



# Diversity Me

Swiss Stories  
of Identity & Inclusion



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## Introduction

*Diversity + Me* was the theme of the Embassy of Switzerland in China's public diplomacy activities throughout 2023. The objective of this campaign was to showcase one of Switzerland's greatest strengths: cultural and social diversity. It also promoted important dialogues with people from different backgrounds on how to create a more inclusive society. Under this theme, the Embassy successfully organized events such as the 1<sup>st</sup> Romansh Language Week, the 'Blinde Kuh – Sensory Parcours in the Dark' experience week, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Swiss Film Festival, the Swiss Italian Language Week, a photo exhibition featuring women in Chinese cities, and two concert tours.

On social media, we launched a series of WeChat articles on *Diversity + Me*, focusing on multilingualism, multiculturalism, social mobility, disability, direct democracy, age, gender, HIV and LGBTQIA+. Each article included short portraits of prominent Swiss people, to give an in-depth view of the challenges and successes of inclusion in Swiss society. This brochure is the compilation of this article series.

The Embassy of Switzerland in China is the official representation of the Swiss Confederation in the People's Republic of China. It covers all aspects of Switzerland's diplomatic relations with China and represents Switzerland's interests in the fields of politics, economy, finance, legal affairs, science, education, culture, etc.

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## Ambassador's Foreword



I am delighted to present this brand-new brochure *Diversity + Me*. The title was also the theme of our yearly campaign in 2023. We asked: What does diversity mean to you? How does it relate to us as individuals?

The preamble of the Swiss Constitution calls for diversity and states: the strength of people is measured by the well-being of its weakest members. It's a great sentence! It affirms that, a good society does not firstly need the admiration for the strong, but the inclusion of the weak. Switzerland has enjoyed a peaceful history over several centuries. This has allowed us to gain valuable experience in social governance, and we maintain a very high level of societal inclusion and harmony. Swiss diversity is reflected in numerous categories: multilingualism, religious and cultural diversity, political plurality, and in more recent times, migration, gender equality and equal rights for LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities. While we live strong and open political debates we always try to maintain a state of equality and respect in order to avoid structural social conflicts.

Many of Switzerland's successes are built on this diversity. As a country with a long-established democracy, plurality of opinions and dialogues are very important to us. We also have managed to include a very high number of foreigners into our society. At the same time, achieving equality on a global scale is an immense task. I hope Switzerland and China can continue to cooperate and have dialogues in this field and jointly explore and achieve a more diverse and inclusive society in both countries.

I hope that this brochure brings you inspiration and reflexion. I look forward to your opinions and suggestions.

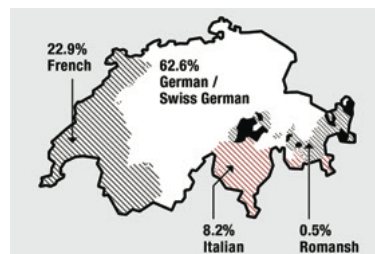
**Jürg Burri**  
Ambassador of Switzerland to China



# How is Switzerland keeping the minority language Romansh alive?

## How is Switzerland keeping the minority language Romansh alive?

Multilingualism is an essential part of Switzerland's identity. The country is a model multilingual state with four linguistic regions, German, French, Italian, and Romansh – and numerous dialects within them – harmoniously living together in an area 200 times smaller than China.



Romansh is Switzerland's smallest national language © PRS

Switzerland's multilingualism is even governed by law. In 2010, the Languages Act came into force with the aim of strengthening exchanges between Switzerland's linguistic communities and safeguarding its minority languages.

German is the most widely spoken in Switzerland, with 63% of the population considering it their main language. French follows with 23%, and Italian with 8%. But it is the country's smallest national language, spoken by only 0.5% of the population, which has the biggest story to tell.

