option. It was understood that the problem is on the task list of the embassy. The federal office for social security will also be contacted to obtain further information. Franz Muheim underlined that Brexit has just only started and that the UK delegates are counting on the close contact with the embassy and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

- **New community platform [swisscommunity.org](https://www.swisscommunity.org)**

By launching the new community platform for the Swiss abroad, [swisscommunity.org](https://www.swisscommunity.org), the OSA hopes to better connect its community abroad with a modern, digital offering. Please check out the new platform to stay up to date.

- **Banking fees**

Although the OSA has an existing partnership with the Cantonal Bank of Geneva, Mr. Lombardi suggested issuing a list of banks that offer favorable conditions for Swiss citizens living abroad. Lucas Metzger (treasurer) will undertake an analysis of all banks, especially the ones suggested by members of the Council including Bank Cler and Migrosbank as well as new digital Fintech bank offerings. The issue is difficult to be challenged by politics given

that Switzerland does not have a state but a private banking system. The ASO will continue to lobby for improved conditions for Swiss bank account holders abroad. More information will follow in due course.

- **New initiatives from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)**

A new digital application for the Swiss abroad is currently being tested with different representations around the world to improve information flow and service. The FDFA is also working on a new concept together with the ASO to better support expatriates leaving and returning to Switzerland. New projects to digitalise civil status matters will be presented at the end of 2021. More specific details on a new project to specifically support the aging population abroad will also be published in 2022.

- **Holocaust memorial in Switzerland**

The ASO started the initiative to build a holocaust memorial in Switzerland. The steering committee includes the Jewish community and various historians. The project has grown in size and will not only include a memorial, but will be a place of education, information and in a broader context address themes such as democracy, human rights, freedom of the media, and treatment of minorities. The ASO will be actively involved to ensure the swift realisation of the concept.

- **Representation of the Swiss abroad in parliament**

Constantin Kokkinos (delegate, Greece) presented the progress of the work group 'representation of the Swiss Abroad in parliament'. A group that was previously headed by our former UK delegate Vincent Croset and also included our current UK delegate Loredana Guetg-Wyatt. Although more than 10% of Swiss citizens reside abroad, there is currently no Swiss abroad candidate directly represented in parliament. In a survey conducted by the work group amongst 246 Swiss politicians, only 35% were favourable towards the representation of Swiss abroad in parliament. The result shows that the political climate is not yet ready for such a significant change. The work group will continue its efforts to demonstrate the necessity of a proportional representation of the Swiss abroad in parliament.

- **CH-EU relations**

Following the decision of the Federal Council not to pursue negotiations to form a bilateral framework agreement with the EU, first consequences have already emerged such as the Erasmus student exchange programme and substantial funding of research by the Horizon 2020 programme being suspended. Jan Atteslander (economiesuisse) regrets the outcomes of the negotiations and criticises the lack of active negotiations over the past two years. Roger Köppel (SVP/UDC) is pleased about the outcome, seeing the framework agreement as a threat to neutrality and direct democracy. Sarah Wyss (SP/PS) criticised that the decision has not been made following a popular vote. Mr. Köppel claimed that the best universities are now located outside the EU, in Switzerland and the UK. Andreas

Feller-Ryf challenged Mr. Köppel's suggestion about the quality of universities and research in the UK after Brexit with the justification that the result of a lack of European funding will only be visible in a few years' time.

Also Franz Muheim, who works at a UK top university, disagrees with Mr. Köppel. He underlines that by hampering access to education and movement of Erasmus students, we risk lowering the high quality of education that Switzerland currently offers. The ASO has passed a resolution expressing its deep concern about the failed negotiations and asking the confederation to work on a clear and transparent strategy to secure the rights of the Swiss living in the EU or planning to in the future.

The next OSA meeting will virtually take place on 27 November 2021. Please don't hesitate to contact your delegates should you have any questions or concerns.

Andreas Feller-Ryf
London, 26 August 2021