

Report on the Council of the Swiss Abroad Meeting August 2021

As happened in 2020, due to the COVID-19, the Congress of the Swiss Abroad and the meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) that were to be held in Lugano, again had to be postponed to next year. Subsequently, the Council meeting was held online, and split over two sessions. The first 5-hour long session was held late at night Australian time on 20 August, the second took place on 23 August and lasted just over 4 hours.

• FIRST SESSION – 20 AUGUST

133 delegates participated in the first instalment of the constituent meeting of the newly elected Council for the term 2021-2025. The main issues on the agenda were:

- Introduction of the new members into the work of the CSA
- Election of members on the Executive Board
- News from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)
- Financials and statutory business

FILIPPO LOMBARDI – NEW OSA PRESIDENT

The Council elected long-time Vice-President of the OSA, Filippo Lombardi, to be its new President. Lombardi said he had learned a lot about the concerns of the Swiss Abroad in parliament, on the board of the OSA and as its Vice-President. He also lived abroad himself for six years in Brussels.

Lombardi, 65, was a member of the Senate for Ticino for 20 years and is one of Switzerland's most distinguished foreign policy experts. He is considered the father of the [Swiss Abroad Act](#), which he led to widespread acceptance in parliament in 2014.

"I will defend the interests of the Fifth Switzerland boldly and vigorously," Lombardi promised. "We have gained a lot of understanding in federal politics, but there is still a long way to go before we are truly recognised as Swiss citizens with all our rights and obligations."

Lombardi succeeds Remo Gysin, whom the Council appointed Honorary President. [CSA from Sydney, Beat Knoblauch](#), thanked Gysin on behalf of the entire CSA for his great leadership, commitment and achievements during his time as President. His visit to Australia and participation in the Swiss Club Presidents' Conference 2016 in Melbourne was especially remembered.

CODE OF CONDUCT FOR MEMBERS OF THE CSA AND EXECUTIVE BOARD

A submission lodged by [CSA from Melbourne, Roland Isler](#), regarding the development of a code of conduct for members of the CSA and members of the Executive Board was voted in successfully. The submission was prompted by what broadly could be described as 'conduct contrary to expectations' for someone standing for election as a Board member. The SVP representative in question withdrew her candidacy in light of the application and general response by the Council. It is hoped that a formal code of conduct will help prevent such regrettable occurrences in the future.

As a subsequence of the above, it was agreed that the number of seats on the Board held by CSA from abroad should increase to seven, with only four being held by members from within Switzerland – these being the President Filippo Lombardi, the Treasurer Lucas Metzger, Laurent Wehrli (FDP/VD) and Carlo Sommaruga (SP/GE).

AUSTRALIA REPRESENTED ON THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

An exciting election ensued for the Swiss Abroad seats on the Board, with nine candidates contesting the seven available seats, and only three being incumbent. [CSA from Adelaide, Carmen Trochler](#), was among the candidates standing and to the great delight of her colleagues, not only won a seat but did so with the clearest margin of all the contestants. As far as it is known, this is the first time ever that a CSA from Australia has been elected to the OSA Executive Board. The almost entirely new Board is now made up of four males and three females, with five from within European countries and two from overseas (AUS/USA).

NEWS FROM THE FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (FDFA)

The Director and Deputy Director of the Consular Directorate FDFA, Johannes Matyassy and Laurent Perriard, provided the latest statistics of the world-wide Swiss Abroad diaspora, which now numbers 776,300, representing 11% of the total Swiss population. The pandemic has slowed down Swiss mobility in 2020, hence the increase in the number of Swiss Abroad is lower than in previous years (Oceania +0.7%).

The pandemic, which affects Swiss Abroad quite significantly in some countries, is one of the main issues the department is dealing with at present. The entire network of consular representations was directed to stay open and to continue to provide support and services throughout the crisis. Matyassy reiterated the position of the government that in principle no distinction is being made between Swiss living in Switzerland and those living abroad to access vaccination while in Switzerland as long as they have Swiss health cover. In practice, however, most Swiss Abroad are excluded as they do not have health insurance in Switzerland. The OSA has been lobbying to find a solution, and as Matyassy informs, if all goes

well, by 1 September Swiss Abroad will be able to get vaccinated even though they have no Swiss health insurance. Whilst this is good news, providing vaccinations for Swiss citizens outside of Switzerland remains a problem. Apparently, there are contractual obligations that prohibit the export of such vaccinations, and as Matyassy concedes, what is lacking at this stage is the political will of the Federal Council to renegotiate these conditions. Further lobby-efforts by the OSA and the FDFA in this space remain.

Matyassy continues to provide an update on voting. Just under 210,000 (Oceania: 5,330), or one third of the world-wide adult Swiss Abroad population, is registered on an electoral roll in Switzerland. He mentioned the pilot program that took place in June in Australia, Thailand and Brazil, whereby the diplomatic mail was utilised for the transmission of half of the voting material of voters in three cantons. A further test along that basis will be conducted in November. Data will then be analysed and made public sometimes towards the end of next year. The roadmap as far as e-voting is concerned remains as previously communicated. The Federal Council decided on a new start back in 2020. Since then and during the duration of this year, the legal and political framework will be put in place with an expected test phase to resume in 2022.