### What is Romansh?

Romansh is Switzerland's oldest language, dating back to 15 BC when the Romans conquered Rhaetia, now Graubünden, the largest canton in eastern Switzerland. It has five idioms - each with their own grammar and dictionary! Romansh is the country's smallest national language, spoken by only 0.5% of the population.

### A brief history of Romansh

Romansh is Switzerland's oldest language, dating back to 15 BC when the Romans conquered Rhaetia, now Graubünden, the largest canton in eastern Switzerland.

Romansh is a Romance language, like French and Italian. And it has many idioms – five in total – each with their own grammar and dictionary!

Around the time of the First World War, there was a move to reinforce Switzerland's identity and push back against claims that Romansh was merely a dialect of Italian. So in 1938, a referendum was held and an impressive 91.6% of the country (including all cantons) voted in favor of Romansh becoming Switzerland's fourth national language.

The status of Romansh was further raised in 1996 when Swiss cantonal and federal governments adopted it as a partial official language. Important publications are issued in Romansh, including



Swiss Federal Constitution lists four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh © FDFA

voting materials and language decrees. And Romansh speakers have the right to use their own language when addressing federal authorities. But its usage is limited compared with the three full official languages: German, French and Italian.

### An endangered language

According to the UN, half of the world's 7,000 languages are at risk of disappearing by the year 2100. Romansh is firmly on the endangered list as its population has fallen by more than 50% in the last century to just 60,000 speakers.



Romansh is mainly spoken in Alpine areas of Switzerland where there are far fewer job opportunities © Graubünden Tourism

There are many reasons a language can become endangered, often tied to economic, political, or cultural factors. So why is Romansh struggling for survival?

### Job opportunities

Romansh is mainly spoken in Alpine areas where job opportunities are scarce. As a result, young people are moving to other parts of the country in search of employment and then assimilating into their new German- or French-speaking communities.

### Access to education

Not all schools in Graubünden are teaching Romansh, instead choosing to focus on the canton's majority language, German. And for those Romansh speakers entering higher education, the language is only taught at a small number of universities in Switzerland: Fribourg, Zurich and Geneva.

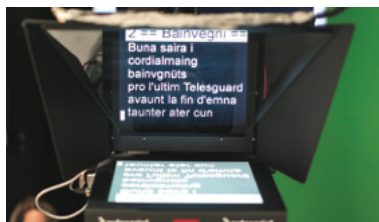
### Migration

Romansh speakers are unique in that they are bilingual and can all speak another national language, usually German. But this makes it easy for German-speakers living in the Romansh

region not to learn the local language because they know everyone can still understand them.

### Idioms and standardization

The fragmented nature of Romansh makes access to the language more difficult. To overcome the challenges of teaching and corresponding in so many idioms, a standardized version was developed, known as 'Rumantsch Grischun'. Today, the new version is used by the Swiss government, as well as Romansh TV and radio programming, but it is limited. TV shows are only broadcast a few hours each day and official texts not always translated. There has also been some resistance from Romansh speakers who have responded with counter initiatives and even legal proceedings.



Romansh has its own independent TV & radio broadcaster © Keystone

### Keeping Romansh alive

Whichever side of the Rumantsch Grischun argument people are on, the debate serves to demonstrate how much the Romansh community cares about its language and future survival.

The Swiss federal and cantonal governments spend more than seven million CHF annually on preserving and promoting Romansh. Additional revenue for Romansh TV and radio, Radiotelevision Svizra Rumantscha, is also taken from mandatory licence fees. Altogether, the total funding for Romansh speakers amounts to more per head than for any other Swiss national language.

In addition to government funding, Romansh is also supported by Lia Rumantscha, the umbrella organization for Romansh speakers. The organization was first established back in 1919 to defend the interests of the Romansh minority against the German majority in Graubünden. Today, it faces the challenge of developing fresh initiatives that can reverse the trend of Romansh's declining population.

