

27th May 2025, Franz Muheim

The spring meeting of the **Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA)** took place in Bern on the 21st March. The day before the council session, Council delegates gathered at the Federal Palace for a workshop and a meeting with Federal Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ignazio Cassis. From the United Kingdom the CSA delegates Andreas Feller-Ryf, Loredana Guetg-Wyatt, Franz Muheim and Lakshmi Sundaram attended the meeting.



From left to right: UK delegate Loredana Guetg-Wyatt, Lorenza Cavalli, candidate for the delegate elections in the UK, Filippo Lombardi, president of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, and UK delegates Lakshmi Sundaram and Franz Muheim.

20th March 2025 – Federal Palace, Bern, Workshop & Meeting with Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis

The **Swiss diaspora** is currently facing multiple challenges. The global situation affects Swiss citizens abroad in different ways, depending on their place of residence. At the same time, they are increasingly facing negative publicity in politics and media in Switzerland, as illustrated by the vote one year ago on the introduction of a 13th month of AVS pension while, at the same time, government services for the Swiss Abroad - as all areas of public spending - are facing budget cuts. [What can be done](#) to improve the standing of the Swiss Abroad?

A **workshop at the Bundeshaus**, organised by the **Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA)** explored the **value of the Fifth Switzerland and how its potential can be better utilised**. Too often, the Swiss Abroad are subject to broad generalisations and sensationalist media reports rather than nuanced, fact-based perspectives. Yet, many internationally mobile Swiss make significant contributions that enhance Switzerland's image, economy, and innovation.

These contributions need greater visibility. The CSA delegates split up in four groups, developing answers and strategies on how to improve. The group leads then presented the findings from their sessions.

After the workshop, **federal councillor Ignazio Cassis** joined the delegates to answer their questions. He emphasised that Switzerland is not immune to the current global shifts and expressed confidence that the Bilateral II agreements with the EU could pass through Parliament by early 2026. He also highlighted the potential of the Swiss Abroad in international cooperation, noting that around three-quarters hold dual nationality. Despite the current dip in public opinion towards the Swiss Abroad in Switzerland, he reaffirmed that their value is well recognised. In addition, delegates met the new **director general of the FDFA's consular directorate, Marianne Jenni**, who also answered questions.



Figure 1 (Left): OSA president Filippo Lombardi introducing Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis. From left to right: Marianne Jenni, director general of FDFA Consular Directorate, Ignazio Cassis, Filippo Lombardi and Laurent Perriard, Deputy Director Consular Directorate of FDFA. (Right) Filippo Lombardi discussing with Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis.



Figure 2 OSA executive board members Carmen Trochsler, Australia and Franz Muheim, UK, summarising the discussion in the workshop groups.

21st March 2025 – Kursaal Bern | Meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad

Key topics that were discussed at the Council meeting:

- The **possible return of high numbers of Swiss living abroad** due to global political developments, which was deemed very unlikely only a couple of years ago, cannot be ruled out anymore. Is Switzerland prepared for that? The challenge of such an influx of people would arise on several levels, both logistically, financially and socially. The OSA executive board will look further into this with representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and update the Council.
- The **assistance for Swiss Citizens living abroad** if they find themselves unexpectedly in war zones or disaster situations (example Israel). The board will clarify what measures are already in place to protect these groups and what could be done in the future to enhance their protection.
- **E-voting** in the cantons of SG, BS & TG and GR for Swiss Abroad continues to work successfully. Several other cantons have confirmed interest to join the pilot project and plan to offer e-voting to Swiss Abroad this or next year. An update on the roll-out is expected for later this year. OSA President Lombardi stressed the progress made and still in process to guarantee electronic voting for all Swiss Abroad. It will be difficult though to convince some cantons to allow Swiss Abroad to elect also the cantonal member to the Council of States (Ständerat).
- A parliamentary proposal, the postulate by national councillor Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter, aiming at a solution for continued access to Swiss Health Insurance for Swiss Abroad living outside the European Union, was narrowly rejected in the National Council at the end of last year. The efforts to find a solution, especially for those Swiss Abroad who are left with no other options, will continue.
- Given the big success of the **webinars offered to Swiss Abroad** conducted since 2023, more webinars on topics relevant to the Swiss Abroad will be offered in 2025. In collaboration with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Soliswiss, webinar will be held this year on the following topics:
 - Civil Status on 17 June 2025
 - Taxes / Finances on 16 September 2025
 - Political Rights on 4 November 2025
- **Banks** were present at the meeting, offering solution for accounts to Swiss Abroad with no minimal deposit:
 - BCGE/Banque Cantonale de Geneve: Branches are in Geneva, Lausanne, Zurich and Basel. Contact Details: auslandschweizer@bcge.ch | 0041 61 226 61 00 (German, French, English)| [Website](#). Yearly fees ~ CHF 180 (includes account fee and domicile abroad fee, as per 1.1.25). T&C apply. **Please note that an appointment is necessary.**
 - ZKB/Zuercher Kantonalbank: Contact details: neukundeninfo@zkb.ch or [Website](#). Yearly fees ~ CHF 360 (includes account fee and domicile abroad fee), as per 1.1.25). T&C apply. **Please note an appointment is necessary.**

