

100th Congress of the Swiss Abroad: delegate report

The **100th Congress of the Swiss Abroad** took place in Lucerne from 11 to 13 July 2024, marking a significant milestone for the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) and the global Swiss community.

The event began with a meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) on Thursday, followed by open plenary sessions on Friday. The congress concluded with a historic boat trip on Lake Lucerne, bringing participants to the Place of the Swiss Abroad in Brunnen, where we were welcomed by traditional Swiss Alphorn players and flag bearers.

The meeting of the CSA brought together approximately 90 delegates to discuss pressing issues affecting Swiss citizens living abroad.

One of the key challenges highlighted was the financial strain on OSA, which is facing declining sponsorship and reduced government subsidies. As a result, the organisation has been forced to cut costs, leading to a reduction in the number of **Swiss Review** issues published annually from six to five. For Swiss citizens living in the UK, this means less coverage of news relevant to our diaspora. The financial constraints facing OSA could result in reduced support for Swiss organisations and fewer engagement opportunities.

In addition, the **annual congress**, which has been a key event for the Swiss Abroad community, will now only take place **once every four years**, with smaller annual meetings of the Council of the Swiss Abroad in the other years.

Discussions also addressed concerns about the governance structure of the CSA. Currently, the Council operates as a foundation under the Swiss Civil Code, a model that some believe is outdated and no longer suited to the needs of Swiss citizens abroad. There were calls for the Swiss Abroad to be managed as a **public institution under a Swiss Federal Department**, ensuring a stable budget as part of federal expenditure. Many delegates expressed frustration that the nearly 800,000 Swiss living abroad are not adequately supported at the federal level.

A significant topic on the agenda was the **CSA elections**, which will determine the 120 CSA delegates for the upcoming four-year term and which will take place in the first half of 2025. Plans are advancing to ensure an electronic voting process open to all Swiss citizens in interested countries, using a system developed by the University of Applied Sciences in Bern and with the support of the FDFA. Up to 13 countries have expressed an interest in using this new system to hold democratic elections, including the United Kingdom. Further details and candidate profiles will be published in the Swiss Review and shared with registered citizens directly.

The Congress also addressed the long-standing issue of representation for the Swiss Abroad in the Swiss Parliament. While direct parliamentary representation remains a difficult objective, efforts continue to improve political engagement and voting participation among Swiss citizens abroad.

We also reviewed a proposal developed by a CSA delegate from Thailand on ensuring access to health insurance to Swiss citizens living outside the EU. This proposal will be debated in the Autumn 2024 session.

A round table discussion focused on Swiss-EU relations and the issue of free movement. With approximately 450,000 Swiss citizens residing in the EU—more than half of all Swiss Abroad—maintaining the free movement of people is a major priority. Representatives from the Swiss business community and government emphasised the importance of **Bilateral III agreements**, which are currently under negotiation. The Swiss economy remains largely in favour of these agreements, and a final decision is expected by the end of 2024. These ongoing negotiations between Switzerland and the EU remain crucial for many of us in the UK, particularly for those who rely on cross-border mobility and business ties.

In light of a referendum put forward to limit the license fee for public broadcasting, a second round table discussion focused on the need for high quality and unbiased information for all Swiss citizens, including those who live abroad. The conversation underscored the importance of **Swissinfo** and the broader Swiss media landscape for Swiss expatriates. While the value of an independent media service was widely recognised, political divisions remain around this issue.

Ambassador David Grichting, representing the **Federal Department of Foreign Affairs** (FDFA), emphasised Switzerland's dedication to maintaining strong ties with its diaspora and ensuring that their concerns are heard, despite funding cuts across all government departments. He discussed the ongoing work of the FDFA to ensure support to an increasing number of Swiss citizens abroad.

He re-emphasised the value of the **Swiss in Touch** app, which allows Swiss citizens to access official and relevant information from their local embassies. He encouraged all Swiss citizens to download the app, as this will likely answer many routine questions.

The event concluded on a positive note, celebrating Swiss traditions while acknowledging the work that remains to be done to secure better representation and rights for the Swiss Abroad.