For new arrivals in Graubünden, Lia Rumantscha is trying to establish Romansh as a language of integration. It is targeting not only German-speaking newcomers, but also the large Portuguese-speaking population that has settled in the region over recent decades. The organization developed a special learning program 'Piripiri', which has been running for more than 10 years and is helping Portuguese-speaking migrants to understand Romansh language and culture. The hope is that they will eventually start using Romansh in the workplace and their everyday lives.

Perhaps Lia Rumantscha's biggest initiative is 'Pledari Grond', a Romansh online dictionary covering Ru-



Lia Rumantscha is headquartered in Chur, Graubünden © Lia Rumantscha/Mattias Nutt

mantsch Grischun and the five idioms. Pledari Grond is a living database, with around 250,000 entries to date – and new words added practically every day. The rapid growth of the dictionary is in part thanks to outside contributions from the Romansh community who regularly suggest new words and translations.

Lia Rumantscha was also involved in another online project, collaborating with Microsoft on its Local Language Program. In 2006, the software giant developed Rumantsch Grischun versions of its popular Windows and Office software. The program has since sparked other initiatives to further exploit the potential of digital language tools, including the development of automatic translators and spellcheckers in all Romansh idioms and Rumantsch Grischun.

As well as education and technology, arts and culture can also play a big part in



A standardized version of Romansh was introduced in 1982, 'Rumantsch Grischun', to help overcome the challenge of teaching in five different idioms © Keystone



Opening reception of the first Romansh Language Week in Beijing, 17 April 2023 © Swiss Embassy in China

keeping Romansh relevant, especially for the next generation. Romansh music is seeing a revival among younger listeners thanks to the emergence of more modern musical genres, such as the rap group Liricas Analas. Romansh literature also offers a way into the language, including the first online comic featuring all five idioms, *Il Crestomat*. And in 2018, the first professional Romansh movie was released, *Amur Senza Fin* or 'Hide and Seek', a romantic comedy screened at the Locarno and Toronto Film Festivals, and picked up by an American film company.

In an effort to create more global awareness of its minority language, the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs launched a Romansh Language Week, 'Emna da la lingua Rumantscha' in 2021. Swiss representations around the world offer international audiences the chance



Liricas Analas released the first rap album in Romansh and were well established in the Swiss hip hop scene until they disbanded in 2022 © Liricas Analas

to learn more about Romansh language and culture through various on- and offline activities. This year is the first time the Swiss Embassy in China has taken part, organizing events in Beijing and Chengdu, with guest appearances from the renowned Romansh artist, Not Vital.

At home and abroad Switzerland is fighting to keep its fourth national language alive. But with the current rate of nine languages dying every year, will it be enough for Romansh to survive?

#### Romansh + Me



**Andreas Gabriel**  
Native speaker of Romansh  
Secretary General of Lia Rumantscha

Romansh is Andreas' first language. He grew up in a small village in the Romansh-speaking region of Graubünden where all the community customs and activities were in Romansh. At home and at school, Andreas spoke in Romansh.

'Romansh has become an important part of my identity,' he says, 'it was the language I spoke with my family and for the first three years of primary school. All my lessons were taught in it.'

As his education continued, the influence of German and other languages increased. Andreas, like many other Romansh speakers, found it hard to find time for his mother tongue.

'When other languages were introduced, it became more difficult to develop my Romansh skills without pursuing language-specific studies,' he admits. 'Only when I started working for Lia Rumantscha was I finally able to deepen my knowledge in Romansh again.'



The Lia Rumantscha building

Andreas is Secretary General for Lia Rumantscha, leading the organization on its mission to preserve and promote Romansh. This includes voicing concerns for the language in politics and the media, and overseeing the development of promotional initiatives.

In recent years, Andreas' work has become more and more challenging as the Romansh-speaking population continues to decline.

'One of the greatest challenges is increased language mixing in Romansh areas. The dominant German language is visibly displacing Romansh and over a third of the Romansh-speaking language community now lives outside the language area,' He explains. 'And a second challenge is enabling children growing up outside the language area to learn Romansh, since they do not receive schooling in the language.'

