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Swiss Review

The magazine
for the Swiss Abroad



**No snow – Switzerland's winter
wonderland is melting**

**A newspaper in the Bernese countryside
is bucking the decline in local journalism**

**The political climate turns frostier
for the Swiss Abroad**

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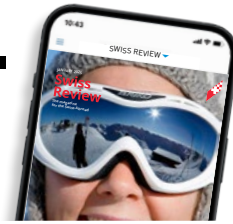
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Photo: Keystone

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Cover photo: Winter fun in the Swiss Alps (Weisshorn, 2,653 metres above sea level). Photo: Keystone

The day the snow returned



It was like some surreal winter's tale: during the night from 21 to 22 November, Switzerland suddenly found itself covered in deep snow. Many places practically came to a standstill. Lucerne had 42 centimetres of snow, outstripping the 1919 record with room to spare. In Berne, the traffic chaos prompted some quick-thinking travellers to snowboard down from the main station to the Monbijou area. The snowboarding conditions were ideal: new snow, and a piste in good condition.

The early snowfall – and the enormous quantities of it – revived memories of winters long past. However, the journey down a snowy memory lane proved brief, as the snow melted almost as suddenly as it arrived. The early winter days ultimately reverted to type, at least for the lower lying parts of the country: countless shades of grey rain and wet green.

The stark contrast brought home that winter is changing. The picturesque postcard image of winter in Switzerland is being increasingly consigned to the past – or a scene embellished with artificial snow. The change is being felt most acutely in the ski resorts. Many of the lower-lying ski lifts have had to be decommissioned in recent years. The winters have simply become too warm. The idea of skiing as a national sport that anyone can enjoy practically on their doorstep has become somewhat passé, as our Focus article shows (page 4).

Winters may be getting warmer, but for some people life is set to get harder. The Swiss parliament passed radical spending cuts in December (page 9). Their consequences are far-reaching, particularly for the most vulnerable: Switzerland has made massive cuts to its development aid. The outlook isn't exactly rosy for the Swiss Abroad either, at least not if they have any specific expectations of their home country. Parliament is also cutting benefits for the Fifth Switzerland. A survey we conducted in the Federal Palace shows that political sentiment towards the Fifth Switzerland is cooling. You can find out more on page 28. You are also most welcome to share your own opinions.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"Swiss Review", the information magazine for the Fifth Switzerland, is published by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.





No more winter snow

Switzerland is finding it harder to sell itself as a picture-perfect winter destination. Its highest ski resorts are increasingly the only places offering decent snow. The national pastime of Alpine skiing, still much loved, is becoming ever more expensive.

THEODORA PETER

Ski lifts on your local Swiss hill will soon be a thing of the past. Take Langenbruck. Situated 700 metres above sea level in the canton of Basel-Landschaft, the village's 73-year-old ski lift faces closure because snow is becoming increasingly rare. The lifts, which take skiers and snowboarders to an altitude of 900 metres, remained shut over the past two winters.

Countless children and teenagers made their first tentative turns on the slopes above Langenbruck. One of them was the now 74-year-old architect Peter Hammer, who now runs the lifts. Hammer's father was one of those who helped to open the facility in 1952, making Langenbruck the first-ever winter sports destination in north-



western Switzerland. As a child, young Peter used to help out at the ski lifts in his free time. He has continued to work there ever since. "Seeing people happy is my motivation," he says.

Skiing boomed well into the 1980s in Langenbruck, which is situated only 30 kilometres from the city of Basel as the crow flies. There was still plenty of snow back then, not least thanks to the introduction of an artificial snow can-

Skiing down into the valley often requires artificial snow. The piste going down to Flims (1,000 metres above sea level) in Grisons, Christmas 2022

Photo: Keystone

The time has come for Peter Hammer to close his Langenbruck ski lift. When it opened in 1952 (picture on the right), there was no shortage of snow. Photo: Volksstimme Sissach, Keystone



non in 1978. Floodlit skiing was also popular, giving local snow worshippers the chance to cut shapes on the slopes after work. But mild winters without snow became more common at the beginning of the 1990s. "No one really talked much about climate change back then, but we could sense something was happening," Hammer told "Swiss Review".

Closure of 230 ski resorts

The number of days on which the pistes were open then dwindled – "from 20 to zero". Hammer is hoping for a good final season. If Langenbruck is unable to attract a buyer, the definitive curtain call will come in spring 2025. The most galling thing for Hammer is that the lifts are "still in good condition" – and actually licensed to operate until 2031. He wistfully recalls past decades. "Entire families and generations grew up here on the ski slopes."

Langenbruck is one of many snow resorts to have thrown in the towel. Of Switzerland's original 545 ski resorts and slopes, some 230 – or 40 per cent – have disappeared. Waning interest in winter sport as well as low profitability have also contributed to lift closures –

Winters in Switzerland are now 2.4°C warmer than they were in the mid-19th century. Temperatures are likely to have climbed another degree by 2050. Ski areas below 1,500 metres will then be virtually without snow.

besides the lack of snow – according to a study by the Technical University of Dortmund. Not all the abandoned ski resorts have been dismantled. Rust-covered drag lifts, broken gondolas and abandoned mountain restaurants tell of what used to be. Their operators have gone bankrupt, leaving behind a derelict infrastructure as well as debt.

Warmer winters

Rising temperatures will also become a big challenge for resorts at higher altitudes in the coming decades. On



Switzerland, the skiing nation

“Alles fährt Ski... alles fährt Ski... Ski fährt die ganze Nation” – Vico Torriani’s 1963 hit was the sound track to the ski boom that reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s. Nearly everyone seemed to ski in Switzerland back then, thanks to a plethora of ski lifts around the country, not least on minor hillsides. The nearest drag lift was never far away, and almost every schoolchild regularly attended ski camp.

The “golden days of Sapporo”, when Switzerland won 10 medals at the 1972 Winter Olympics in Japan, has pride of place in Swiss ski folklore. Bernhard Russi and Roland Collombin finished first and second in the men’s downhill, while Marie-Theres Nadig won two golds. Switzerland was a skiing nation.

Winter sport – making the nation “fit for defence”

In Switzerland, it was mountaineers who first discovered skis as a useful tool for their expeditions, writes sport historian Simon Engel in a blog for the Swiss National Museum. Switzerland’s first-ever ski club was formed in Glarus in 1893, while the Swiss-Ski Association was established in 1904. At first, skiing was largely the preserve of well-heeled tourists. Sporty upper-class Brits organised races in which the objective was to descend the slope as quickly as possible. Unlike the Scandinavians, they regarded skiing as “downhill only”.

According to Engel, skiing’s “nationalisation” as a popular Swiss sport owed much to the two world wars that brought international tourism to a standstill. To get more Swiss out on the slopes, the federal government and cantons ploughed money into rescuing hotels



Looking back to the “golden days of Sapporo”: Swiss downhill Olympic skiing champion Bernhard Russi (no. 4) and Swiss Olympic number two Roland Collombin (no. 11) being carried by fans at the 1972 Winter Olympics.

Photo: Keystone

and mountain railways as well as subsidising ski passes and ski courses. The 1940s saw the first cantons introducing the concept of an annual school break dedicated to winter sport.

The armed forces also played a role. During the Second World War, General Guisan popularised the notion that the mountains and skiing provided young people with the ideal arena in which to develop the physical and moral strength needed for the country’s defence. This concerted propaganda campaign served its purpose, attracting domestic tourists to Switzerland’s ski resorts. (TP)

Swiss National Museum blog:
www.revue.link/skiing

behalf of ski lift operators and the Swiss national tourist board, climate scientists at ETH Zurich have produced forecasts for winters up until the 2050s. They say that the lack of snow in all ski areas below 1,500 metres will be increasingly acute. Winters in Switzerland are now 2.4°C warmer than when records began in

1864, says the ETH Zurich climate researcher Reto Knutti. “We expect a further increment of one degree Celsius by 2050.” Depending on CO₂ emissions, the figure could change by one or more tenths of a degree – with corresponding knock-on effects.

If winter temperatures increase by 1°C as forecast, the zero-degree limit –

the altitude at which the temperature in Celsius drops to freezing – will be 300 metres higher than it is now. The zero-degree limit is a key indicator for winter tourists, indicating the altitude at which rain turns to snow. It has already risen by 300 to 400 metres since the 1960s, spelling the end for low-lying ski lifts.

Pistes below 1,800 metres will soon be in danger, says Knutti. These areas are also finding it hard to produce artificial snow, because snow cannons only work at temperatures below 0°C. And the number of sub-zero days will fall by 10 to 30 per cent depending on altitude, the climate forecasts say. “It will be too warm for snow cannons, particularly in early winter from mid-November to mid-December.”

Even more artificial snow

Many winter tourist destinations in the Alps are located above the already critical 1,500-metre threshold. Yet even they have had to adapt their strategies to climate change. Of 100 ski lift operators surveyed by the University of St Gallen, over 75 per cent are expecting less snow and shorter ski seasons in the next 20 years. Nevertheless, most believe that skiing and snowboarding will remain popular in future, which is why they are investing even more in cannons that will pump out large amounts of artificial snow in a short space of time. Ski pistes will be relocated upwards, wherever feasible, incorporating additional ski lifts built higher up the mountain.

These plans cost money. Millions of Swiss francs, to be precise. In some cases, foreign investors have come to inject the necessary capital. Two years ago, for example, US company Vail Resorts acquired a majority stake in Andermatt-Sedrun Sport AG, which controls and operates the Andermatt-Sedrun mountain resort situated on the cantonal border between Uri and



Grisons. The US ski giant, which owns and operates over 40 ski areas worldwide, also bought the Valais resort of Crans-Montana in 2024. In both Andermatt-Sedrun and Crans-Montana, Vail Resorts wants to invest a total of around 50 million francs in improving infrastructure such as snow cannons, ski lifts, and restaurants. The idea is that other investors will then step in and build their own hotels and holiday complexes at these resorts, attracting wealthy guests in the process.

From national pastime to luxury activity

Other ski resorts are also investing heavily in their infrastructure. Not only has this bumped up energy costs, but visitors now have to pay more to use the ski lifts. Depending on the size of the resort, a day's skiing or snowboarding costs between 40 and 90 francs for an adult. Some lift operators employ dynamic pricing, which involves adjusting prices based on real-time market demand. Hence, the price of a single-day ski pass can sometimes exceed 100 francs in places like St Moritz, Zermatt or snowboarding mecca Laax.

Laax CEO Reto Gurtner caused a stir last autumn when he said that prices had not yet reached their peak. "In ten years' time, a day pass in Laax will cost between 200 and 300 francs." Gurtner believes that resorts offering guaranteed snow will continue to grow in popularity – and enough tourists will be willing to cough up for the privilege. Golfers are already happy to pay

Snow cannons only work at icy temperatures of below 0°C.

Photo: Keystone

up to 1,000 francs a round, he argues. Tourism expert Jürg Stettler from the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts does not expect prices to be as exorbitant everywhere, but believes many Swiss will wonder whether winter sport is still worth the money. "Skiing is no longer the national pastime it was 40 years ago," he told Radio SRF. About one third of the population still practises winter sport. "But people are heading to the pistes less often than they used to." For families in particular, winter sport is becoming an unaffordable luxury. If you have two children, the cost of a week's ski holiday soon adds up to several thousand francs.

Ski camps – a dying tradition

Learning to ski has also become less of a priority at school. Annual ski

camps were a staple of the curriculum in the 1970s but are now less common than they were. The current curriculum for German-speaking Switzerland merely sets the objective of children being able to move "on sliding equipment", which can also mean ice skates.

Youth+Sport, the federal government scheme to promote sport, subsidises winter sports camps that attract around 100,000 young people every year. Industry stakeholders also launched the Swiss Snow Sports Initiative in 2014 to attract more children and teenagers to the slopes, with the GoSnow website (gosnow.ch) offering schools and teachers inexpensive winter sports camp packages as well as a diverse range of instructional material. This winter, the platform is organising around 400 camps for over 18,000 participants.

Former ski racer Fränzi Aufdenblatten, who chairs the initiative, says skiing is not only a sport but a part of Swiss culture. She cannot imagine children growing up in Switzerland and not going skiing at least once in their life. "That would be like living in Hawaii but never standing on a surfboard."

