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## Swiss abroad get involved in electoral debate



by **Sonia Fenazzi**, swissinfo.ch

**In its seven months of existence SwissCommunity.org has come a long way: it gets hundreds of hits each day, has thousands of members, and the site has even won an award.**

The internet platform for Swiss abroad is now looking forward to playing an active role in the debate on the federal elections later this year.

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) looks after the interests of Swiss expatriates worldwide, who are often referred to as "the fifth Switzerland".

SwissCommunity.org is the virtual meeting place of the Swiss abroad (Ex-press)

Since last August when it launched SwissCommunity as a platform to give overseas Swiss a voice, the OSA has concluded cooperation agreements with two cantons, Lucerne and Zug, and also with Presence Switzerland, the federal government organisation responsible for Switzerland's communication abroad.

So far the platform is in German, French and English, but canton Ticino has just announced that it will become a partner of SwissCommunity. "By the end of the year at the latest" the site should be running in Italian too, Ariane Rustichelli, OSA's head of communication, told swissinfo.ch.

Meanwhile the steady increase in the number of members is attracting organisations and institutions to become involved in SwissCommunity. At the same time, the increase in content available on the site is encouraging new members to join up.

"The initial objective was to reach ten thousand members by the end of 2011," recalled Rustichelli. With eight months to go before that deadline, the threshold of 6,500 has already been passed.

Rustichelli is optimistic about future developments. But most of all, she is pleased with the sheer liveliness of this virtual meeting-place for Swiss around the globe.

"There is a tremendous vitality you can feel. The most varied topics imaginable come up for discussion in the on-line forums. The members are active. They make their voices heard," she said.

### **The art of moderating**

OSA's head of communication does not hide the fact that maintaining a balance on the site is not always easy. The main difficulty has been finding the right touch in moderating the forums.

"Certainly there has to be some control to ensure civility in discussions, but we don't want to muzzle the users either. Our members should be aware that there is some moderation going on and at the same time feel free to discuss whatever it is they want to talk about," she said.

Moderators are having to learn to intervene in the right way, at the right time – for example when a discussion takes an ugly turn, or when members fail to observe the rules they accepted when they signed up.

Rustichelli maintains, however, that the control mechanisms put in place by SwissCommunity are working. "We have an internal moderation by the OSA and then an external one by members of the

platform," she explained.

### **Keeping up momentum**

Besides its success with the public, the quality of the platform is being recognised by professionals in the field.

On March 31, at the Best of Swiss Web Awards 2011 – Switzerland's "Oscars" in the field of the internet and information and communications technology – SwissCommunity won a silver medal in the "usability" section.

This recognition by internet professionals obviously encourages the OSA and its partners, but such recognition is not their ultimate goal. What they are aiming at is to "push the envelope" even farther.

The range of services provided by SwissCommunity is constantly being adapted "to the real needs of members" says Rustichelli.

"This is a process that is in constant evolution. And that's what makes the whole venture so interesting."

Over the coming months SwissCommunity plans to add a number of new elements. The launch of an online magazine reserved for members is scheduled for the beginning of May.

### **Election fever?**

In a federal election year, politics could hardly be neglected on SwissCommunity. Debates on the major issues are gradually beginning to appear in the site's forums.

SwissCommunity will shortly add a special section on the coming elections. Threads on political themes will also be launched in the forums.

SwissCommunity will promote these kinds of discussions among expatriate Swiss in collaboration with swissinfo.ch. The OSA is also currently negotiating a cooperative arrangement with Smartvote, a Swiss site which presents profiles of political candidates based on the positions they have taken on various issues.

Rustichelli expects that as voting day gets closer, politicians themselves will be registering on SwissCommunity to talk to the diaspora.

"Swiss abroad will thus have the opportunity to make their views heard at the federal level," she said.

To be listened to by Swiss politicians and make their views count, "it is important that they sign up as members of our online community, that they participate actively and that they make their views known", emphasises Rustichelli.

For the first time, then, expatriate Swiss will have the opportunity to communicate online with politicians at home and to show that the "fifth Switzerland" is a force to be reckoned with even if they are outside the country.

Sonia Fenazzi, swissinfo.ch  
(Translated from Italian by Terence McNamee)

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### CONTEXT

Launched in August 2010, SwissCommunity.org is a free internet platform created by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) to respond to the particular needs of Swiss expatriates by putting them in contact with each other and with the homeland.

Participation is open to all Swiss citizens connected with the diaspora. Accordingly, even relatives of Swiss abroad who reside in Switzerland can become members of the community.

Those interested in joining need to provide some personal data which will allow OSA to verify their identity and thus prevent any abuses. New members also have to commit themselves to respecting the rules of the community. A member who breaks these rules can be barred from the site.

For its part, the OSA undertakes to safeguard members' privacy. Personal data on members will not be divulged to third parties. The OSA uses the services of a lawyer specialising in virtual platforms and communities.

Currently the site numbers 6,500 members, with a daily average of 600-700 hits lasting about 4 minutes each.

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