More generally, Andreas believes the status of Romansh is still lacking compared to Switzerland's other national languages.

'German, French, Italian, and increasingly English, are predominating. In order to raise awareness of Romansh, it is important for the language to have greater presence at a national level.'

So with the odds stacked against it, why is Romansh a language worth preserving?

As well as being an important part of Andreas' identity, and that of the remaining 60,000 Romansh speakers, the language is also a significant part of Switzerland's identity.

'Romansh is special in that, despite its small size, it still has a distinctly good position as one of Switzerland's four national languages, and as an official and school language in the Romansh communities in Graubünden,' Andreas concludes.





# How to climb the social ladder in Switzerland?

## How to climb the social ladder in Switzerland?

Global poverty has increased for the first time in 25 years, according to a recent report by the non-profit organization Oxfam. Meanwhile, the rich are getting richer, with the wealthiest 1% bagging nearly twice as much wealth as the rest of the world.

This growing divide between rich and poor also exists in Switzerland. Yet, compared to most other countries, the Alpine nation fares pretty well when it comes to social mobility.

### What is social mobility?

Social mobility is the movement of a person (or their family) from one social level to another, often in relation to their parents. It is also referred to as moving up or down the 'social ladder'. The more a country fosters social mobility, the more chance people have to do well in life regardless of their socio-economic background.

In the 2020 Global Social Mobility Index, which assessed 82 countries based on factors influencing mobility, Switzerland ranked seventh in the world, just behind five Nordic countries and the Netherlands.



Switzerland's dual-track VPET system combines classroom learning with workplace training, and provides a direct link to the job market © PRS

So what are the main factors helping people in Switzerland to climb the social ladder?

### Education

Access to education is one of the biggest drivers of upward mobility. In Switzerland, more than 90% of 25-year-olds have completed some form of education. While 52% have completed tertiary education – and significantly, Switzerland is above average compared to other OECD countries regarding the likelihood of students going to a higher education institution when their parents did not.

Fewer financial barriers help to maintain Switzerland's high education rates, especially for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. University tuition fees, for instance, are more affordable compared to other countries such as the UK and the USA. Even Switzerland's top-ranking institutions, École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich (ETHZ), charge less than 750 CHF per semester.



ETHZ is one of the top universities in the world, yet tuition fees remain considerably lower than many other high-ranking institutions © ETHZ / Marco Carocari



Yet surprisingly, more than 70% of Swiss school leavers don't go to university, but instead choose vocational training – an apprenticeship and then a job. Even the highest achievers and those with greater parental incomes opt to go down the vocational route.

Switzerland's unique dual-track VPET system combines workplace training with classroom teaching. The system is very flexible; qualified apprentices can go on to further professional training or enroll at a higher education college. And for those who want to go to university after all, they can still do so after passing an entrance exam.

Unlike the higher costs associated with university, VPET takes some of the financial burden away from parents. Apprentices are paid a salary and their high-quality professional training puts them in a strong position to access the job market.

### Employment

Switzerland has a thriving job market with consistently low unemployment rates. Last year, the number of unemployed fell to a record 20-year low of just 2.2% – and the youth unemployment rate