The future of the Crans-Montana ski resort is secure due to foreign investment: the Valais ski area was purchased by US conglomerate Vail Resorts in 2024.

Photo: Keystone



Laurent Debrot



In the book “The Little Prince”, there is a man who lights and puts out his lamp every minute. Is it just as absurd for every road in Switzerland to be lit up at night? Yes, says Laurent Debrot from the canton of Neuchâtel. Debrot, a retired organic farmer, campaigned to have the lights switched off in his home municipality of Val-de-Ruz. It took a while for everyone to acquiesce, but street lights in the villages of Val-de-Ruz are now turned off between midnight and 4.45 a.m. This makes Val-de-Ruz the first municipality in Switzerland to remain dark at night. Darkness is good for both animals and humans, returning the night to its natural state. Neuchâtel’s other municipalities have since followed suit. Street lights throughout the canton have been switched off from midnight since 2022. Laurent Debrot, a former Green member of Neuchâtel’s cantonal parliament, backed up his campaign with facts. In 2017, he measured the light intensity at a pedestrian crossing situated in front of the local cantonal driver and vehicle licensing office in Malvilliers. “The crossing is rarely ever used during the day, and the people in the offices opposite clock off by late afternoon anyway,” he said. “You wonder what the point of these street lights was in the first place.” While touring Val-de-Ruz with a group of journalists, Debrot complained that the crossing had been exempted from the new night-time ruling. “It defeats the object.” The matter has since been resolved. In Le Locle, for example, every street light is now turned off, zebra crossings included. Debrot is happy because he thinks street lights at pedestrian crossings can cause more danger by lulling pedestrians into a false sense of security. He recently conducted a survey among the inhabitants of Le Locle and was pleased with the result. “The reaction has been positive.”

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Female retirement age rise gets the green light

No turning back now – the female retirement age in Switzerland is to rise in stages from 64 to 65. The electorate voted for the change two years ago, narrowly endorsing a comprehensive reform of the old-age and survivors’ insurance (OASI) scheme that incorporated the increase. The only snag was that the Federal Council had given an overly gloomy assessment of the financial state of OASI, later admitting it had miscalculated its projections. The Green Party and the women’s wing of the SP consequently went to the Federal Supreme Court (FSC) to demand that the vote be declared null and void. But the FSC dismissed the case on 12 December 2024. It criticised the blunder but concluded that any annulment would undermine the rule of law.

(MUL)

“Zürcher*innen” still allowed in Zurich

Gender-inclusive language is a tricky issue for German speakers. It is fair to say that not everyone is a fan of the gender-neutral “gender star” (as in “Zürcher*innen” to denote a person or persons from Zurich). The slightly more discreet colon (as in “Schweizer:innen”/Swiss) is now quite popular; “Swiss Review” has been using it for the last four years. The capital “I” (as in “AusländerInnen”/foreigner(s)), common for a good while, is on the decline, which is why the city of Zurich discarded it in favour of the gender star in 2022. Campaigners subsequently launched a popular initiative demanding that the city of Zurich be prohibited from using the gender star. But in Switzerland’s first-ever plebiscite on gender-inclusive language, voters emphatically rejected the proposal on 27 November 2024. “Zürcher*innen” is still allowed.

(MUL)

Basel gives ESC 2025 the thumbs up.

This year’s Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), the world’s largest live music event, is to go ahead in Basel as planned. The ultra-conservative Federal Democratic Union of Switzerland (EDU) initiated a referendum to try to prevent the ESC from taking place, labelling the competition a satanic, immoral and unjustifiably expensive “freak show”. Basel will spend 35 million Swiss francs in taxpayer money on hosting the event. The city canton’s electorate disagreed with the EDU, with a clear majority of voters approving the funding plans on 24 November. See also: www.revue.link/escbasel.

(MUL)

Opposition to the 30 km/h speed limit

Our online edition of the magazine offers additional content. For example, read more about why cutting the road speed limit in Switzerland’s built-up areas continues to divide opinion: www.revue.link/speed30

(MUL)

More money for defence, less for foreign aid

Funding for the Swiss armed forces is being increased, partly financed by cuts to international cooperation. That was the outcome of the winter session of parliament following some heated and drawn-out debate.

SUSANNE WENGER

Shortly before Christmas, the federal budget was finalised for 2025. It envisages expenditure of 86.5 billion Swiss francs and revenue of 85.7 billion. The debt brake in the constitution allows this shortfall for economic reasons. Three weeks of wrangling between the National Council and the Council of States preceded the final outcome. One particularly thorny issue was determining by how much to finance the increase in defence expenditure through cuts to international cooperation, i.e. development aid, contributions to multilateral organisations and economic cooperation.

The debate also centred on Switzerland's role in an uncertain world (see quotes). The majority position is to increase the defence budget to 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). There was disagreement over the timeline: the federal government is looking at 2035, but parliament



Voices from the debate

"We have been sending billions of tax money abroad for decades. After the Berlin wall came down, this parliament assumed the peace would last for ever. That has come back to bite us."

LARS GUGGISBERG (SVP/BE)

"We can't just allocate an extra half a billion francs to the armed forces without knowing what the money will be used for."

TAMARA FUNICIELLO (SP/BE)

"The peace dividend has been spent abroad in past years. Now Switzerland's first priority is to get its own house in order."

PETER SCHILLIGER (FDP/LU)

"It's wrong to add half a billion to the defence budget and jeopardise Switzerland's humanitarian tradition at the same time."

CORINA GREDIG (GLP/ZH)

"For a small, neutral country like Switzerland, a global policy of peace is the best security policy; it's irresponsible to neglect that."

GERHARD ANDREY (THE GREENS/FR)

"Look at what's going in the world. The debt crisis is everywhere. Financially challenged states are also militarily challenged. The importance of the debt brake cannot be overstated."

BENEDIKT WÜRTH (THE CENTRE/SG)

wants to make it three years sooner. The outcome was 530 million francs more for defence in this year's budget than the Federal Council had envisaged, a total of 6.3 billion.

Bleak financial outlook

The conservative majority in the National Council initially wanted to cut 250 million francs, almost half of the additional funds earmarked for the armed forces, from international cooperation. Even the frugal Minister of Finance Karin Keller-Sutter warned that such a drastic reduction would jeopardise development aid projects. The Council of States brought the sum down to 30 million and stood firm on offsetting the extra defence expenditure due to the debt brake and bleak financial outlook. Both chambers agreed on a compromise to offset the difference: a 110 million franc cut in international cooperation.

Additional cuts are also planned in other areas, including federal staff. Calls to generate additional revenue in addition to making budget cuts were rejected. The conservative parties SVP, FDP and the Centre were in favour of the 2025 budget; the centre-left parties, namely the SP and Greens were against. In February, the next round of the fiscal controversy will start. There are pending structural deficits from 2027, which is why the Swiss government will send a restructuring package for the federal budget for consultation, based on proposals by an expert group.

Parliament is pushing for the rapid build-up of the country's military. Pictured here: a fighter jet lands on the motorway near Payerne (Vaud) on 5 June 2024 as part of an air force exercise. Photo: Keystone

Isabel Bürgin – a weaver inspired by her craft

Weaving is one of the oldest forms of textile production. There are several hundred practising weavers in Switzerland. One of them is Isabel Bürgin.

GERLIND MARTIN

Isabel Bürgin has been plying her craft ever since she began training to become a textile designer and hand weaver in 1981. Her bright, high-ceilinged workshop in a rear building located in the Klybeck district of Basel has been well used in the past. Bürgin's grandfather and an uncle of hers used to run a confectionery business there. Confectionery and weaving are traditional crafts, says Bürgin. "I am continuing the family tradition."

Her workshop contains three looms and also acts as an office and showroom. Visitors can come and see and feel her colourful rugs, blankets and scarves for themselves. And Bürgin can talk to her customers face to face. She would never sit in a shop and wait for people to walk in. No, she has to work and move at the same time. "I love walking." Bürgin wanted to become a dancer when she was younger. She has an agile physique. Her daily walks are a form of stimulation. "It could be a noise. Or a woman might pass me with an interesting colour combination on her clothes. Or it could be nature itself. Or the light. Inspiration can't just be plucked like an apple from a tree. But you need to be receptive to it." Bürgin creates her designs at the loom. She tries out different patterns and experiments with colours and yarns, constantly checking, discarding and changing. She gradually comes up with a blueprint that she can refine on her computer. "My ideas come from doing," she explains. "And I translate my ideas into pictures."

Fascinating – but too difficult

Isabel Bürgin learned how to weave in her textiles class at the Basel School of Design. However, she initially had trouble understanding the



Isabel Bürgin displays one of her creations: a soft and voluminous carpet made from sheep's wool.
Photo: Lisa Schäublin

technical ins and outs. "It was fascinating, but I couldn't get my head around it." Everything changed when she and her five fellow students managed to get the curriculum reorganised into teaching blocks. This gave her the time she needed to focus on every element of the course. Bürgin gained a better grasp of the subject and was able to conceptualise what she was doing. "I was smitten. I finally understood textiles."

Bürgin explored the following question in her thesis: how would I like a tactile walkway to feel if I were

blind? "I wove my first-ever carpet back then. It was a runner." Little did she know that she would be weaving carpets for 37 years and probably longer. "It has become a real passion."

No fear of failure

Bürgin set up her own business in 1986 at the age of 24, armed with a hand weaving apprenticeship, a degree in textile design, and the worthwhile experience of doing an internship at Ulf Moritz's design studio in Amsterdam. The "Dutch approach" of



The studio in Basel (above) is both an office and a showroom. The largest tool of the trade stands in the centre of the room: the three-metre wide loom, which is as tiring to operate as it looks. After scarves and blankets, rugs (below) are the main product in the collection.

Photos: Lisa Schäublin

trying out off-the-cuff ideas and not being afraid to fail was particularly inspiring. Bürigin twice won a federal scholarship in applied art from the Federal Office of Culture at the beginning of the 1990s, which allowed her to work for a while without any financial worries. It was at this time that she created her classic “sch-nur-zu-fall” floor carpet made of natural goat’s hair and recycled coloured string. “It is the basis of my collection.” Prospective customers now had something they could run their hands over and imagine having in the home. Bürigin still enjoys weaving “sch-nur-zufall” to this day. “It is an extremely exciting carpet to make, because the string colour always varies.”

Ready-made blankets and scarves

Bürigin has been exhibiting at trade fairs for years. Yet few would come to a trade fair and dish out on the spot for an expensive rug. Products that people can take home with them, like



her varied range of multicoloured woollen blankets, sell better. Woven using seven colours, her “wollok” blanket features an abundant fringe of hand-spun yarns and, according to Bürigin’s website, is “no comfy blanket but a multi-functional piece of body furniture”. Her soft scarves and shawls also come in bright colour combinations and are designed to keep people warm.

Does Bürigin earn a good living from weaving? “I have learned to be realistic,” she replies. She did side jobs for 23 years to ease some of the financial strain. These included running workshops and teaching at art academies. In 2005, she was appointed as a professor for a very demanding three-year term at Kassel Art School in Germany. That was her last “side job”.

“Such a beautiful, tactile craft”

The structure, density and design of the different yarns and fringes that she employs lend notable variety to her rug collection, despite her carpet loom only having two shafts. This limitation requires Bürigin to be extremely creative. The loom is just three metres wide, so she has to exert herself when using it. She never sits down and has to constantly move with the loom. Although air pressure helps her to change shafts, weaving

New book about weaving in Switzerland

The article above is an excerpt from a new book called “Alle Fäden in der Hand. Weben in der Schweiz”, which profiles 13 different weavers of all ages, across three generations, in Switzerland. The oldest is over 90 years of age, while the youngest recently completed her three-year weaving apprenticeship. Their different experiences and working methods demonstrate the potential of this ancient craft. The book also explores the story of weaving over the past 100 or so years, documenting the efforts that have been made to preserve the tradition and enhance its appeal as a viable profession in today’s world. At present, some 650 weavers in Switzerland are affiliated to a professional textile association.



Gerlind Martin, Regula Zähler (publisher):
 “Alle Fäden in der Hand – Weben in der Schweiz”
 204 pages; 145 mostly colour pictures; bound;
 21 x 27 cm
 © 2024 Christoph Merian Verlag
 CHF 49 / EUR 49; ISBN 978-3-03969-035-0

a rug remains hard work. She should outsource this job, some people say. Bürigin laughs. “That is the last thing I would do! Weaving is such a beautiful, tactile craft.”

