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Autor: Rutz, Eveline
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E-voting – all hopes rest on Swiss Post

It is currently not possible to vote online in Switzerland. If everything goes according to plan, cantons will be able to start piloting e-voting again in 2023. Swiss Post should have its e-voting system up and running by then.

EVELINE RUTZ

We are making good strides. This was what the Federal Chancellery and Swiss Post essentially had to say about e-voting in April. They were reacting to a report in which independent experts, who had put the e-voting system through its paces, concluded that “significant” progress had been made. For example, e-voting documentation is now clearer, more comprehensive and better structured than it was in 2019. The source code has also attracted a great deal of positive feedback. But the experts have pointed out vulnerabilities as well. One of these is the

cryptographic protocol, which is used to verify the votes cast without violating the confidentiality of the voting procedure. The cryptographic protocol is an essential part of the security framework. Swiss Post has already heeded some of the findings and says that the project is now in the “next development phase”. It intends to complete this phase during the course of 2023.

E-voting has been a long-running saga

Switzerland has already been palpably close to delivering e-voting a few

times in recent years. But there have always been setbacks – a case of two steps forward, one step back. E-voting was first piloted in 2004. It was even possible in some cantons to vote in the national elections via computer, tablet or smartphone in 2015. E-voting was very popular among Swiss Abroad, with the “Fifth Switzerland” casting around a third more votes than normal.

Over 300 pilots took place in 15 cantons. This was until the Federal Council decided to abort the project in 2019, after the canton of Geneva and Swiss Post had pulled their IT solutions due to financial considerations and security flaws respectively. The federal government subsequently adjusted the parameters for a new attempt at e-voting. It wanted stricter security and an open-source strategy, while announcing that independent specialists would conduct reviews. The first such check has now taken place.

Three cantons intend to trial e-voting in 2023

Ariane Rustichelli, Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA), is cautiously optimistic. “We trust the process and hope that Swiss Post can quickly implement the requested improvements,” she says, noting that supporters of e-voting have already been left disappointed more than once. “But we will only believe it when we see it.”

Political willingness to facilitate e-voting in the foreseeable future is likely to have increased during the pandemic – a crisis that showed how valuable digital services can be. Rustichelli: “E-government helps to safeguard our direct democracy.” The OSA director reveals that some can-



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Ariane Rustichelli, Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA)

tons are interested in rolling out pilots in 2023. These are Basel-Stadt, St Gallen and Thurgau. Grisons wants to start in 2024.

BFH has also developed a source code

The fact that all eyes are currently on Swiss Post is due to a lack of competition. Work on the e-voting system pioneered by the canton of Geneva has continued, albeit in just one area. A team at the Berne University of Applied Sciences (BFH) has continued to develop the source code since 2019. The team had already been consulted for the cryptographic specifications at an earlier juncture.

When its service contract ended with the canton of Geneva, it carried on working within the parameters of a federally run e-government project. “We were able to implement all security-related parts of the system in full,” says IT professor Rolf Haenni. Their efforts have paid off, with the publicly available code now reaching a high-quality level, he adds. Others will be able to build on this expertise. “But no company has yet come forward, unfortunately.”

Young people do a lot by smartphone

Developing an e-voting system is an extremely complex and expensive undertaking, in which Swiss Post has already invested a lot of time and money, says Rustichelli. “We hope that Swiss Post stays the course.” Swiss Post, for its part, is keen to stress the strategic importance of the project. Spokesperson Silvana Grellmann: “We are talking about the future of Swiss Post in an increasingly digital world, so what we have here is



“The biggest challenge is maintaining trust in our solution.”

Roberto Cirillo, CEO Swiss Post

an essential investment in the Swiss Post of tomorrow.” Surveys show that voters want an additional means of voting, and their voices will only get louder. “As far as young people are concerned, you can do everything on your smartphone. Try explaining to them in the near future that they can do everything on their phones, except vote.”

Swiss Post has underlined its intention to make an e-voting system available from 2023. However, it is prioritising security over speed. “The biggest challenge is maintaining trust in our solution,” CEO Roberto Cirillo recently told the media. The company is therefore being very open about how it detects and irons out flaws. In 2021, it published its source code and launched a bug bounty program. It has since received around 130 tip-offs from hackers and paid out a total of 97,000 Swiss francs in rewards. It has not disclosed how much it is spending on e-voting otherwise.

There will be another independent review once Swiss Post has improved its IT solution. Only when the results of this review are available can the

cantons get on with requesting approval for new trials. Depending on circumstances, they will have to change their infrastructure, existing processes, interfaces with other systems, and voter identification cards accordingly. “Based on various factors and deadlines, this integration work will take one to one-and-a-half years to complete,” says Barbara Schüpbach-Guggenbühl, chair of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Chancellors. This is why the plan to make e-voting available in time for the federal elections in autumn 2023 is ambitious, she adds. The chances of it happening are unlikely.

The 788,000 or so Swiss who live abroad will probably have to rely on postal voting. This would be regrettable, says Rustichelli. “Voting papers often arrive too late, so many will be unable to exercise their political rights.”