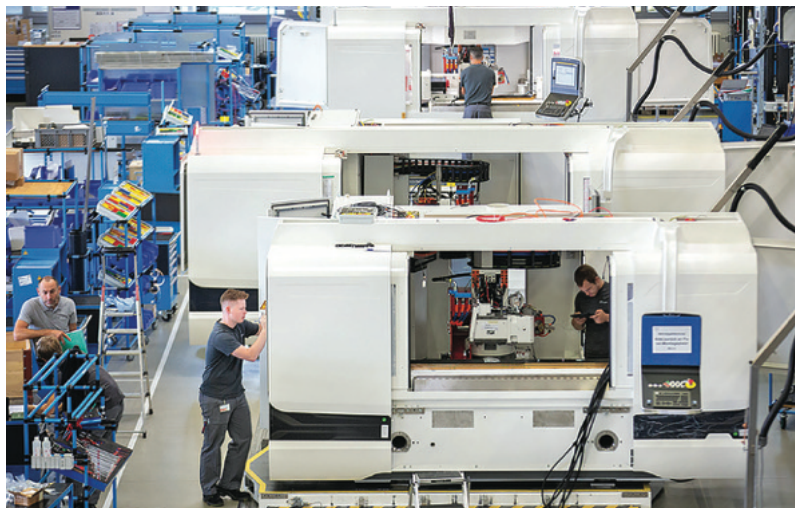


Switzerland's average salary is one of the highest in the world at approximately CHF 6,500 per month © Swiss National Bank

(15-24 year olds) was only 2.0%. Even for disadvantaged groups, including foreign-born residents, the unemployment rate was only marginally higher than for the native-born population.

Such economic success is largely attributed to Switzerland's services and manufacturing sectors. But it is also the open and flexible nature of the Swiss job market that makes it an attractive investment.

Companies can enjoy some of the most liberal labor laws in the world, including few limitations on hiring (or dismissing) employees, and greater autonomy regarding wages and working hours. They also benefit from a large pool of highly skilled workers to recruit from. And this links back to Switzerland's education system.



Unemployment in Switzerland is the lowest it has been for 20 years. In 2022, the average rate fell to a record low of just 2.2% © SBFI / Monique Wittwer

Most Swiss employees possess a relatively high level of education and specialized training. This has in turn led the Swiss job market to offer higher-end jobs with higher wages. The average salary of 6,500 CHF is more than most other countries, even taking into account the higher cost of living. And significantly, there is no big wage disparity between apprenticeship graduates and university graduates because the VPET system offers countless opportunities to gain further qualifications during employment. In fact, many managers of small and medium-sized businesses in Switzerland now come from the vocational route.

### Social welfare

While education and work can help people climb up the ladder, social welfare is the safety net for those who fall down it.



People without post-compulsory education, children, foreign nationals, single-parent families and persons living alone are more likely to need social assistance in Switzerland © Keystone / Christian Beutler

Switzerland has an extensive social security network, covering unemployment benefits, accident insurance, maternity leave, pensions, and family allowances. And further financial aid, or social assistance, is available for those living below the poverty line. This helps people with basic needs like food and clothing, as well as housing and health insurance. Payments are available not only for Swiss citizens and residence-permit holders, but also for asylum seekers and refugees.

In 2021, just over 265,000 people received welfare payments in Switzerland. Notably, half of the people receiving assistance no longer need it within the first year – and only 8% need help for more than six years.

Although getting people off welfare and back into the job market is the ultimate goal, more recently there has been a drive to boost skills. By offering further education and training opportunities, the government hopes to not only relieve the current labor shortage in Switzerland, but also enable those receiving assistance to make a better living than they had before.

### Social mobility + Me



**Valon Behrami**

Switzerland's most celebrated footballer

Valon Behrami has represented the Swiss national team more than 80 times, including at four World Cups, but his journey to sporting stardom was not an easy one.

Valon was born in Kosovo to Albanian parents. At the age of four, he and his family were forced to flee their home because of the Balkans war. They settled in Ticino, in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland.

Valon started learning Italian and attending the local school, while his family awaited the outcome of their asylum application. The process took many years and it was only thanks to a petition signed by more than 2,000 people in his village that the family's application was finally approved.

During this time, Valon showed a real talent for football and eventually went on to pursue a career in the sport. He started playing professionally in Ticino, before moving to top clubs in Italy, England and Germany. Valon went on to represent Switzerland at four consecutive World Cups – the first Swiss player to do so – as well as two European Championships.



**Conny Camenzind**

Diplomat, former Consul General in Chengdu, China

Conny Camenzind has been a diplomat for more than 30 years and was the Consul General in Chengdu from 2019 to 2022. She is a diplomat for the Swiss Foreign Office, but she doesn't have the traditional education of a state representative.