The electorate stops plans for motorway expansion

On 24 November 2024, voters rejected the planned five-billion-franc expansion of the motorways, with 52.7 per cent voting against it. Voters also disagreed with the federal authorities on two proposed amendments to tenancy law.

THEODORA PETER

No, no and no again: the last vote of 2024 did not turn out well for the government or parliament. The Swiss electorate turned down three out of four proposals by the Federal Palace: besides the expansion of the highways, two relaxations of tenancy law that had the tenants' association up in arms were also rejected. Only the standardised financing of insured healthcare benefits received the green light from voters.

The Fifth Switzerland was more receptive to the authorities' proposals on 24 November: unlike the majority of voters, the Swiss Abroad actually voted in favour of financing the motorway expansion and backed one of the controversial amendments to tenancy law (see charts). In so doing, they agreed with the Federal Council and parliament on three of the four proposals. This confirms the trend whereby the Fifth Switzerland follows the official line more closely when voting.

The success of the left-green opposition

Confidence in the government seems to have broken down, at least within the country. In the first year of the new legislative period, the government won a mere seven out of 12 votes. The Left triumphed five times in 2024 – most memorably when the SP and unions were successful with their initiative to introduce a 13th OASI pension payment (“Review 3/2024”).

These victories for the Left at the polls are remarkable given that parliament moved markedly to the right in the federal elections of autumn 2023. Against this backdrop, the triple no is a signal to the power politics of the centre-right parties: SVP, FDP and The Centre. Although they set the tone in the government and parliament, the people are clearly singing a different tune.

Women are more sceptical than men about cars

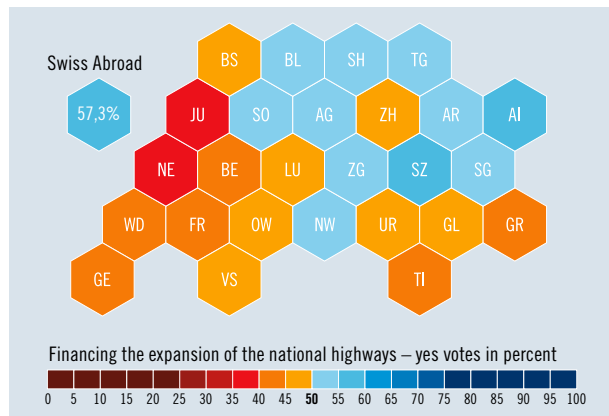
On 24 November, the Greens joined the SP in the winners' camp. The ecological lobby struck a chord with the public through its campaign against excessive highway expansion, (“Review 5/2024”), as shown by a survey conducted after the vote. Besides climate-related concerns, people were also worried about more roads bringing more traffic. This argument from the anti-motorway lobby resonated most among female voters, 60 per cent of whom voted against the proposal.

Men, on the other hand, were more sympathetic towards motorised transport: 56 per cent approved the financing, which, at least in the eyes of the yes camp, was simply a matter of relieving motorway congestion in a few areas. Maybe the yes camp was overly confident: its slogan “For a Switzerland that moves forward” failed to convince the majority.

Political scientist and pollster Michael Herman also saw the rejection of the motorway expansion as an ex-

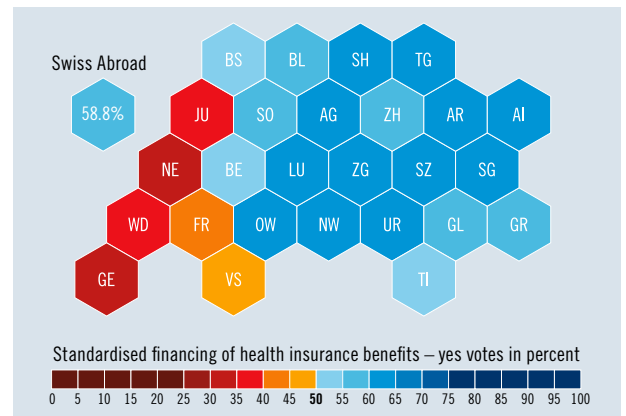


Financing the expansion of the national highways



Across Switzerland, only 47.3 per cent voted in favour of the planned six extensions of the motorways. In contrast, the Fifth Switzerland voted strongly in favour of the works, with 57.3 per cent in favour of the financing, placing it in the minority along with the voters in 11 cantons.

Standardised financing of health insurance benefits



A majority (53.3 per cent) gave the green light to the new financing model in the healthcare sector. The Fifth Switzerland approved the proposal even more emphatically. The voters' overall response to this bill revealed a distinct division between French-speaking Switzerland and the rest of the country.



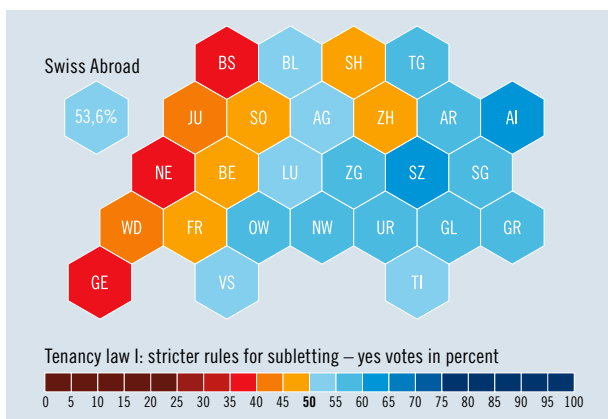
pression of “growth aversion”. Many people feel Switzerland is growing too quickly, he said: “They fear an ever-greier Switzerland, covered in concrete”, Herman told the Tamedia newspapers.

The public’s no to the motorway expansion shows what other road construction projects may also have to contend with. According to Minister of Transport Albert Rösti (SVP), a comprehensive expansion of the A1 motorway is now off the agenda. The Federal Council and parliament had intended to extend the busy stretch between Lausanne and Geneva and from Berne to Zurich to at least six lanes.

Only the healthcare reform passed at the polls

Meanwhile, it’s full steam ahead for the healthcare reforms. The Swiss voted 53.3 per cent in favour of the standardised financing of health insurance benefits. The Fifth Switzerland also agreed to the legislative change. It will lead to more treatments being classified as outpatient and costing less as a result. The authorities hope to see savings of up to 440 million Swiss francs.

Tenancy law I: stricter rules for subletting



Tightening the rules to the detriment of tenants fell short of nationwide majority approval, obtaining 48.4 per cent of the vote. The Fifth Switzerland, on the other hand, voted in favour (53.6 per cent). The victorious No lobby included the populous canton of Zurich as well as French-speaking Switzerland.

This was the one vote where the unions came up short. They had campaigned against the bill arguing, among other things, that the quality of care could be compromised and working conditions could also be affected.

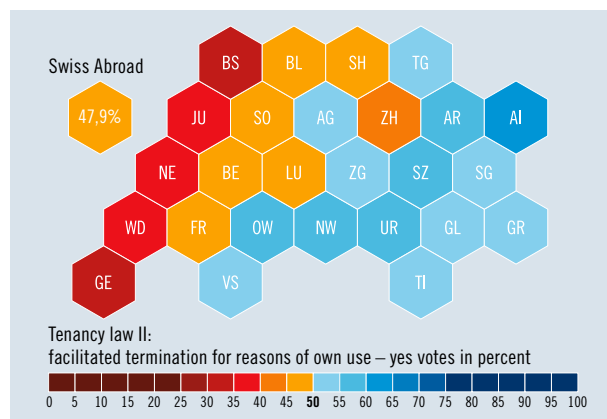
A reality check for landlords

Meanwhile, it’s business as usual for tenancy law: 51.6 per cent of the electorate said no to tightening the rules for subletting. The Fifth Switzerland approved the legislative change, albeit to no avail. The bill was designed to prevent abuse of the system. If the bill had passed, tenants would have had to obtain explicit written agreement from the owner each time they wanted to sublet a property. As the law stands now, the tenant simply has to notify the owner.

The no vote (53.8 per cent) was somewhat more emphatic in response to the proposed simplification of lease terminations for own use. Landlords will still have to prove that they have an “urgent” need for an apartment or house for themselves or for close relatives if they want to dissolve an existing rental contract. The Fifth Switzerland concurred as it also voted against the motion.

The victorious tenant’s association is now preparing for the next defence of tenants’ rights. On Voting Sunday, it was already threatening referendums if parliament backs other adverse legislation, when setting rent levels for example. If it comes to that, the people will as always have the last word.

Tenancy law II: facilitated termination for reasons of own use



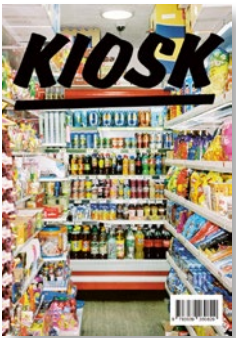
This second amendment to tenancy law proved even less popular, with just 46.2 per cent in favour. The Fifth Switzerland was also opposed to this legislative change in favour of landlords.

The electorate has voted against building additional lanes on motorways like the A1 (seen here traversing the outskirts of Berne).

Photo: Keystone

As children, we spent our first-ever pocket money on sweets at the local kiosk. Despite our parents' protestations, cola frogs and caramel sticks were the top priority. As adults, we bought newspapers, magazines and cigarettes from the same kiosk. We filled in our lottery tickets and dreamed of a jackpot that never came. The man or woman behind the counter knew immediately whether you wanted to talk to them or not. "Kiosk – Ein Kaleidoskop" is a new book that pays homage to all the little kiosks that we know and love around the corner, at the station or in the shopping centre – a wistful trip down memory lane, because the classic kiosk in Switzerland is a dying phenomenon. Tobacco, sweets and printed newspapers are less popular than during the kiosk heyday of the 20th century. Switzerland's leading kiosk operator Valora still has around 800 sales outlets offering an expanded range including take-away food and power bank charging stations. "Kiosk" is a beautifully designed book that also explores kiosks through the eyes of younger people and puts them in a cultural, architectural and consumer-related context. Its stories and 100 or so images provide a fitting tribute. Kiosks are, according to the publishers, a place "where news from around the world lies in neatly stacked piles". And "where the hasty and sleepless start the day".

SUSANNE WENGER



Plattform Kulturpublikistik, Zurich
University of the Arts

"Kiosk – Ein Kaleidoskop",
Limmat Verlag 2024.
208 pages, CHF 38
(in German)

Football stickers, cigarettes,
magazines – Dora Meier at
her kiosk in Niederbipp
(canton of Solothurn), 1976



Dreaming of a big win – lottery slips are a ubiquitous and popular feature of every kiosk.

Kiosks revisited



The cola frog is a famous Swiss sweet.



A certain kind of symmetry inside one of the many kiosks across Switzerland.
Photos: Limmat Verlag



Kiosks are where cultures intersect.



Neat and tidy shelf arrangements



“People want to know what is happening in their village”

When media outlets feel the financial pinch, local newspapers are the first to fold. This has concerning implications for democracy. Yet the “Unter-Emmentaler” is 150 years old and still going strong amid the cuts.



SUSANNE WENGER

Arrive at the headquarters of the “Unter-Emmentaler” in Huttwil (canton of Berne) and a Schürch Druck & Medien AG employee will take you through the noisy printing room, then up the steep, winding wooden stairs at the back of the building until you reach the editorial office – a small meeting room in which portraits of the paper’s founding family hang on the wall. Established in 1875, “Unter-Emmentaler” has remained in family hands to this day. When recently advertising an editorial job, it described itself as “one of the last remaining independent local newspapers in Switzerland”.

Most of the desks are unoccupied on this snowy November afternoon. The journalists are out chasing stories. Six editorial staff work the equivalent of 5.1 full-time employees, with 10 freelancers helping them to publish two editions a week. The paper’s catchment area partially covers the Emmental Valley and the Oberaargau district in the canton of Berne as well as the Lucerne hinterland. Walter Ryser, an experienced local journalist, knows this part of the world like the back of his hand.

