

A look at the international chapters : goodbye to a wallflower existence?

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **26 (1999)**

Heft 4-5

PDF erstellt am: **18.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907014>

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Goodbye to a wallflower exists

For Swiss political parties, the introduction of postal voting rights seven years ago opened up a new reservoir of voters. The measures that were rapidly set in motion to woo Swiss voters abroad are now accorded scant attention. The level of commitment and future plans of the international chapters vary from party to party.

Seven years ago the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) was the first to react. Even before the right of the Fifth Switzerland to vote by correspondence was enforced on 1 July

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1992, the party had set up an association of Swiss Abroad headed by National Councillor Georg Stucky.

Differing opinions

A few months later the Swiss People's Party launched its campaign to woo Swiss voters abroad. Both other Federal Council parties were less forthcoming in this respect. The Social Democratic Party (SP) set itself other priorities and focused instead on the extension of voting rights to foreigners resident in Switzerland. Likewise the Christian Democratic Party (CVP) saw no need to rush into setting up an international chapter. Iwan Rickenbacher, the General Secretary at that time, attributes this reluctance to the fragmentary nature of the potential vote. "Swiss Abroad cannot be of great political import, since their votes are distributed among various cantons." Nevertheless the CVP too decided to establish an international chapter in 1994.

From marginal ...

Seven years on from the introduction of the right to vote by correspondence, there is much disparity in the organisation and level of commitment of the various international chapters. According to Central Secretary Bernhard Hess, although the Swiss Democrats (SD) run such an organisation, it is not governed by any statutes. At its head is Basle Cantonal Councillor Hans Bucher, who says his task is merely to represent the

party at conferences and conventions abroad.

The activities of the CVP international chapter are also minimal. Although according to press spokesperson Paul Felber the party has a President in the person of former National Councillor Fulvio Caccia, in reality it would appear that no concrete activity has been undertaken for months. Felber freely admits that the CVP international chapter is practically crippled: "Its value is marginal." Consequently there is uncertainty at party headquarters as to whether and to what extent the international chapter will be revived.

... to crucial

The SP takes a diametrically opposite view. Its international chapter was founded during the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Lausanne, and its committee includes Bernese National Councillor Peter Vollmer, who regards its existence as a necessity. "The SP already has many members living abroad. Since no corresponding vehicle of communication exists, these members feel slightly cut off." Vollmer promises that the international chapter will provide valuable impetus in the cultivation of multifaceted relationships. "We are increasingly being confronted with issues of a global nature. So it is advantageous to have among our ranks qualified people who are active in multilateral organisations and can place their know-how at the party's disposal."

Asked to estimate membership, Secretary Christoph Zimmer is cautious. Based on the existing register of addresses, he reckons on a starting membership of 40. But the young politician adds for the record that the goal is a three-digit number. Vollmer is confident that the international chapter will play a more dominant role than other

Swiss chapters. "The foundation of the SP international chapter underpins the Social Democratic Party's policy of openness in foreign affairs. We believe Swiss Abroad will lend more weight to the opening up of Switzerland." This approach is evident in the SP's groundbreaking recruitment of members to head the organisation. In François Nordmann, Swiss Ambassador in London, the party has found a dyed-in-the-wool Swiss Abroad as chairman.

Different preferences for information campaigns

When it comes to communication, the SP international chapter relies entirely on the internet. Zimmer looks on the chapter's data-protected mailing list as an ideal medium, and intends to use it to send out a newsletter to members every two weeks. Online meetings complete the regular exchange of information. For other chapters the most common medium of communication is the regular mailing of print media. The SVP international chapter sends out a so-called Infoletter to its members three or four times a year, while the FDP international chapter sends out a letter from the president twice a year in German and French, as well as information material based on current manifestos and position statements. Mailing is a costly item, even for the major political parties. "We spend CHF 600 to 700 on each mailing to our 180 or so members," estimates Claudia Kohlschütter, head of the FDP international chapter.

From intensified exchange...

The SVP international chapter currently has a membership of approximately 90 and holds a plenary session once a year. General Secretary Martin Baltisser, who is also a member of the committee, freely admits that the level of organisation is minimal and cannot be given priority within the party's sphere of activities. Despite this he believes the impetus from members abroad is of great value. For this reason he claims one of the party's main aims in the coming legislative period is to intensify the exchange of ideas with Swiss

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abroad who support the mother party's political views. On the other hand he is reluctant to view the Fifth Switzerland as a reservoir of votes. "The SVP has ceased to view compatriots abroad as a coherent target group."

... to expanded activities abroad

Like the SVP, the FDP's most active outpost is in South Africa. Over the next four years Kohlschütter would like to see the party's activities expanded to as many countries as possible with Swiss expatriate communities. That said, he immediately qualifies this ambition. "The chances of exerting an influence should not be overestimated." The seven-strong organising committee meets four times a year. National Coun-

cillor Erich Müller, President of the FDP international chapter, cites two main goals: "The opening up of Switzerland towards Europe, and a fairer, more feasible ruling on voluntary AHV."

The other relatively large international chapters are also against the government's proposed restrictions on retirement benefits. Albrecht Rychen, Bernese National Councillor and President of the SVP international chapter, regrets the government's proposed legislation but at the same time adds that it needs to be seen against the backdrop of a budget deficit. For Vollmer it is clear that the SP international chapter will follow the line of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. "We are endeavouring

to bring about substantial improvements."

On the issue of government funding of Swiss schools abroad there is little difference of opinion. Across the board the parties are in favour of supporting educational institutions as a cultural seal of quality on Switzerland's presence abroad.

The fascination of the internet

All the parties questioned approved the lifting of the obligation to re-register on the electoral roll every four years, and were unanimously in favour of measures to facilitate the exercise of political rights, albeit for different reasons. Baltisser firmly believes that such a project lends itself to collaboration with other parties. Müller, on the other hand, asks whether it is necessary to do everything at cantonal level. "I am in favour of centralisation provided it does not result in major bureaucratic overheads for the government."

On the subject of the technical options provided by the internet, Vollmer demonstrates an innovative approach. To address the problem of tight mailing deadlines, he believes it is well worth examining the possibility of e-mailing voting documentation. All the parties have expressed interest in the idea of voting by internet, although there are reservations concerning its practical implementation. In Rychen's judgement, "The new medium is hugely popular, but it also poses many problems of security which have not yet been satisfactorily solved." ■



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