Conny grew up in a small picturesque village in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. After completing secondary school education, she was keen to become financially independent and so started an apprenticeship in banking. She went on to work in three different banks before her interest in travel drew her to the Swiss Foreign Office.

Conny started as a secretary and then joined the consular service, working as a diplomat in many Swiss embassies and consulates around the world. While at the Foreign Office, she was able to do further education and went on to graduate with a university degree in politics. Conny became one of a handful of Swiss women with the role of Consul General, when she took up her post in Chengdu in 2019. Today, she is the Consul General in Sydney.



**Sergio Ermotti**

Former CEO of UBS

Sergio Ermotti was CEO of UBS from 2011 to 2020 and then returned to the bank in April 2023 to oversee its merger with Credit Suisse.

Sergio Ermotti is one of the most influential figures in the financial industry, but he didn't always dream of being a high-flying banker.

Sergio is from Lugano, an Italian-speaking city in southern Switzerland. As a child he was a big fan of his local football club, FC Lugano, and dreamed of working in sport. After completing secondary school, Sergio planned to train as a sport teacher. But before enrolling in college, he decided to fill his time with an apprenticeship at a bank in the city. A few weeks into his training, Sergio discovered he really enjoyed it – and that's where his banking career began.

After graduating from his apprenticeship, Sergio worked in equity bond trading at Citibank, making his way up the ranks to vice president. He then went on to high level positions at the London-based investment bank Merrill Lynch and the Italian bank UniCredit, before returning to Switzerland and eventually becoming CEO of the country's largest bank UBS.





# What is Switzerland doing to promote greater disability inclusion?

## What is Switzerland doing to promote greater disability inclusion?

Disability is part of being human. Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life. 16% of the global population, or an estimated 1.3 billion people, experiences a significant disability. In Switzerland, the rate is even higher at 22% – and just under one third of those are considered severely disabled, meaning that living an independent life is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Disability is not just a medical matter,



Switzerland's parliament hosted the first session of people with disabilities in March 2023 to strengthen their political representation and inclusion © SRF

Some steps are being taken on a global level to close the inclusion gap. For example, many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly reference people with disabilities. But what is Switzerland doing to promote disability inclusion in its society?

### More political rights

Switzerland's Disability Discrimination Act came into force in 2004. The law aims to prevent, and ultimately eliminate, discrimination against disabled people. For instance, the law states that all public transport should be fully accessible; not just trains and buses, but also boats and cable cars. Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) is Switzerland's largest transport provider. From 2024, the company says 75% of people using its services will be able to travel fully autonomously thanks to new ramps, lifts and elevated platforms at hundreds of train stations across the country.

But many of the 1.8 million people living with a disability in Switzerland are continuing to fight for greater equality. In 2020, people with severe mental or physical disabilities won the right to vote

### What is disability?

Disability is experiencing any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities and interact with the world around them. Disabilities may be cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, sensory, or a combination of multiple factors.

but also a social one. Many people with disabilities have unequal access to the benefits and rights of society, including education, work, housing, and public services. Yet, with the global disabled population expected to double by 2050, supporting disability inclusion is essential for societal growth and prosperity.



Switzerland's Disability Act sets framework conditions that make it easier for people with disabilities to participate in society, including making all public transport fully accessible © SBB



SEK 3 offers children with hearing impairments the chance of a bilingual education (sign and spoken language) within the setting on a mainstream school © SEK 3

in Geneva – the first Swiss canton to introduce such a reform, with 75% voting in favor of it. Other Swiss cantons are now considering following Geneva's lead.

And in March this year, the Swiss parliament hosted the first session of people with disabilities, inviting participants to occupy 44 of the 200 seats in the House of Representatives, representing the country's 22% who live with disability. At the end of the debate, a resolution was adopted to strengthen the political representation and inclusion of disabled people. And the government is also looking to amend the Disability Act and put further pressure on employers, as well as public and private services, to do more.