“Fertile ground”

As the company’s media manager, Ryser gives strategic advice to senior management in addition to writing articles for the newspaper. He also runs his own small advertising agency and is involved in cultural and sport associations. Ryser describes the region as rural and conservative. “Traditions are important here,” he says. “The pace of life is sedate, offering a fertile ground for local journal-

ism.” But people from the town of Langenthal also read the “Unter-Emmentaler”. “Langenthal is a world away from Huttwil,” explains Ryser’s colleague Thomas Peter, who is the paper’s chief editor.

ism.” But people from the town of Langenthal also read the “Unter-Emmentaler”. “Langenthal is a world away from Huttwil,” explains Ryser’s colleague Thomas Peter, who is the paper’s chief editor.

Such diversity within a small area is typical of Switzerland. “We do a journalistic balancing act,” says Peter. With aplomb, he might add. “None of the big publications bother with local journalism,” says Ryser, with a nod to the developments of the last 20 years. For a long time, Switzerland boasted an intricate media landscape that formed an important part of the federal system. Yet the rise of online media since the turn of the millennium has brought about the demise of business models around the country. Cost cutting and mergers have hit local journalism in particular.

Many publications have disappeared

At least 70 publications went out of print between 2003 and 2021. Newspapers have been discontinued or integrated into the centralised news desks of large media groups like Zurich-based Tamedia, which also owns publications in French-speaking Switzerland and the canton of Berne. Last autumn, Tamedia announced further significant job cuts and more mergers, the company’s stated aim being to “grow strategically in the digital world” with its stable of major publications. A storm of criticism greeted the announcement in affected regions right across the country – including Emmental-Oberaargau, home of the “Langenthaler Tagblatt”. In recent years, this once independent newspaper has been published as a regional variant of the Tamedia-owned “Berner Zeitung”, which has now swallowed it up entirely.

Photo provided



Chief editor
Thomas Peter.
Photo provided

“Traditions are important here” – the “Unter-Emmentaler” has always been produced in Huttwil (canton of Berne).

Photo: Keystone





Protest in Lausanne against job cuts by the Zurich-based media company Tamedia. The layoffs will hit French-speaking Switzerland particularly hard (12 September 2024). Photo: Keystone

The opening of a new village shop is worth an article on the front page of the "Unter-Emmentaler" (6 December 2024).

up their own minds. Ryser knows that readers won't tolerate much more than that. "Otherwise they immediately pick us up on it because it's not our style."

Rise in circulation

The "Unter-Emmentaler" is holding its own. According to the latest audited circulation figures, it has around 4,700 paid subscribers. This number has grown in recent years, bucking the general trend. Local advertisers have consequently remained loyal to the newspaper. Revenues are satisfactory, say management. A large print run of 20,000 copies is distributed every two weeks. As a print media publisher, the company also gets postal concessions.

How has a tiny newspaper been able to brave the digital transformation and the crisis afflicting the media sector? "Papers like the 'Unter-Emmentaler' are still able to employ the business model that is dying out at cross-re-

Walter Ryser from the "Unter-Emmentaler" used to be the chief editor of the "Langenthaler Tagblatt". He always thought cutting local content was a big mistake. "I cannot believe how the media get away with it," he says. "People want to know what's happening in their village." There is a need for quality local journalism. This is what the Huttwil-based company has invested in over the last few years: slightly increasing its editorial staff and extending its radius. The editorial policy remains print-first, with the paper's website and Facebook page also offering content.

Huge effort

Articles containing the latest in-depth local news make up 80 per cent of the editorial content – whether this be Melchnau getting to keep its cheese dairy, locals voting to increase municipal funding for the ice rink in Huttwil, or plans to build a fire museum in Affoltern. The editors put a great deal of work into visiting events, researching stories and interviewing people across the region. They never miss any of the region's public assemblies at which members of the community vote on local issues – a key pillar of direct democracy in Switzerland. Covering over 40 such assemblies is a huge effort. "But this is what we want to do," says chief editor Peter.

Studies reveal a decline in political participation and the social fabric whenever the media stops reporting on the issues that affect local communities. Without an independent local media, reporting also grows. According to Peter, the "Unter-Emmentaler" lacks the resources for extensive research. They have no wish to stir up controversy anyway. When issues turn heated, the newspaper simply reports the facts and the views so that readers can make

FREITAG, 6. DEZEMBER 2024
www.unter-emmentaler.ch

Unter-Emmentaler

Die Zeitung für den Oberaargau, das Emmental und das Luzerner Hinterland

148. Jahrgang Nummer 27

HEUTE GROSSZUGLAGE 23 918 Exemplare

Zeit für eine neue Website?

HUTTILWIL
Neues Erholungsgebiet
Im Zuge der Hochwasserschutzmassnahmen im Kammermoos ist ein neues Erholungsgebiet entstanden. Seite 3

URSENBACH
Klimapakt für Loosli AG
Etwas hat Matthias Loosli nicht gegeschaut: Der Berner Unternehmer Niklaus Loosli wird an die Loosli AG. Seite 5

EISHOCKEY
Brands ist Tabellenführer
Der EHC Brändis liegt nach acht Siegen in neuen Spielen an der Tabellen Spitze der 1. Liga. Trainer Thomas Fasel berichtet. Seite 19

URSENBACH
Neuer Dorfladen in ehemaliger Bäckerei
In der ehemaligen Dorfbäckerei Schär in Ursenbach wird am Samstag, 7. Dezember, ein neuer Dorfladen eröffnet. Hier dem Projekt steht eine Genossenschaft, an der zahlreiche Einwohnerinnen und Einwohner beteiligt sind, mit dem Ziel, dass Lebensmittel und Produkte für den täglichen Bedarf weiterhin im Dorf bezogen werden können.

Herzlichchen Dank für Ihr Vertrauen. Für unser Huttwil!
ADRIAN WÜTHRICH
Genossenschaftspräsident Huttwil ab 1.1.2025
Falls Sie mehr über das Genossenschaftsmodell verfolgen wollen, folgen Sie mir auf Instagram: @adriawuethr

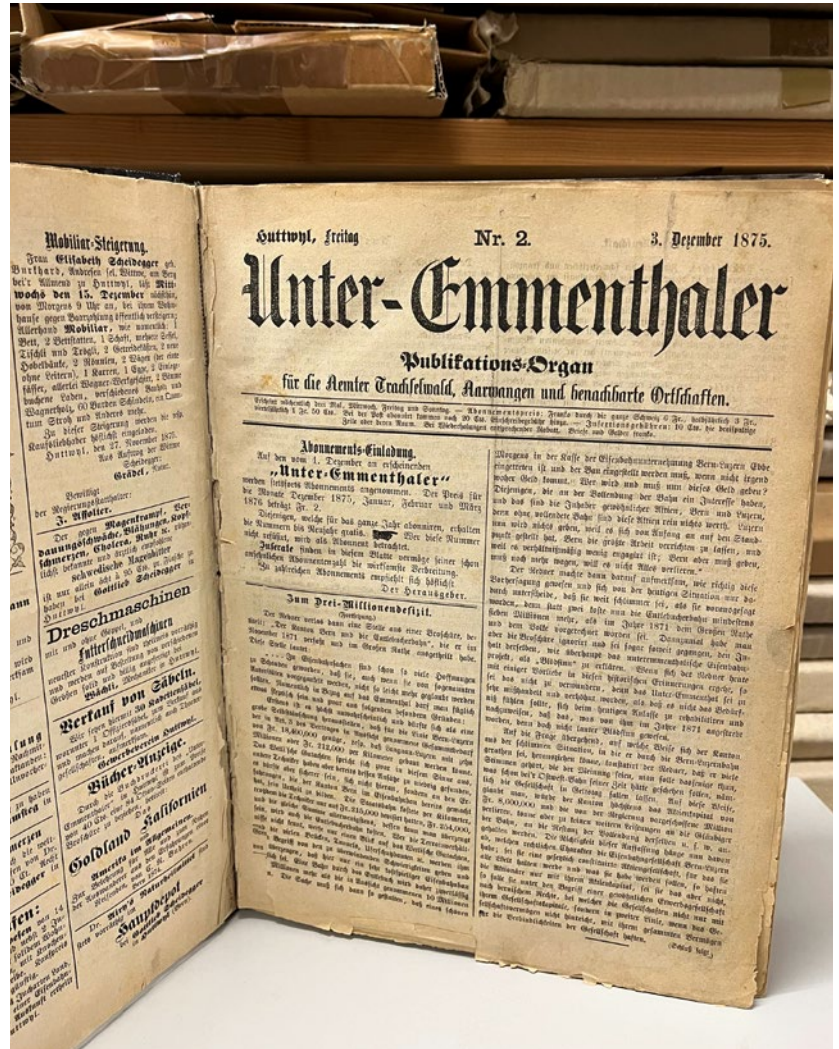
UNTER-EMMENTALER SCHÖRCH DRUCK & MEDIEN | E-MAIL: U@SCHÖRCH-DRUCK.CH | TELEFON: 041 939 80 70

gional and national level, which relies on a mix of funding from subscription and advertising revenue,” explains media journalist Nick Lüthi. This is because there are no alternatives for readers or advertisers, and because these local publications continue to provide a service that people use and appreciate. “Tamedia newspapers no longer offer as much depth as the ‘Unter-Emmentaler’ can afford to do.” Furthermore, the village butcher and the farm shop around the corner can reach their target audience more effectively with an ad in the local paper than through an online campaign.

“Important role”

Politicians lament how Tamedia has pared back local journalism in their region, which is why they applaud how the “Unter-Emmentaler” is able to report on stories in their respective municipalities. “It reports on events, functions and official communications that would no longer reach our communities otherwise,” says the mayor of Langenthal, Reto Müller, who is less enamoured by the direct affiliations – political and sporting – of some individuals at the newspaper. He would like them to drop these ties.

Hans Peter Baltensperger, who has been the mayor of Wüssachen for years, believes that the “Unter-Emmentaler” fulfils an extremely important role, without which his little village would barely register in the media anymore. Citizens need to stay informed for local politics to work, he says. Big media outlets report on world events. “You need local newspapers for local news.” As a gesture of



solidarity, Baltensperger’s haulage company helps to fund newspaper ads for local clubs and associations – which is good for the “Unter-Emmentaler”.

“A piece of local heritage”

The people at Schürch Druck & Medien are confident that their business model for the printed newspaper will remain viable. In a catchment area with 45,000 or so inhabitants, it should be possible to keep the proportion of subscribers at 10 per cent or more, says Ryser, who notes that younger people are also starting to reconnect with old traditions. “Our 150-year-old newspaper is a piece of local heritage.” One that is also read by expats, who now subscribe to the “Unter-Emmentaler” from around the world.

The company archives contain the newspaper’s first-ever prints, which were published in 1875.

Photo: Susanne Wenger

New online media helping to fill the gap

In urban areas in particular, new online media is helping to fill the gap in local journalism left by the big publishers. Independent platforms like “hauptstadt.be”, “tsüri.ch”, and “bajour.ch” are trying to disrupt the media landscape, building their own reader communities that pay for content mostly through subscriptions. Foundations provide the start-up capital. However, it is hard for these models to generate sustainable revenue. In 2022, Swiss voters rejected legislation proposing new forms of funding that would have also helped online media. The federal parliament ratified this result during its 2024 winter session. However, lawmakers recognise the importance of regional and local journalism for democracy and have instead decided to bolster indirect funding of the press through postal charges. (SWE)

Berne: www.hauptstadt.be

Zurich: www.tsüri.ch

Basel: www.bajour.ch

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A toast to money, gold, gardens – and floorboards

833,500,000,000

The 300 richest people in Switzerland have never been as rich, now owning a total of 833.5 billion Swiss francs. Published at the end of every year since 1988, Switzerland’s rich list is mainly of interest to those who can only dream of such prosperity. Incidentally, the total wealth of the 300 richest people in 1988 was 66 billion francs. Source: “Bilanz” business magazine



88,000,000,000

Posthumous transactions are one of the reasons why the rich get richer. A large proportion of all inherited wealth goes to those who already have a lot of money. This further exacerbates the gap between rich and poor. According to the latest figures, 88 billion francs is inherited every year in Switzerland – around twice as much as the total amount of money paid out in state pensions.