The Travel Admin app has been very successful and is widely used by Swiss travellers. The pandemic has provided lessons learned which will be used for further improvement. Looking ahead, a complimentary platform is being planned to deal with civil matters. A program called 'Aging Abroad' will be developed to provide information and services especially for senior Swiss citizens abroad. Furthermore, the FDFA plans to strengthen the cooperation with the OSA in developing digital and online information surrounding emigration from and to Switzerland.

Matyassy concluded by making reference to the service contract agreement between the FDFA and the OSA which will expire at the end of this year. Negotiations are progressing well and he emphasised the great cooperation that exist. Remo Gysin extended the thanks of the OSA for the support provided by the government.

FINANCIALS AND STATUTORY BUSINESS

The financial report and annual report 2020 were overwhelmingly accepted, as was any additional statutory business.

LOOKING AHEAD – GOALS FOR 2021-2025

Filippo Lombardi provided his vision for the future. The main goals for the term 2021-2025 have been defined by the Council at the previous meeting in March. The OSA has put a lot of effort towards internal matters over the past year or two and he urges to now firmly focus on tackling these goals. The Council voted and accepted the Goals 2021-2025 unchanged.

CONGRESS

After having been postponed twice it has been decided that the 98th Congress of the Swiss Abroad will definitely go ahead as a physical event in Lugano on 19-21 August 2022. The theme will be 'What are the challenges for our democracy?'

RESOLUTION: RECOGNITION OF VACCINATION CERTIFICATES ISSUED ABROAD WITH REGARD TO VACCINES RECOGNISED BY THE WHO

The Council voted in favour of issuing a resolution requiring the federal government to accept vaccination certificates issued abroad for all vaccines that are recognised by the WHO. There are currently only three vaccines approved in Switzerland: Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

• SECOND SESSION – 23 AUGUST

116 delegates participated in the second instalment of the CSA meeting. The main issues on the agenda were:

- Working Group Report: Swiss Abroad representation in Parliament
- Open discussion forum
- CH/EU: After the failure of the Institutional Framework Agreement – where to now?

FOUNDATION 'AREA FOR THE SWISS ABROAD' BRUNNEN

Alex Hauenstein, President of the Foundation 'Area for the Swiss Abroad' provided a video about the park, which was established as a contribution by the Swiss Abroad to the 700th anniversary of the Confederation in 1991. It has recently undergone substantial refurbishment.

WORKING GROUP REPORT: SWISS ABROAD REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

An update was provided by the working group tasked with investigating the possibility of a direct representation of the Swiss Abroad in the National Council. Different models were evaluated, especially the one in France, which allows direct participation by French Abroad. A survey conducted among parliamentarians has shown that only 35% of them would support such an idea, and the support of the broader public would almost certainly be even less. The findings are that a huge amount of lobbying would be required to establish a climate favourable of considering such an idea.

OPEN DISCUSSION FORUM

This forum provided an opportunity for free exchange of opinions and ideas among a range of topics, such as:

- Location of the proposed memorial for the victims of National Socialism – an idea which Remo Gysin was spearheading and which now has found public and government support.
- Ways for the CSA to work more productively.

- E-voting
- COVID vaccination certification

SWITZERLAND AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: AFTER THE FAILURE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT – WHERE TO NOW?

State of the situation:

With 434,000 Swiss Abroad living in an EU country, the bilateral agreement between Switzerland and the EU is most important. The Federal Council has decided to cease negotiations which have been going on for years. For Switzerland and the Swiss Abroad, this leaves many unanswered questions and an uncertain future. Filippo Lombardi provided an update on the state of the situation, both historically and current.

Adversarial assessment of the initial situation and further objectives:

Proponents of different political viewpoints conducted a panel discussion. Speakers were:

- Jan Atteslander – Member Executive Board, Head International Relations, economiesuisse
- Roger Köppel – Journalist, Entrepreneur and Publicist. Editor-in-chief at the right-wing weekly magazine 'Die Weltwoche' (SVP/ZH)
- Vincent Maitre – National Councillor (Die Mitte/GE)
- Sarah Wyss – National Councillor (SP/ BS)

RESOLUTION: THE FEDERAL COUNCIL MUST DEFINE A CLEAR STRATEGY FOR MAINTAINING THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE FREE MOVEMENT OF PERSONS

The Council voted in favour of issuing a resolution requiring the federal government to ensure the interests of the Swiss Abroad that live in a country of the EU are protected.

FAREWELL MESSAGE BY OUTGOING PRESIDENT REMO GYSIN

Remo Gysin, former National Councillor (SP), was a member of the OSA Executive for 21 years and has been its President since 2015. He reminisced about some of the highlights and achievements during his tenure and was farewelled with much gratitude.

The next online meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad is scheduled for Sunday, 27 November 2021. Pandemic permitting, it is hoped that the Council will be able to get together in person on Saturday, 12 March 2022 in Bern.

*Roland Isler
CSA Delegate, Melbourne
August 2021*