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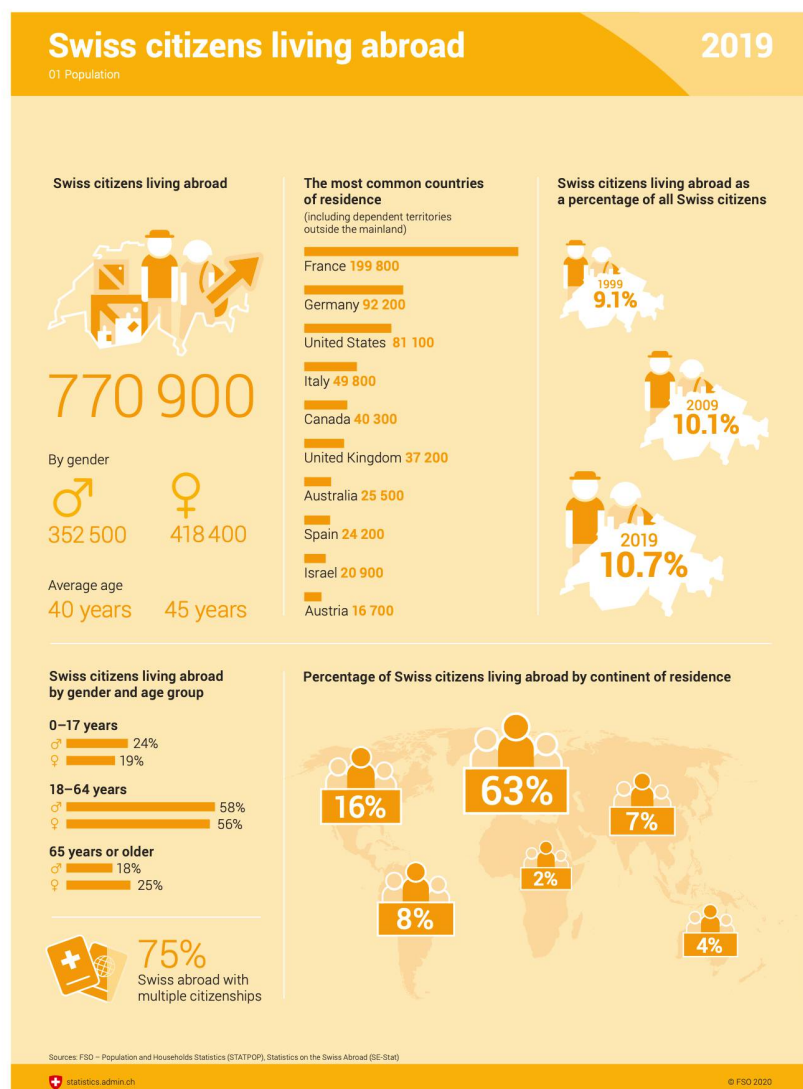
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The “Fifth Switzerland” continues to grow

The number of Swiss living abroad increased again in 2019, accounting for a population of 770,900 by the end of the year – up by around 1.4 per cent. According to the statistics on the Swiss Abroad compiled by the Federal Statistical Office, most Swiss Abroad continue to live in Europe, namely 484,300 (or 63 per cent). The most popular European country of residence is France (199,800), followed by Germany (92,200), Italy (49,800), the UK (35,200) and Spain (24,200). However, the EU country with the highest Swiss expatriate growth rate in 2019 was Portugal (+11.6 per cent). Some 286,000 Swiss Abroad live outside Europe – in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean (24 per cent), in Asia (7 per cent), in Australia and Oceania (4 per cent), and in Africa (2 per cent).

Further information: [ogy.de/statistics2019](https://www.fso.admin.ch/statistics2019)



Federal votes

The Federal Council determines voting proposals at least four months before the voting date.

Everything you need to know about voting proposals (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by Parliament and the Federal Council etc.) is available at www.admin.ch/votes or via the Federal Chancellery's VoteInfo app.

On 18 March 2020, the Federal Council decided to postpone the federal popular vote scheduled for 17 May 2020. The COVID-19 epidemic and associated containment measures would have compromised the smooth running of the vote and the unrestricted formation of opinion, thereby putting in question the integrity of the exercise.

The Federal Council has decided that there will be five federal proposals submitted to the vote on 27 September 2020:

- Federal Popular Initiative “For moderate immigration (Limitation Initiative)”;
- Amendment of the Federal Act on Hunting and the Protection of Wild Mammals and Birds (Hunting Act, HnTA);
- Amendment of the Federal Act on Direct Federal Taxation (DFTA) (Recognition of third-party childcare costs for tax purposes);
- Amendment of 27 September 2019 to the Federal Act on Compensation for Loss of Earnings for Persons on Military Service or Maternity Leave (indirect counter-proposal to the popular initiative “For sensible paternity leave – that benefits the entire family”);
- Federal Decree of 20 December 2019 on the Procurement of New Fighter Aircraft.

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in German at www.bk.admin.ch > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen

The suspension of deadlines in relation to federal votes was not extended, with the collection of signatures consequently permissible again from 1 June 2020.