1,000,000,000

Switzerland considers itself a thrifty nation. But perhaps it should also call itself a forgetful nation. According to the Swiss National Bank (SNB), 17 million sixth-series Swiss banknotes (1976) worth a total of around one billion francs have gone missing. Worthless today, they were never exchanged for new banknotes and are considered to be lost. That is a lot of forgotten money under the floorboards. However, it is still possible to exchange sixth-series banknotes directly at the SNB in Berne or Zurich or at an SNB agency. www.revue.link/serie6



200,000

When interest rates are low, people turn to gold. More and more Swiss people view gold as a stable investment. In total, around 200,000 kg of the precious metal are currently owned by private individuals in Switzerland. Less than 40 per cent of people in Switzerland who keep gold use a bank safe. Many store it at home. Five per cent bury it in the garden. Source: University of St Gallen and Philoro Schweiz

0.75

How about a bottle of white wine from the canton of Vaud to toast all this wealth? It also offers interest. Many Vaud vigneronns sell their wine in 0.70-litre bottles, but the EU wants Swiss wine bottles to have a uniform size. Sooner or later, producers will have to switch to the conventional 0.75-litre format.



Home alone in Basel

One-person households account for 47 per cent of all households in Basel-Stadt – the Swiss average is 36 per cent. A quarter of the city canton’s population live alone. The Basel authorities have launched a strategy to combat loneliness and raise awareness of a tricky issue that affects both young and old

STÉPHANE HERZOG

An autumn morning. Sunlight streams into Esther Janine Zehntner’s apartment. The view over Basel from her four-room, sixth-floor flat at the edge of the city’s Iselin district is wonderful. “Life is good. I have always lived alone without this necessarily having been my goal,” explains the former school teacher. Esther spent almost ten years with the World Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Africa. “A piece of my heart belongs to Africa,” she says, recounting the development work she did there. The 82-year-old goes for walks around Basel every day to keep fit. She enjoys walking along the Rhine and through

Basel Zoo. She has a group of friends with whom she goes to the theatre, attends concerts and visits museums. Does she, like a growing number of other people in Switzerland, sometimes feel lonely? The country has an ageing population. Divorces are on the up. In the canton of Basel-Stadt, around a quarter of the population – 50,000 people – live alone. One-person households account for 47 per cent of all Basel households, which means that 53 per cent are multi-person households, equating to 150,000 people,

Zehntner talks about the week that she spent with friends from the YWCA. Everyone there showed her

photos of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. “I don’t have any myself. Did I miss the boat in life? Who knows, but if there is a time when I could feel lonely, it’s then,” she says, smiling as she hears the noise that the three children in the apartment above are making. Huefyse Bar is the name of a restaurant situated on the ground floor of her apartment block. Single people, both men and women who live nearby, like to have a beer there. Some will go outside on the terrace for a smoke. One of the regulars at the bistro next door is working on his laptop. Esther sometimes eats with him. The socially minded pensioner has been living in

Basel on the Rhine – a city of one-person households.
Photo: Keystone



her apartment for the last six years after previously spending most of her life elsewhere in the Iselin district, in a house built by her grandfather in 1902. She is still in contact with her old neighbours.

Cantonal measures

The proportion of one-person households in Basel-Stadt increased from 21 per cent in 1960 to some 45 per cent in 1990. It is set to climb to over 50 per cent by 2050. “There are ways to measure social isolation, but quantifying loneliness is difficult,” says Lukas Ott, head of the Office of Cantonal and City Development in Basel-Stadt. Ott is responsible for implementing a motion that was submitted in the Basel-Stadt cantonal parliament by the SP politician Pascal Pfister in 2023. Some 150,000 Swiss francs is due to be set aside for voluntary projects from 2025 onwards as part of a cantonal strategy to combat loneliness. “Basel-Stadt needs to offer new ways for people to come together,” stresses Ott, aware that the city canton has a large number of elderly people, hospitals, and care homes.

In 2023, the canton sent a letter to all elderly people living alone. The letter contained two phone numbers – one offering information on ways to meet other elderly people in Basel (“Info älter werden”), the other providing simple conversation and support for lonely people (“Mein Ohr für dich”). Loneliness not only affects the elderly. A third of all one-person households in Basel-Stadt comprise people aged between 20 and 40. Young people are more mobile and more connected with other people than they used to be, says Ott. But their relationships with each other are more fragile. “The quality and depth of connec-



“Life is good,” says Esther Jeanine Zehntner, pictured here in her Basel apartment. She has always lived on her own.

Photo: Stéphane Herzog

tion matters.” Social isolation is a difficult subject. “We know of the effect it has on the elderly, but we find it hard to accept that younger people can feel lonely.”

many self-employed people, and he had to readjust. He talks openly about his loneliness and many of his friends and acquaintances being fellow divorcees. Life has become tougher for the baby-boomer generation. Even highly educated people are suddenly having to rely on income support. “People at my age don’t want to be single,” says Gottfried. They don’t want to be alone, but neither do they want to give up their independence or high standard of living. This is a contradiction. “So everyone stays lonely. They think life goes on for forever.” Gottfried would like to meet someone like-minded of the opposite sex and believes it has become harder for men and women to connect. “I no longer have the confidence to catch a woman’s eye, let alone start talking to her.” Ways to meet are few and far between for 60 somethings, though Tinder is one of them. “I know a lot of women who have a profile on Tinder,” he says, “but talking to them about loneliness would be a step too far in real life.” On the whole, Gottfried thinks that his quality of life has deteriorated without a partner.

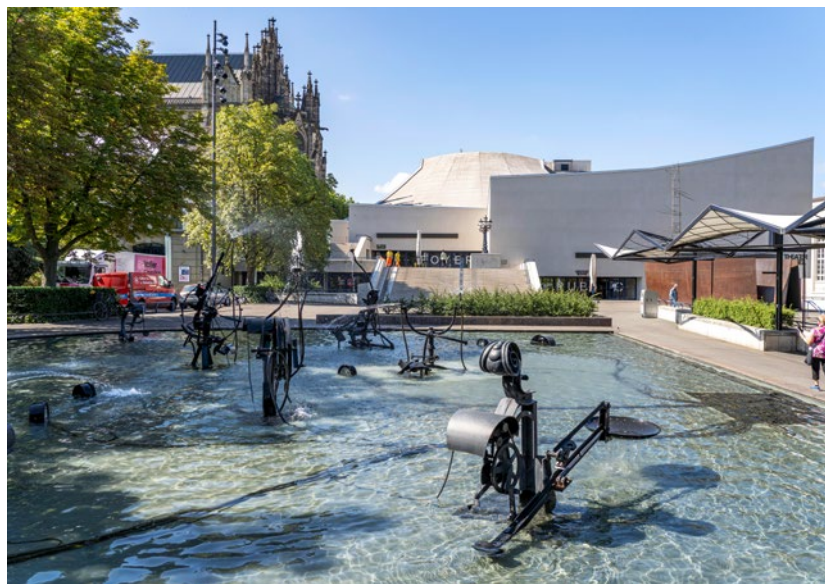


Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records

This edition: Basel – the city with the highest proportion of one-person households in Switzerland

Baby-boomer blues

We chat to Gottfried* on the phone. The 60-year-old has two grown-up children. He and his wife have been living apart for the last 10 years or so. Gottfried has a background in culture. Work dried up during Covid-19 for



The Tinguely Fountain in Basel
Photo: Keystone

“The two of us could share our problems and talk about them.” He would love to start a new relationship – at an age when you become physically weaker and your parents start to die.

Lots of single women

Around 75 per cent of people on income support in Basel live alone or in care homes, according to the cantonal government. The number of one-person households is increasing including among the younger generation, as families with children forsake the city for somewhere quieter. “The canton is promoting services and infrastructure more tailored to young families,” says Melanie Imhof,

Loneliness not only affects the elderly – a third of all one-person households in Basel-Stadt are aged between 20 and 40.



The Kaserne is a popular cultural venue in Basel. Public spaces serve an important purpose for people who live on their own.

Photo: Keystone

a spokeswoman for the cantonal government. “Many highly qualified women delay living with a partner,” explains Luca Pattaroni, who is a professor at the Urban Sociology Laboratory of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL). The property sector has spotted a gap in the market and started to develop co-living solutions such as one-room apartments in buildings with shared communal spaces. “If you build apartment blocks without anywhere for residents to interact apart from the

stairs and lift, it limits social contact even more,” says Thomas Pfluger, who manages a national loneliness prevention scheme called “connect!”. Pattaroni cites the example of cooperatives that have created communal areas in their building. He also mentions the idea of co-living clusters, which are shared dwelling units consisting of private studios and communal areas. “Loneliness can lead to depression,” the professor says. “It is a key factor in our concerns regarding

mental health.” Does Basel have more lonely people than anywhere else in Switzerland? Thomas Pfluger: “The people of Basel see themselves as a convivial bunch who value tradition. Take the city’s famous carnival or autumn fair, for example.”

*Name has been changed

He claimed that women ruled the world until 2,500 years ago

Basel aristocrat Johann Jakob Bachofen's book "Das Mutterrecht" ("Mother Right") espoused theories on gender that reverberated for decades.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Johann Jakob Bachofen, the author of "Mother Right (Das Mutterrecht): A Study of the Religious and Juridical Aspects of Gynecocracy in the Ancient World", was without doubt one of the greats of Swiss literature. But few have heard of him now.

The theory that family and the state have not always been ruled by patriarchy and that men emancipated themselves from matriarchy around 2,500 years ago has long been repudiated. Yet Bachofen's 1861 treatise, which referred to ancient manuscripts and gravestone carvings in an attempt to document the previous existence of a matriarchy, had a surprisingly long echo.

Violation of "mother right"

The term "mother right" requires explanation. "[It] means... maternal rights, birth rights, justice, laws, interests, authority, and privileges," wrote the author of the book's English translation. According to Bachofen, marriage is a violation of mother right: "Nature did not endow a woman with sensuous beauty only for her to wilt away in the arms of one man." Bachofen not only deprives the monogamous patriarchal family of the mystique of its one conceivable God-given institution, but also makes the case for female emancipation. He also explores new and wider possibilities for dealing with the past.

Yet Bachofen's work, which at times seems to venerate women, also reduces the female role to that of mother. Readers today would be aghast. And for Bachofen himself, this theory has less of a rationale and more of an emotional and possibly even biographical basis.

Bachofen's dominant mother Valeria

Born on 22 December 1815 into one of the wealthiest families in Basel, Bachofen was a slightly eccentric, very well-read and incredibly hard-working independent scholar, jurist, and professor of law at the University of Basel, who was long overshadowed by his mother Valeria, a strong, dom-

"The beehive shows us a gynecocracy in its clearest and purest form. Each hive has its queen. She is the mother of the entire stock. She is served by numerous male drones, whose entire purpose is to inseminate her. The drones do not work and the female worker bees kill them once they have fulfilled their mating function. Thus, the hive comes from a single mother yet from many fathers. The fathers do not earn love or devotion from the hive. Once they have inseminated the queen bee, they are doomed to die."

Excerpt from J.J. Bachofen, "Das Mutterrecht", volume 135 of the Suhrkamp Taschenbuch series

inant women from the Merian dynasty. Valeria's influence continued when, at the age of 50, Bachofen married 19-year-old Elisabeth Burckhardt in 1865 and proceeded to run a household "according to imperialistic principles", as he himself put it.

"Mother Right", which Bachofen dedicated "to the memory of [his] mother, Mrs Valeria Bachofen-Merian", went on to have a colourful afterlife. Ignored or dismissed as hocus-pocus by Bachofen's contemporaries, it was brought to worldwide attention by Ludwig Klages and Carl Albrecht Bernoulli in around 1920 before ethnologists debunked its main hypotheses.

Bachofen played down his theories

The complete edition of Bachofen's work, published between 1943 and 1967, nevertheless had a surprise in store. Ten years after finishing the book, the author himself had begun to reassess and play down his theories, using all the ethnological findings that were now available to him. But after publishing two modestly titled volumes called "Antiquarian Letters", Bachofen finally gave up. The deafening silence in his home town and from academic colleagues was too much to take.

When Bachofen died on 25 November 1887 at the age of 72, just one academic obituary appeared. It was published in a Russian-language magazine for Paris-based exiles.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: JAKOB BACHOFEN'S "DAS MUTTERRECHT" (IN GERMAN) IS AVAILABLE AS VOLUME 135 OF THE SUHRKAMP TASCHENBUCH SERIES.

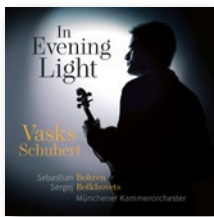
CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST BASED IN ZÜRICH



Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887)

The violinist bringing the big time to a small town in Aargau

Sebastian Bohren is a world-class violinist who directs a series of concerts and a classical music festival that have put Brugg on the map. The canton of Aargau needs its own concert hall, he says.