- The new SWIplus App was released on 11th March. The app offers quick and easy access to important news and information from Switzerland. Amongst the notable new features is **direct access to programs such as the Tagesschau und Echo der Zeit**.
- Information from the **Department of Foreign Affairs**, was given by Marianne Jenni
 - Marianne Jenni is the new Director General of the Consular Directorate at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Berne since 1.1.2025.
 - The International Crisis Management is now with her office.
 - In Countries, where Switzerland is not officially represented, approaches are underway with e.g. Austria to fill the gap for Consular Services.
 - Smaller equipment for biometric collection of data for the issue of passports is being evaluated, to make it easier for more frequent touring in a country.
- OSA President Lombardi stressed the **financial constraints imposed by the Federal cost cutting measures** which affects all facets of government. The Federal subsidy to the OSA will be curtailed by 1% and further cuts by 2027 by some 10 %. Sponsorships are hard to come by and long-term supporter Swiss Tourism has cancelled their contributions. This means that some projects will be mothballed and the well frequented Youth Camps in Summer and Winter will be put in doubt. The previous annual (costly) Congress will be held only every four years. The Council of the Swiss Abroad will have three yearly meetings, the one in November on a virtual basis.
- The printed version of the **Swiss Review** will be maintained with 5 issues – each one having a regional section. The Swiss Review remains the most important link between the Swiss Abroad and the Federal Government for exchange of information.
- Importance of independent and high-quality information for the Swiss abroad. **Swissinfo** is part of SRG (Swiss Broadcasting Corporation), which is faced with budget cuts as part of the general cost cutting measures. OSA supports the services of Swissinfo and takes position in favour of Swissinfo in the current consultation process to the cost cutting measures.



Figure 4 (Left) OSA Director Ariane Rustichelli making her final appearance at the Council meeting. (Right) Lukas Weber has been selected as the new director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.

- **Ariane Rustichelli, Director of OSA**, decided to leave the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. Ariane has shaped the organisation for 17 years, including the last 11 of these as Director. The Council and the executive board thanked Ariane for her tireless and successful commitment to the Swiss Abroad. Among her many achievements, she oversaw the implementation of the Swiss Abroad Act, secured partnerships with banks to ensure Swiss citizens abroad could access banking services in Switzerland. She drove the organisation's digital transformation and initiated its rebranding as "SwissCommunity". I met up with Ariane shortly after she announced her resignation and thanked her personally on behalf of the UK for her services, and I wished her all the best for her future.
- The position of OSA director was advertised. From a large field of excellent candidates, the OSA executive board selected **Lukas Weber** as the **new Director of OSA**. He has meanwhile taken over from Ariane Rustichelli at the helm of the organisation.
- **Elections of the delegates** of the Council of the Swiss Abroad in the different countries are in full swing. The United Kingdom conducts direct elections for the fourth time, and after 2021 is pleased to offer online voting again. All Swiss, who have their email registered with the Consulate General will receive an email with voting codes. The ballot opens on 12th April and closes on 11th May. **The UK holds 5 seats in the council; thus voters can cast 5 votes.** Find out more about the [OSA UK delegate elections](#) on the FOSSUK website.
- In 13 countries, direct elections of the Council delegates for 2025 to 2029 will take place and about 40% of the delegates will be elected in this way. The e-Voting system is provided by Fachhochschule Bern, and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs will send out the emails with the voting codes. These elections are a significant step towards better representation of the Council of the Swiss Abroad. A task force of CSA delegates has put in a huge amount of work to make this possible. The election project was presented by task force members Noel Frei, Ethiopia and Andreas Feller-Ryf, United Kingdom.



Figure 5 Presentation of the direct elections of the Council delegates. From left to right: task force members Noel Frei, Ethiopia, Andreas Feller-Ryf, UK, Monique Heymann, Israel, Ernst Steinmann, Switzerland & Antoine Belaieff, Canada.

Final comments

This was the last Council meeting for UK delegates **Andreas Feller-Ryf** and **Loredana Guetg-Wyatt**, who decided to step down. On behalf of FOSSUK and the Swiss Abroad in the United Kingdom, I would like to express my thanks Andreas and Loredana for their services and I wish them the best for their futures. Thanks also to OSA board colleague Carmen Trochsler, who gave me permission to use material from her report for the Swiss in Australia.

The next session of the newly elected Council of the Swiss Abroad will take place in Berne on the **22nd – 23rd August 2025**. The meeting on the 23rd will take place in the Nationalratssaal at the Federal Palace, with Maya Riniker, president of the National Council in attendance.

It was a pleasure to meet over 80 **fellow delegates** from all over the world, as well as **members of the Swiss Parliament**, the **Department of Foreign Affairs** and the OSA partner organisations including **Swissinfo**, **Educationsuisse**, **BCGE** and **ZKB**.

Further Links:

- Press release OSA: [New Director / CSA Meeting 20., 21. Maerz](#)
- Echo der Zeit on Swiss thinking about possible return: https://www.srf.ch/audio/echo-der-zeit/wie-auslandschweizer-ueber-eine-moegliche-heimkehr-nachdenken?partId=x-yBwKBqIsBaE8tX2WU7OYra_II#autoplay
- Parliamentary postulate on health insurance - Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefte?AffairId=20233556>
- Articles Swiss Info:
 - On Workshop: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swiss-abroad/the-reputation-of-the-swiss-abroad-is-suffering-what-can-be-done/89044970>
 - On new Director <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swiss-abroad/lukas-weber-named-as-director-of-the-organisation-of-the-swiss-abroad/89037925>
 - On meeting: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/swiss-abroad/die-auslandschweizer-organisation-spuert-den-fruehling/89047067>



OSA Executive Board and outgoing and new OSA Directors with Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis and Director of FDFA Consular Directorate, Marianne Jenni. From left to right: Lucas Weber, Franz Muheim, Marianne Jenni, Carlo Sommaruga, Laurent Wehrli, Sonja Lengning, Ignazio Cassis, Filippo Lombardi, Dominique Baccanaud, David Moerker, Carmen Trochsler, Helen Freiermuth, Gian Franco Definti and Ariane Rustichelli.