Responsible for the FDFA official communications:
Simone Flubacher, Relations with the Swiss Abroad
Effingerstrasse 27, 3003 Berne, Switzerland
Tel. +41 800 24 7 365 or +41 58 465 33 33
www.eda.admin.ch, email: helpline@eda.admin.ch

HELPLINE FDFA

☎ from Switzerland +41 800 24 7 365
☎ from abroad +41 58 465 33 33
E-Mail: helpline@eda.admin.ch
Skype: [helpline-eda](https://www.skype.com/en/contacts/helpline-eda)

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The biggest repatriation operation in Swiss history

The COVID-19 pandemic plunged the world into a crisis like no other. Many Swiss nationals abroad were also severely affected. How did the FDFA help these people at the height of the crisis?

JOHANNES MATYASSY*

Since becoming director of the Consular Directorate of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) around two years ago, I have already overseen numerous challenging cases in which we were able to assist Swiss nationals in difficulty abroad. Nevertheless, the crisis management measures that we initiated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic were on a scale that even the FDFA would scarcely have imagined not so long ago. But how exactly did we assist those who needed our help? And what could the 'new normal' possibly look like after the hoped-for end of the pandemic?

How it started

Once the Federal Council declared an 'extraordinary situation' on 16 March 2020 in light of the rapid spread of COVID-19, the FDFA focused its attention on crisis management at all levels. However, the coronavirus had already been preoccupying the FDFA and Swiss representations in China on a daily basis for some time. From the end of 2019, an increasing number of inquiries came in from worried citizens via the FDFA helpline. The pandemic then started to overshadow everything else from the beginning of March 2020, forcing us into overdrive.

Into the public consciousness

The ensuing crisis saw a change in public attitude towards the citizen-oriented services that have traditionally been a key component of

Swiss foreign policy. The media and wider public normally take little notice of these services, but things were much different this time. On the one hand, the provision of assistance to our fellow compatriots has long been a widely debated and, at times, emotive issue. On the other, many thousands of Swiss nationals abroad finally gained direct first-hand experience of what 'citizen-oriented services' mean in the context of Swiss foreign policy. People also discovered that the FDFA would not have been able to offer its services in many instances had it not been for its wide global network of representations abroad. It was this broad network that allowed the FDFA to tailor its response to local conditions and provide uncomplicated and effective assistance without ignoring the quintessentially Swiss virtue of personal responsibility.

Stranded abroad

The action taken by the FDFA during the coronavirus crisis benefited two different contingents of Swiss nationals. Firstly, people who had travelled abroad and wanted to return to Switzerland needed our support. But then we also had Swiss living abroad who had got into difficulty and were no longer able to do anything about it.

Therefore, we initially wanted to help stranded tourists return home. At the beginning of the crisis, it was more or less still possible for people to return to Switzerland independently on commercial flights. Swiss representations were on hand to inform and assist tourists where necessary.



Johannes Matyassy:
"Many people finally gained experience of what 'citizen-oriented services' mean in the context of Swiss foreign policy."

Photo donated

Consular assistance for Swiss returning home; Bangkok Airport, Thailand.

Photo: FDFA



Thirty-five FDFA-organised flights

However, the deteriorating situation prevented others from getting back from many parts of the world under their own steam. The FDFA consequently launched a repatriation operation. From the outset, we could not have predicted that this would be the largest airlift of its kind in Swiss history. The federal government organised 35 flights in total, repatriating about 4,200 Swiss in the process. The campaign was remarkable not only for its size, but also for its success in extremely challenging circumstances. Staff at many Swiss representations had to work day and night to obtain the necessary landing rights and ensure that stranded citizens made it to the departure lounge in the first place.

Support continues

Now the focus is on assisting those who, until now, have been unable or



unwilling to return. Our intention is to provide them with the best possible protection on the ground. Demand for welfare aid and other consular services has increased – unsurprising given that, one, over 770,000 Swiss live abroad and, two, the Swiss normally take over 16 million trips abroad every year. Some of the reasons for this additional demand include inadequate healthcare, inadequate social welfare systems, and volatile security situations in the country of residence.

Dual nationals – victims of their status

Certain nations have prohibited their citizens from travelling abroad during the pandemic. In some countries, this has resulted in dual nationals being unable to return home. This additional issue has posed quite a challenge in terms of providing consular protection.

Glimpse of the future

The crisis hit and continues to hit Switzerland just as hard as the rest of the world. We have never experienced anything of this enormity. Tried-and-tested contingency plans only go so far in times like these. Despite the alarming nature of what

Swiss passengers boarding a flight from Lima to Zurich. Switzerland organised 35 repatriation flights in total.

Photo: FDFA

was unfolding, the FDFA managed to respond quickly in the interests of Switzerland and its citizens, thanks not least to modern technology and new communication methods – elements of the ‘virtual digital diplomacy’ that is steadily gaining traction and will doubtless play a key role in the FDFA’s future work.

Broad network

Looking ahead, the FDFA will carefully examine how digitalisation,

current working practices, changes in international mobility, and other factors are shaping tomorrow’s world – and how consular services need to be developed accordingly. What we already know is that our broad network of Swiss representations more than proved its worth. We must safeguard this infrastructure.

Ambassador Johannes Matyassy is the director of the Consular Directorate (CD) at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)

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