

CSA 2019 Spring Meeting

Delegate's Report for the Swiss Embassy and Swiss Clubs in the UK

The Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) had its Spring 2019 meeting at the Bern Town Hall (Rathaus) on Saturday, March 23rd, 2019. Three UK delegates were present: Nathalie Chuard, Franz Muheim (also member of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad [OSA] committee) and Vincent Croset.

The session was chaired by OSA president, Remo Gysin. In addition to Franz Muheim, the other members of the committee present to this meeting were Filippo Lombardi (OSA Vice-President, member of the Council of States), Laurent Wehrli and Claudio Zanetti (Members of the National Council) Peter Wühtrich (OSA Treasurer), Gian Franco Definti (Italy), David Mörker (USA), Roger Sauvain (France), Silvia Schoch (Canada) and Sabine Silberstein (Singapore).

Some changes have recently happened both in the OSA and CSA. First, Alexandre Tissot will no longer represent the Swiss in the UK as he has recently moved to the Netherlands. We would like to thank Alexandre for his outstanding work and his selfless dedication for the Swiss community in the UK and wish him all the best for the future. His successor will be named soon.

After working at OSA for almost 17 years, including most recently as co-director, Sara Mastantuoni has left the organisation for new challenges at the end of 2018. The UK representatives and FOSSUK would like to give a warm thank you to Ms Mastantuoni for her strong commitment to the cause of the Swiss abroad, and for taking the time to visit us for several of our AGMs. The other co-director Ariane Rustichelli will now be working as the sole OSA director.

Peter Schibli, representing the Swissinfo online news platform at the CSA and a very strong advocate for the Swiss abroad has now retired and is replaced in the CSA by Peter Zschaler. All the best and thank you to Mr Schibli, and welcome to Mr Zschaler.

The main themes that were discussed during the meeting were the following:

1. E-voting

A popular initiative was launched recently to impose a 5-year moratorium on e-voting. Initiators have started a campaign where they explain that they estimate that the current technology is not sufficient to guarantee secure online voting. They would rather backtrack and have a 5-year period wait until e-voting can be used again. While the OSA acknowledges that the system can always be improved, it strongly opposes this initiative on the ground that many Swiss abroad have no other alternative to make their voices heard, and that using, testing and improving the system rather than forbidding it is the only way to make it safer. Unfortunately, the Council did not have enough time to discuss this in more detail.

The following article by Franz Muheim is a very interesting read about this topic and expresses opinions that are shared by most CSA members:

https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/standpunkt_auslandschweizer-zeigen-den-weg-zum-e-voting/44832342

2. Bank accounts for Swiss people abroad

Not much has happened about this topic since the OSA made a deal with the Banque Cantonale de Genève to offer fair banking conditions to all Swiss abroad. The OSA is now in talks with other banks to potentially offer more options for the Swiss abroad to open and maintain bank accounts in Switzerland without exorbitant fees.

John McGough, CSA delegate for Hungary, proposed to take legal action against Postfinance (which is owned by the Swiss Confederation) for discrimination against the Swiss abroad as they charge fees to keep an account with them only to people living abroad but not their customers living in Switzerland. Mr Gysin suggested that this proposal should be postponed until more advances are made in the negotiations in Parliament and with other banks, and Mr McGough agreed. More on this topic to come in the next CSA sessions.

It is also important to note that in recent years several online banking options have emerged, such as Revolut, Monzo or TransferWise. These can be used to send or receive money or even pay with a debit card in various currencies with very low or no fees. Whereas they do not always offer the same options as a bank account, especially in terms of interests, they are extremely convenient for all kinds of travellers or expats.

If you have been in touch with the Banque Cantonale de Genève or have already opened an account there, or if you use an online banking option, we would love to hear your feedback! Please email us at info@swiss-societies.co.uk

3. 2021 CSA elections and modifications to OSA rules

Franz Muheim presented the work of his sub-committee in charge of establishing the plan for the next CSA elections in 2021. The objective is to give the possibility to Swiss citizens in as many countries as possible to not only directly elect their CSA delegates, but also to have the possibility to do so online. This is a very important evolution as most delegates have historically only been selected by the presidents of local Swiss clubs. These changes will allow more people from the Swiss communities abroad to be involved in the CSA, which will gain in legitimacy by having its members elected more democratically. FOSSUK has already decided to adopt e-voting for the next election of UK delegates. A few modifications in the OSA rules were agreed by the Council, that will allow these changes to happen. Franz Muheim recommended that local Swiss societies start early with the organisation to enable a smooth voting process.

4. Monument for the Swiss victims of national-socialism

OSA President Remo Gysin has been at the origin of a project for setting a monument in the memory of Swiss people who have been victims of national-socialism during World War II. In this context, historian and archivist Gregor Spuhler from ETH Zurich presented his research and explained the suffering that some Swiss people living abroad had to endure, and the difficulties that these people had to obtain help from Switzerland, which did not recognise dual citizenship at the time and for both political and logistical reasons was only able to offer limited support. He also highlighted the initiatives from private Swiss people such as Carl Lutz, whose heroic actions saved thousands of lives.

Discussions as to where, when and how the memorial will be erected are still ongoing.

5. Swiss Federal elections 2019

The OSA has decided to get involved in the upcoming Federal elections like never before. A poll made by Vincent Croset's working group on the representativeness of the Swiss abroad in Parliament suggests that even though many Swiss MPs have a positive opinion of the Swiss abroad and would like them to be involved in Swiss politics, improvements are necessary to make their voices truly heard in Bern. With the elections there is an opportunity to remind politicians that 10% of the Swiss nationals live abroad, and to elect people who will support our case. Hence, for the first time, the CSA has decided to publish an electoral manifesto reminding political parties and candidates of the important themes for the Swiss abroad. The major parties will have a chance to address Swiss citizens from abroad, in particular during the next Congress of the Swiss abroad in Montreux in August (see below for more information about dates and registration). Voting recommendations will also be sent out to help people make their choice.

6. Other topics and announcements

- Bea van Gessel, head of AHV/AVS benefits at the Swiss Compensation Office presented the work of her team, especially in relation to the Swiss people living abroad. They process a huge number of requests and payments every single day. The delegates were very impressed with the typically swiss efficiency of this service.
- Johannes Matyassy, head of the Swiss Consular Directorate, joined the traditional CSA discussion forum on Skype and made himself available for questions about the Department of Foreign Affairs and his Directorate in particular.
- Simone Flubacher from the Department of Foreign Affairs announced that the 2018 statistics about the Swiss abroad have been published recently (Some of the numbers are shown below, and under the following link: <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/living-abroad/publications-statistics/statistics.html>). Ms Flubacher also talked about the efforts that her Department is doing to improve its services to Swiss expatriates, particularly in terms of digitalisation.

The next CSA meeting, held together with the 97th Congress of the Swiss Abroad, takes place from August 16th to 18th in Montreux. Registrations are now open on this link: <https://www.aso.ch/en/offers/congress-of-the-swiss-abroad/congress-2019>

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