BOHREN/MUNICH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA: "In Evening Light" Vasks and Schubert, Avie 2024

Aargau is the most underrated Swiss canton when it comes to culture. Lovers of classical music are spoilt for choice, with notable venues like Olsberg, Boswil, Muri, Wettingen and Seon. But what the canton needs are local politicians who can get everyone pulling in the same direction – not least because local violinist Sebastian Bohren has created an additional hotspot: Brugg.

Bohren is an established violinist on the world stage who recently attracted critical acclaim for his "In Evening Light" recording, which is devoted to two works by the Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks (1946). In this world premiere of Violin Concerto No. 2, Bohren gives a dazzlingly wistful yet assertive performance. He ends the album with an atmospheric meditation.

In its review, violin magazine "The Strad" describes Bohren as Vasks' ideal champion: "The long soaring lines are lovingly sustained and his tone, although lucid, allows for melancholy and uncertainty too. Yet there's no lack of power, not least in the three cadenzas, which are replete with double and triple stops."

Lofty ambitions

Bohren has lofty ambitions, which he is in the process of fulfilling. He has been Switzerland's best and most prominent violinist of recent years but is wonderfully forthright saying that he wants to be among the very best. Directing his own classical events is a step towards this goal.

But how much live classical music can Aargau take? "It's survival of the fittest," Bohren replies nonchalantly. "Competition is good for business. Hopefully it makes everyone up their game." He admires the Seetal Classics, which the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich cellist Benjamin Nyfenegger has done so much to revive. But he has nothing to fear either, he adds. "Numa Bischof, the artistic director of the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra, once said that you also need to see the positive side. Festivals, like other things, come and go. New things take their place. Nothing has to be forever."

Bohren has not shied away from the competition. His festival starts at the beginning of September, just when everyone is heading to the Lucerne Festival. Is he crazy? The violinist prefers to describe himself as audacious. "A lot of hard work and business acumen go into it – but it gives me a buzz." And the fact that people only really go to concert halls and operas from the beginning of October is of little worry to him. "Experiences from other festivals or concerts in general only interest me to a point. We have been building our own brand in Brugg for a good few years, with an audience that totally identifies with our concerts and artists. People now come to Brugg from around the canton and beyond. I believe we need to take a very long-term view. Repetition is extremely important. Only then does the tradition grow."

The scheduling is fine as far as he is concerned. The only real snag is that it prevents Bohren from going on a relaxing summer holiday with his wife and two-and-a-half-year-old son.

Nor is the violinist afraid to point out what the canton of Aargau currently lacks: a modern concert hall. No disgrace in the grand scheme of things, says Bohren. But he thinks it would certainly be feasible and possible to build a

Violinist Sebastian Bohren, the man behind Brugg Festival, is an entrepreneur who has put the town on the map. Photo: Marco Borggreve, Utrecht



Beyond the border

classical music hall in Brugg with outstanding acoustics and the appropriate infrastructure. Entrepreneur at heart, Bohren is not one to beg solely for public money. “Both the public and private sector need to get involved, in the right balance and to the right extent,” he says.

“I see enormous potential”

A major project like this will not simply happen on its own but depends on the persuasiveness and perseverance of individual people. “You will meet resistance on the way, so you need people with staying power to see the project through.” Bohren hesitates for a moment, but then he adds: “We need to think of what the canton of Aargau will be like in 50 years’ time. I see enormous potential.”

Brugg very much appreciates its world-class violinist, who even gave an official address during the town’s Swiss National Day celebrations. The feeling is mutual. Bohren is proud to represent this small town and cement its place on the cultural map. He will continue to do his bit with as much business savvy as he has. Yet even he relies on cantonal money. And public funding is never a given.

Bohren has shown that he can inspire people. He wants to grow Brugg Festival into one of Switzerland’s leading festivals. Fighting talk – and a breath of fresh air in a country more prone to understatement.

CHRISTIAN BERZINS

The 2025 Brugg Festival takes place at the beginning of September, with timings and line-up to be confirmed. Latest album: “In Evening Light”; Bohren/Munich Chamber Orchestra, Vasks and Schubert, Avie 2024

www.sebastianbohren.ch
www.strettaconcerts.com



THOMAS STRÄSSLE:
“Fluchtnovelle”
Suhrkamp, Berlin 2024
124 pages, CHF 26.90

It is a trick as simple as it is audacious. Instead of his mother fleeing East Germany illegally, all it takes is a forged passport at Prague Airport, recounts Thomas Strässle in “Fluchtnovelle”. An astounding story – the story of his own parents, who met and fell in love in Erfurt in 1965. She was from East Germany, he was Swiss. They wanted to spend the rest of their lives together but were separated by the Iron Curtain. The young couple began to look for a way for her to join him in the West – an illegal undertaking. But Strässle’s father-to-be had an ingenious idea. He planned everything meticulously, even forging the necessary passport and passport stamp. But when the decisive moment came, the colour of the official border stamp unexpectedly changed from green to red. The plan would have failed without some quick thinking.

Proof again that love overcomes everything – even between two people who still barely know each other.

The author Hermann Burger first uncovered this story back in the 1970s. He recorded an interview with both of Strässle’s parents on cassette before writing about this encounter in an unpublished manuscript called “Fluchtliebe”. Strässle was able to use this recording when he found out about the story and began to do his own research.

His book is not a novella in the strictest sense. Its title touches on what was a real-life drama. Strässle repeatedly quotes from legal material in Switzerland (forged passport) and East Germany (defection), combining the human story with more formal passages, which in turn are intertwined with dialogues between Strässle’s parents. A trip to the places where the events played out adds literary weight.

The tension of this short story lies less in whether the plan succeeded – it did; the Swiss-born author is living proof of that – but in how it succeeded, placing it into a larger political context and recalling an era in which Europe was bitterly divided.

BEAT MAZENAUER

Signature fraud shocks Switzerland

Thousands of signatures have allegedly been forged to initiate votes. The Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland is taking action against commercial signature collectors. The scandal has rocked trust in direct democracy – and strengthened the case for e-collection.

EVELINE RUTZ

This is far from a few isolated transgressions. It is a shocking case of abusing the system. Entire sheets of signatures were allegedly falsified. This calls into question the legitimacy of popular initiatives, which evidently only came about because of illegal business practices. It also means votes were held that actually should not have taken place. The newspaper “Tages-Anzeiger” reported in September 2024 that signature forgery was suspected to have occurred on a large scale. Companies that collect signatures commercially are in the dock. These professional collectors are mainly used when plans for a popular petition seem destined to fail, i.e. when committees have trouble collecting the required 50,000 or 100,000 signatures within a limited time.

Proponents of a civic duty initiative, for example, enlisted professional support in early 2023. They hired Incop, a Lausanne-based provider. Incop reportedly collected 10,000 signatures in a month in return for 4.50 Swiss francs per signature. However, the committee was disappointed when many of the signatures turned out to be false: 35 to 90 per cent per commune had to be discarded. The ratio of invalid signatures is usually about 10 per cent.

Systematic falsification on a large scale

“At first we thought it was just one collector breaking the rules,” said Noémie Roten, co-president of the initiative, in conversation with the “Tages-Anzeiger”. Over time, however, patterns emerged indicating systematic fraud. The names and addresses were usually accurate – they can be taken from post boxes – but the birth



dates did not match. Individual persons were entered up to five times and with different handwriting. In June 2023, the committee reported a criminal offence to the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland. Since then, it has emerged that this was not a one-off: “Signatures have been invented, falsified or copied on a large scale for many other initiatives and referendums.”

In fact, signature creation has become a lucrative business in recent years. Before the pandemic, prices were between 1.50 and 2.50 francs. It has since risen to 7.50 francs per sig-



Collecting signatures for any popular initiative is hard work. Pictured here: activists in Lausanne drumming up support for the Fair Food Initiative, which failed at the ballot box.

Photo: Keystone

Noémie Roten helped to get the ball rolling – her committee filed a claim for fraud in 2023. Photo: Keystone

nature, although the collectors receive only a certain proportion of that sum.

It was in 2019 that the authorities first became aware of the possibility that fraud was being committed; suspicious activity was initially detected in the French-speaking part of the country, where a number of these companies are based. The canton of Vaud teamed up with other cantons in the west of Switzerland and turned to the Federal Chancellery (FCh). In 2021, Neuchâtel decided to ban commercial signature collection. After the pandemic, instances of irregularities being reported to the FCh kept growing, including from the German-speaking part of the country.

Insider criticises lack of action by the authorities

The signature fraud impacts central instruments of political co-determi-

nation. Hence the size of the resulting fallout, with talk of “a political-democratic earthquake” and a “massive loss of confidence”. “The dimensions are shocking”, says Daniel Graf of the Foundation for Direct Democracy. There had been indications



Daniel Graf of the Foundation for Direct Democracy calls it a “democratic earthquake”. Photo: Keystone

of manipulation by commercial firms for some years. “But I assumed they were isolated instances, which – if necessary – would be subject to criminal proceedings.” But the cantonal departments and the FCh missed the chance to combat the misconduct early and effectively.

No results were falsified

The businesspeople involved stand accused of electoral fraud. This is a serious offence and can lead to a fine or a custodial sentence of up to three years. However, the cases in question do not actually involve falsified results. It is possible that popular petitions were illegitimately put to the vote. Nonetheless, the voters had the last word, as ever. “No bill that the people didn’t actually want was accepted,” as political scientist Michael Hermann puts it. No ballot or voting papers were tampered with, so no results were falsified. “That would have been much more serious.”

The current system facilitates fraudulent conduct, argues Rahel Estermann, General Secretary of the

Swiss Green Party. “Being paid per signature is a strong incentive to cheat.” All you have to do is write down names from post boxes to earn a lot of money in a few minutes. “It is a problem – and it could be changed by paying an hourly rate, for example.” The real victims of this behaviour becoming public knowledge are those who volunteer to collect signatures. People on the street are now more mistrusting of them. “We used to get 20 to 30 signatures per hour; now, we only get 10 to 15.” Daniel Graf can relate to that. “Many people aren’t sure whether they have signed with an engaged member of the public or a paid collector – and they don’t know what will happen with their data.” When the legal grounds are lacking to fight the abuse effectively, the commercialisation aspect must be banned. “We shouldn’t forget what makes our direct democracy strong: voluntary engagement.”

Self-regulation instead of laws

Politicians have steered clear of a ban until now. The Federal Chancellery now wants to act. It wants to strengthen monitoring and control, is counting on self-regulation and has initiated a permanent exchange among all the parties involved. They are to put together a code of conduct by spring 2025. Parliament will also discuss more stringent requirements for commercial providers, a ban and a duty of disclosure for committees.

Members of parliament across the political spectrum are also proposing the launch of a pilot e-collecting scheme. This would involve using the e-ID trust infrastructure, which will be available for test purposes from 2025. Digital collection can substantially increase security when providing signatures, argues the e-signature

Two ways to reach a popular decision

There are two ways to initiate a nationwide vote in Switzerland; either via popular initiative, or via referendum. A popular initiative is when someone wants to enshrine a new idea in the constitution. This is contingent on collecting 100,000 valid signatures from eligible voters within 18 months. Once this has been done, there is a popular vote. A referendum occurs when someone wishes to amend or repeal a parliamentary decision. This also entails a popular vote. A referendum requires 50,000 signatures within 100 days. (ERU)

camp. “There would be more control over the content,” says Amelle Ako from the civic movement Campax. No more sheets of paper would have to be sent by post and laboriously checked. The whole process would become simpler, argues the campaign boss of Campax. The Federal Council has addressed the opportunities and risks of e-collecting. It wants to enable restricted, practical attempts and has commissioned a pre-project to that end.

This scandal is a boon to those who favour a purely digital solution. “E-collecting can restore faith in the proper application of political rights,” says Ako.

Sentiment turns against the Swiss Abroad

Indifference and disdain – the mood in Switzerland has turned against the Swiss Abroad of late. No longer flavour of the month, or symptomatic of a more general malaise? We asked some politicians who are closely involved with the “Fifth Switzerland” for their views.

DENISE LACHAT

Rarely has there been a more sobering item on the agenda in the run-up to Christmas. “Reduction in services and benefits for Swiss Abroad” was the title of the December meeting of the Swiss Abroad parliamentary group. Instead of the sound of sleigh bells, everyone’s thoughts fast forwarded to the cold turkey of a particularly dry January. The Federal Council wants to save money (see page 9), introducing gradual measures that will hit hard across the board, including the “Fifth Switzerland”. It is cancelling the annual almost 19 million Swiss franc subsidy of media content produced by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) for people living abroad – a move that not only affects the Italian-language website *tvsvizzera.it* as well as collaboration with the international television channels TV5MONDE and 3sat, but also – and in particular – the 10-language online service *swissinfo*, which is funded on a fifty-fifty basis by SRG SSR and the federal government. *Swissinfo* has barely any hope of surviving without state funding.

Other casualties include government subsidies to promote relations with the Swiss Abroad, as well as *educationsuisse*, the coordination agency for Swiss schools

abroad, which until now has had a third of its outgoings funded by the federal government. Following a first round of subsidy reductions for 2025, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) can expect further significant cuts in state funding.

Alarming

Against this backdrop, OSA spared no time in writing to the Federal Council to express its opposition to the measures. But there is much more to these cuts than saving money. Negative messaging regarding the Swiss Abroad has proliferated. National Councillor Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter (Centre, canton of Basel-Landschaft), a seasoned politician, is not alone in saying that sentiment has turned against the “Fifth Switzerland” – and it is “quite alarming”. “It’s their own fault for moving abroad” is one of the phrases that she increasingly hears. In the cantons where the Swiss Abroad are not entitled to vote in the elections to the Council of States, there is a lack of willingness to change this status quo. This is symptomatic of the current mood, she says. Expats could return to Switzerland if they wanted, seems to be the consensus. Schneider-Sch-

The Swiss Abroad parliamentary group met in December at the Federal Palace to discuss the recent measures affecting Swiss expats. Pictured here from left to right: Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter (Centre), Laurent Wehrli (FDP), Nicolas Walder (Greens), Alex Farinelli (FDP), Katja Christ (GLP), and SP member of the Council of States Carlo Sommaruga
Photo: Danielle Liniger



neither was also shocked to see her parliamentary motion to improve health insurance cover for the Swiss Abroad rejected. This does not bode well. “Because I am sure the measure would have even helped the government save money.”

The examples above reflect an indifference to the interests of the Swiss Abroad, which National Councillor Barbara Gysi (SP, canton of St Gallen) has also noticed among voters. “Generally, I would say the public don’t think about the ‘Fifth Switzerland’ very often.”

“Spongers”

Indifference is bad. Accusations of freeloading are worse. Before the vote on the 13th OASI pension payment (see “Swiss Review 3/2024”), the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” (NZZ) referred to the “spongers” abroad who, unlike domestic taxpayers, are happy to receive a bigger pension without helping to cover the additional costs. The NZZ also asked whether it actually makes any sense for someone to keep their voting rights regardless of how long they remain abroad.

Switzerland’s “ambassadors abroad” are suddenly meant to be fleecing the state? National Councillor Laurent Wehrli (FDP, canton of Vaud) is appalled by the rhetoric, agreeing that attitudes towards the Swiss Abroad appear to be deteriorating. National Councillor Nicolas Walder (Greens, canton of Geneva) calls it “shocking and demeaning”. “Do they think the money paid out to Swiss Abroad is lost money?” he says, adding that it was unfortunate that the SVP took a “very nationalistic view” of citizenship. Anyone who has lived abroad for a prolonged period of time was being put in a bad light.

“They are Swiss”

National Councillor Jean-Luc Addor (SVP, canton of Valais) would beg to differ, at least from what he sees and hears. “No, the Swiss Abroad are not second-class Swiss. They are Swiss.” He disagrees with his counterparts across the parliament floor who say that the mood has turned against the “Fifth Switzerland”. We should avoid putting undue strain on the relationship between the Swiss Abroad and their compatriots at home, he warns. The government’s cost-cutting plans for swissinfo are a step too far, in his opinion. This is an interesting stance to take for someone who is involved in the “200 francs is enough” initiative to slash the annual SRG SSR radio and television licence fee for private households. Addor explains that he wants SRG SSR to concentrate solely on its basic mandate, of which catering to a foreign-based audience is part. “Hands off swissinfo,” he says.

All the politicians we talked to agree on one thing, i.e. that reports in the media about rich Swiss pensioners abroad sunning themselves by the pool have fuelled the “freeloading” narrative. “We often assume that the Swiss Abroad are able to enjoy a better quality of life outside Switzerland with the money available to them,” says Gysi. “Unfortunately, we seem to forget that many who emigrate at retirement age do so because of financial pressures after having contributed to our society for their entire working lives.”

Gysi finds attempts to cut social security for the Swiss Abroad particularly hard to swallow. The National Council voting to abolish child pensions is one such step – and another example of expats taking the rap. Nearly a third of child pensions are paid abroad, was one of the arguments made in parliament. The “Tages-Anzeiger” reported

Read more – and join the debate

Visit www.revue.link/debate5 to read further quotes from the six politicians mentioned in this article. Readers can contribute to the debate by submitting their own comments.

that child pensions were being drawn particularly often in Thailand, the Philippines and the Dominican Republic. The paper failed to mention that this only related to a small number of fathers in absolute terms, and that the amounts paid in Switzerland far exceeded those abroad. Schneider-Schneiter can only shake her head. “If moving abroad becomes less attractive, Swiss firms with subsidiaries abroad will soon be unable to recruit any more people from Switzerland,” she says. Business leaders need to be aware of this, she is at pains to point out whenever she is abroad.

FDP politician Andrea Caroni (canton of Appenzell-Ausserrhoden) takes a more critical view of the Swiss Abroad and has made various interpellations on the issue of lifelong voting rights. “It makes no sense that people who have never lived in Switzerland or have no intention of returning are entitled to vote here, while foreigners who are very well integrated into Swiss life are deprived of a voice on matters than directly affect them,” he told swissinfo back in 2019. Caroni is currently keeping his counsel in his role as this year’s president of the Council of States. Parliamentary tradition dictates that anyone who chairs the upper chamber must keep their political views a little more private.

The Federal Audit Office – driving efficiency and transparency since 1877

As Switzerland's supreme independent financial supervisory body, the Federal Audit Office has a clear mission to ensure transparency as well as the responsible use of taxpayer money. This is relevant to Swiss Abroad.

The Federal Audit Office (SFAO), Switzerland's supreme independent financial supervisory body, monitors how the federal government handles taxpayer money. It assesses whether public funds are being used suitably and economically, and is responsible for the early identification of problems and risks. In its reports, the SFAO provides recommendations for improving efficiency and effectiveness. Almost all its reports to parliament and the Federal Council are publicly accessible, giving taxpayers an insight into how their money is being used. This openness is intended to help bolster public trust in state institutions.

The SFAO currently has around 130 employees as well as a budget of some 34 million Swiss francs.

New responsibilities, old values

Since its establishment in 1877, the SFAO has continued to take on new responsibilities while remaining true to its values. For example, it has been acting as a port of call for whistleblowers since 2011. Federal employees and private individuals can report suspected irregularities, corruption or other unlawful acts anonymously and securely to the SFAO.

Since 2022, the SFAO has also been responsible for implementing new transparency rules on political funding. Political par-



The quality of the FDFA's online services was the subject of an SFAO audit in 2022. Photo: Adobe Stock

ties and stakeholders must disclose details of their funding to the SFAO, which verifies and publishes this information in order to enhance the integrity of political funding and strengthen trust in the political system. The SFAO conducts over 150 audits in a wide

Since its establishment in 1877, the SFAO has continued to take on new responsibilities while remaining true to its values.

variety of areas every year. Many of these audits go far beyond the financial scope. Here is a selection of audits that may be of particular interest to Swiss living abroad.

Creating a digital connection to Switzerland

An effective network of Swiss representations is vital to providing emergency support to any Swiss – expatriate or otherwise – experiencing difficulty abroad. In 2022, the SFAO audited the consular services of Swiss representations abroad. Its findings show that the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has been able to improve the quality of its services in recent years.

However, direct inquiries have put an immense strain on consular services. The FDFA's online desk, which was designed to facilitate communication between Swiss Abroad and Swiss representations, has hardly been used due to its lack of user-friendliness. Files related to Swiss Abroad were still being kept on paper.

The SFAO has therefore recommended that more be done to introduce digital technology. In response, the FDFA has expanded

and extended its online services. All files related to Swiss Abroad are expected to go online by the end of 2025. The SFAO will then check what improvements have actually been implemented.

Are pensions being paid out correctly to recipients abroad?

The Central Compensation Office (CCO) currently pays out around one million old-age and survivors' insurance (OASI) and disability insurance (DI) pensions worth a total of 7.8 billion francs to people abroad every year. In 2021, the SFAO audited the effectiveness of the CCO's supervisory measures to ensure that pensions are paid out solely to entitled parties. Naturally, it is not possible to implement precisely the same controls abroad to prevent insurance fraud. Every year, pensioners who live abroad provide notarised confirmation that they are still alive.

Curbing bank margins to safeguard pension payments

Many still send these confirmations by post. According to the SFAO audit, the CCO's controls fulfil their purpose but need to be modernised. The CCO was able to recover incorrect pension payments worth around 74 million francs in 2020. Nevertheless, the SFAO identified room for improvement and recommended that the CCO carry out more efficient checks and use data better. There also needs to be increased use of digital platforms to identify discrepancies more effectively. Furthermore, Swiss pensioners abroad should not have to record their details on more than one system. The CCO has renegotiated its agreements with the banks



The SFAO's audits relate to areas that are relevant to Swiss Abroad. Photo: Adobe Stock

that execute pension payments abroad. These agreements came into force on 1 January 2025. The SFAO had found that the banks' margins were too high, resulting in lower pension payments.

Is there a comprehensive approach to managing the Schengen air borders?

Since Switzerland signed the Schengen agreement with the EU, the nature of border controls has fundamentally changed – moving away from systematic controls at national borders in favour of greater mobility. This is of benefit to many travellers as well as the half a million Swiss Abroad in Europe. To effectively combat global risks like organised crime, terrorism and illegal migration, the EU and Switzerland advocate tighter controls on the Schengen area's external borders.

In 2024, the SFAO analysed the implementation of measures to protect the exter-

The FDFA has expanded its online services in response to an SFAO recommendation.

nal Schengen borders at Swiss airports. It found that the federal structure consisting of eight different supervisory authorities at Confederation and cantonal level made it harder to manage the external borders in a uniform manner. No one, not even the State Secretariat for Migration, had authority to manage the entire system. This is why important improvements involving all stakeholders were carried out quite slowly. The SFAO called for greater accountability on the part of the responsible authorities, recommending that they conduct a systematic

review. At a later juncture, it will review whether its recommendations have been implemented.

A future-proof Federal Administration

Effective controls along with transparency and the ability to change are key elements of a functioning state. The SFAO hopes to contribute to a well-managed, future-proof Federal Administration by identifying weaknesses, suggesting improvements and supervising the implementation of recommendations.

ROGER PFIFFNER, PERFORMANCE AUDITOR AT THE SFAO

The audits mentioned in the article are available on the SFAO website under the numbers 19404 (Swiss representation abroad), 20419 (pensions paid abroad) and 23231 (integrated border management): www.efk.admin.ch

Switzerland in your pocket

SwissInTouch.ch
The app for the Swiss abroad



swissintouch.ch

swissintouch.ch



Federal votes

The proposals submitted to the people are set by the Federal Council at least four months prior to the voting date.

The Federal Council decided at its session on 9 October 2024 to submit the following proposals to the people on 9 February 2024:

- Federal Popular Initiative “For a responsible economy within our planet’s limits (Environmental Responsibility Initiative)” (BBI 2024 2488)

All information on proposals submitted to the people (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by the parliament, Federal Council etc.) can be found at www.admin.ch/abstimmungen or in the Federal Chancellery Votelnfo app.



Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiative has been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for signatures in brackets):

- Federal Popular Initiative “For a sustainable and future-oriented Swiss financial centre” (26 May 2026)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in French, German and Italian at <https://www.bk.admin.ch/> > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen



Please note

Provide your Swiss representation **with your email address(es) and mobile phone number(s)** and/or any changes thereto and register at the online counter (link on FDFA homepage www.eda.admin.ch or via www.swissabroad.ch), to select your order of “Swiss Review” and other publications. If you encounter any problems registering, please contact your representation.

You can read and/or print the current edition of “Swiss Review” as well as back copies since 2006 at www.revue.ch. “Swiss Review” (or “Gazzetta Svizzera” in Italian) is available electronically (via email, free of charge) or in print for all Swiss Abroad households, or through the iOS-/Android app.

Not long to go before the Council of the Swiss Abroad elections

Do you want to participate online in the upcoming Council of the Swiss Abroad elections? Then you need to make sure your current email address is registered with your local embassy or consulate.

Between 11 April and 11 May 2025, the Swiss Abroad will vote to determine the new composition of the Council of the Swiss Abroad, referred to as the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”. Thirteen regions are participating in the “Direct elections” pilot, with Swiss nationals in these regions being able to elect their local delegates directly via e-voting.

The pilot will be conducted in the following countries and electoral constituencies: Australia, Germany, Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal), Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, Singapore, Türkiye, USA, UK, and the Central, West and South Asia electoral constituency (Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Georgia, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Maldives, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, the occupied Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Yemen).

Swiss citizens who live in one of the aforementioned countries and wish to vote should make sure that they are registered with the competent Swiss representation (embassy or consulate) under a valid email address.

They can do this directly via the FDFA online desk or by sending an email to the relevant Swiss representation. Anyone who has provided only one email address per household should note that only one vote can be cast per email address. It is still possible to change

this, i.e. give the email address of every person in your household who is eligible to vote. The voting period will run from 11 April to 11 May 2025. Registered voters will receive relevant instructions by email.

Finally, anyone who not only wishes to vote but also wants to stand for election should contact the election coordinator in their electoral constituency as soon as possible.

The official election website: <https://www.swisscommunity.org/de/elections/>

ANDREAS FELLER,
MEMBER OF THE DIRECT ELECTIONS WORKING GROUP

“Palestine” – a clarification

In edition 5/2024, we mentioned that Swiss who live in “Palestine” can participate in the e-voting pilot. Some readers were surprised and angry, because Palestine is neither a precise geographical area nor does Switzerland recognise Palestine as a state. It was careless, confusing and unfortunate of us to use the term – and we are sorry. We had no intention of making a political statement and only wanted to confirm that the small number of Swiss Abroad who live in what the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs refers to as “occupied Palestinian territory”, i.e. the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as the Gaza Strip, are also eligible to vote.

(MUL)

The “Fifth Switzerland” will meet in August 2025 in Berne

The Congress of the Swiss Abroad continues to evolve and adapt to the needs of the “Fifth Switzerland”. Starting this year, the gathering will take on a different format to serve the interests of the Swiss Abroad even more effectively.

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) celebrated a historic milestone when it held its 100th congress in 2024. From 2025, the nature of its annual gatherings will change. Every four years, i.e. halfway through every legislative term, the Congress of the Swiss Abroad will take place in its traditional format for the purpose of taking stock and gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges facing Swiss Abroad.

Flexible format

In the intervening years, the gathering will now be called SwissCommunity Days and will assume a flexible and innovative priority-based format – e.g. providing a form of induction at the beginning of every new legislative period, or consisting of regular meetings to address current issues. This

streamlined gathering will be a platform dedicated to interaction and cooperation, featuring workshops, networking events and sightseeing excursions. Individual events will be open to anyone interested in attending.

Both the Congress of the Swiss Abroad and the SwissCommunity Days will take place in the third week of August, making that time of the year an unmissable and permanent fixture in the calendar.

Symbolic start in Berne

The event in Berne on 22 and 23 August 2025 will mark the beginning of a new legislative term for the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA). It will combine theme-based workshops with the official CSA meeting, while providing a platform for interaction

between the Swiss Abroad, the federal authorities and the elected representatives. Through this new format, OSA is underscoring its key role as the voice of the Swiss Abroad, marrying tradition with innovation for the benefit of a dynamic, connected community.

MAYA ROBERT-NICOUD, SWISSCOMMUNITY

Further information: www.revue.link/congress24



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Holiday camps for children – open for bookings

With bookings having already opened a few weeks ago for this year's FYSA summer holiday camps, now is the time to act.

Every holiday camp will be held in a typically Swiss setting offering plenty of opportunity for games and sports. Participants will be able to go on numerous excursions, paying visits to nearby cities, hiking through the countryside, taking a dip in the local swimming pool – and much more besides. There will be a varied and interesting range of age-appropriate daily activities.


"Swiss trip" participants will be on the move from place to place almost every day – on foot, by boat or on public transport. The "Swiss trip" camps have always been booked out very quickly in recent years, which is why an additional "Swiss trip" is being planned to accommodate the considerable demand.

The FYSA winter camp season is over, but it won't be long before the excitement begins again. Participants recently returned home from our Valbella, Melchtal and Lenk camps, where they had a great time in the snow. If any children are already missing their snow buddies and want to continue honing their skills on the slopes, then 15 March 2025 is a red letter day. This is the date on which we start accepting bookings for the 2025/2026 winter season.

Visit our website at www.sjas.ch/en/camps for enrolment options and everything else you need to know about our holiday camps.

ISABELLE STEBLER, FYSA

Offer	Date	Age Group
Adelboden (BE)	21 June – 4 July 2025	10 – 14
Swisstrip 1	25 June – 4 July 2025	12 – 14
Dieni (GR)	5–18 July 2025	12 – 14
Bellevue (VD)	9–18 July 2025	8 – 12
Swisstrip 2	9–18 July 2025	12 – 14
Uster (ZH)	19 July – 2 August 2025	12 – 14
Bellevue (VD)	19 July – 2 August 2025	8 – 12
Swisstrip 3	23 July – 2 August 2025	12 – 14
Fieschertal (VS)	2 July – 15 August 2025	10 – 14
Swisstrip 4	6 July – 15 August 2025	12 – 14
Winter holiday camps	27 December 2025 – 4 January 2026	10 – 14
Juskila – Lenk (BE)	2–8 January 2026	13 – 14


 Stiftung für junge Auslandschweizer
 Fondation pour les enfants suisses à l'étranger
 The foundation for young swiss abroad
 Fondazione per i giovani svizzeri all'estero

Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA)
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Young Swiss Abroad are also asking: Apprenticeship, university of applied sciences or university?

Swiss vocational education and training and Swiss universities enjoy a very good reputation abroad. Education or training in Switzerland is also open to young Swiss Abroad. Now is the time to apply to start an apprenticeship in the summer or a university course in the autumn.

> Apprenticeship

After compulsory schooling, or sometimes after high school, two thirds of all young people in Switzerland choose an apprenticeship. A three- or four-year apprenticeship can be completed in around 250 professions. Apprentices normally work three to four days a week in a private or public company and attend a vocational school one to two days a week. Apprentices receive a small wage during their training, but this does not cover their living costs. It is possible for Swiss citizens abroad to apply



Practical apprenticeships are popular in Switzerland. The picture shows a young employee of the Esec Group in Cham (ZG). Photo provided

for a scholarship, depending on their parents' income and assets. After completing an apprenticeship with a vocational baccalaureate, the path is open to studying at a university of applied sciences.

It takes a lot of personal initiative to find an apprenticeship place. Young people must actively apply. An application dossier must be compiled, similar to when looking for a job. Many apprenticeship contracts are now being finalised. So anyone interested should not delay. A wealth of information and vacancies can be found on the official website www.berufsberatung.ch.

> University or university of applied sciences

If you want to start studying in Switzerland in September, you usually have to register before the end of April or the end of March. The application deadline for medical studies is mid-February. Universities of applied sciences may have different application deadlines. Universities and universities of applied sciences offer three-year Bachelor's degree programmes and the subsequent Master's degree programmes.

The admission requirements for a Bachelor's degree programme vary depending on the country of origin of the secondary school leaving certificate. The admission requirements can be found at www.revue.link/universities.

Very good language skills in the language of instruction are also a prerequisite. A course of study at a university is more academic and research-oriented, whereas a course of study at a university of applied sciences is very practice- and application-oriented. The Federal Institutes of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ) and Lausanne (EPFL) focus on engineering, mathematics and natural sciences. Cantonal scholarships are available if students' parents are unable to cover the full cost of their studies.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

Educatiosuisse offers counselling to all young Swiss Abroad on all matters related to education in Switzerland.



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A year full of Youth Service offers and events

In 2025, the Youth Service of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad is pulling out all the stops to offer enriching experiences in Switzerland as well as online learning opportunities.

Our summer camps will give young people aged 15 to 18 the opportunity to connect with their Swiss roots and have an unforgettable time.

- 5 July – 18 July 2025: Swiss Challenge, throughout Switzerland
- 19 July – 2 August 2025: sport and leisure camp in Sainte-Croix (canton of Vaud)
- 2 August – 15 August 2025: sport and leisure camp in Sainte-Croix (canton of Vaud)

In addition to our holiday camps in 2025, webinars addressing the issues at stake in upcoming popular votes will also be available throughout the year. These webinars are aimed specifically, but not exclusively, at young Swiss Abroad:

- 14 January 2025: votes of 9 February 2025
- 23 April 2025: votes of 18 May 2025
- 2 September 2025: votes of 28 September 2025
- 4 November 2025: votes of 30 November 2025

Further information on all Youth Service offers is available at www.swisscommunity.org. Direct link to youth offers: www.revue.link/youthoffers

For additional details, please do not hesitate to contact the Youth Service.

MARIE BLOCH, OSA YOUTH SERVICE

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Discussion: The nuclear debate reignites

Federal Council wants to pave the way for new nuclear power plants, “Swiss Review” 6/2024



URS ALEX SCHUMACHER, PHILIPPINES

How does the Federal Council have the nerve to ignore a referendum? This is a very dangerous development, which parliament has to stop at all costs. It is the people, i.e. the majority of the electorate, who should always have the final say.

MARC PETITPIERRE, CHARLES TOWN, USA

Substituting radioactivity for lowering fossil-fuel emissions is ridiculous. Radioactive materials from the front-end all the way through to the end is the most dangerous, inefficient, and costly manner to produce power. Remember they sang praises about fission too ...

JEAN-MARIE BOSSY, CHARDONNAY, FRANCE

Using nuclear energy to generate electricity is not only legitimate – it’s smart and safe. Safe? Yes, as long as we are consistent and build power stations that are secure enough to handle the risks involved and don’t scrimp on construction in the interests of making a quick profit.

PETER SCHWERZMANN, PATTAYA, THAILAND

Nuclear power stations exist despite the fact that they are uninsurable. Any loss or damage in the event of a serious accident would not be covered. Reactor operators pocket the profits while future generations are left

to deal with a legacy that includes radioactive waste. Only when taxpayers bear the lion’s share of the costs does a nuclear power station become economically viable. We ignore the costs and problems that future generations will inherit in relation to the storage of spent nuclear fuel. Using nuclear power ties up huge amounts of money that are urgently needed for the continued development of renewables.

C. THALHAMMER, USA

In Switzerland, children are raised in values such as cleaning up after oneself, yet there are still no repositories for nuclear waste. I am an environmental scientist and the fact—not paradigm—is simple. There is no away. We all live on one Earth. There’s only one! We will not foul the nest for future generations simply to create more weapons or line more pockets with money. We have plenty of other tasks to do in cleaning up our messes concerning fossil fuels.

RETO DERUNGS, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

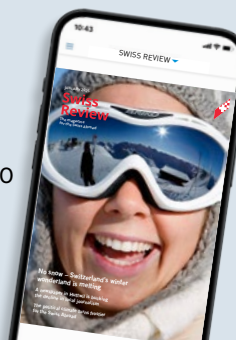
There is currently no reason why we should do without nuclear energy. In fact, nuclear power is vital if we want to meet our climate goals. For example, US climate envoy Kerry said at the Dubai climate conference that nuclear energy capacity needs to be tripled if we are to achieve net zero.

WOLFGANG REHFUS, TASMAN, NEW ZEALAND

Although nuclear power plants generate zero-carbon electricity, they produce huge amounts of radioactive waste. This is the core problem, along with all the legacy issues that it entails (cost, long-term storage, risk, health, etc.). Energy Minister Albert Rösti should know this. He needs to tell the truth.

Read it instead of waiting.

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