#### Integrative approach to schooling

Access to education is a basic human right. In Switzerland, all children and young people (up to the age of 20) with a disability are entitled to special education measures – this was around 4% in the 2021/22 academic year.

The Swiss approach to schooling is integration rather than separation – and many children with disabilities attend regular schools or kindergartens on a full or part-time basis. All children, regardless of disability, can be taught together in the same school or even classroom, with special education and medical care provided where necessary. Only those children who are not

able to integrate in this way attend a dedicated special needs school.

SEK 3 is a secondary school for children with hearing impairments just outside Zurich. The school is embedded into a mainstream institute so pupils have the opportunity to come into contact with the hearing community and general youth culture – basically everything that you would expect in a regular state school. Depending on their level of deafness, pupils are either partially integrated into regular classes or they can attend bilingual classes in both sign and spoken language.

By removing the barriers between special education and mainstream education, all children have access to the same curriculum and opportunities. Children with disabilities can offer new perspectives to their peers, increase their own self-confidence, and develop a wide range of skills they may not have had outside of an inclusive classroom.

#### Inclusive work opportunities

4% of 18 to 64 year-olds in Switzerland receive disability benefits. Alongside the Nordic countries, they are some of the most generous benefits in the world. Despite this financial support, people with disabilities are still highly involved in Swiss working life. 68%



Blindeküh Zurich is the first restaurant in the dark offering customers a chance to experience what it is like to be blind © Blindeküh



2/3 of the employees at the Martigny Boutique Hotel have an intellectual disability © Martigny Boutique Hotel

are economically active, and among people with more severe disabilities, 46% are still working or looking for a job.

Participation in the labor market enables people with disabilities to put their skills and abilities to good use. And because adult life is often centered on productive and paid employment, working gives disabled people a chance to create a social and professional identity for themselves too.

As well as the benefits for the individual, there is also a strong business case for strengthening disability inclusion. According to the World Economic Forum, the cost of excluding people with disabilities represents up to 7% of GDP in some countries – not to mention an untapped pool of talent offering new and more diverse perspectives.

Switzerland has many initiatives to support disabled people in the workplace. In the hospitality sector, for instance, the Blindeküh Foundation creates employment opportunities for blind and visually impaired people. Its most famous initiative is the Blindeküh restaurant in the dark, which offers sighted customers a chance to experience the world of those who cannot see. While the Martigny Boutique Hotel in the canton of Valais is both a commercial hotel and a social inclusion project as nearly two out of three staff have an intellectual disability. And for those people with a psychological disability – which is on the rise in Switzerland – Job Coach Placement, a specialized integration service from the University Psychiatric Services Bern, helps people back into

employment with the assistance of therapy and a personally assigned job coach in the workplace.

#### Assistive technology

For people with the most severe physical disabilities, everyday tasks such as taking a shower or making a cup of coffee can be a big challenge. Many people, especially the elderly, require home-care services or need to live in a nursing home. Assistive technology can provide solutions for these kinds of day-to-day challenges and offer people with disabilities greater independence and inclusion. Globally, more than 2.5 billion people use one or more assistive products – hearing aids, wheelchairs or prostheses – and this number is expected to rise to 3.5 billion by 2050. To support this growing demand, one university in Switzerland has developed a rather unique idea. Cybathlon is a non-profit project by Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule



ETH Zurich's Cybathlon challenges teams from all over the world to develop assistive technologies suitable for everyday use © ETH Zurich / Alessandro Della Bella

Zürich. Teams from all over the world compete to create the most innovative assistive technologies. Each team is made up of a pilot (with a disability) and a technology developer from a university or tech company. Together, they tackle everyday tasks that can be real obstacles for people with disabilities, including tying shoelaces with a robotic arm prosthesis, balancing on rocks with a prosthetic leg, or overcoming uneven terrain with an exoskeleton. The competition not only helps to promote research in the field of assistive technology but also raises awareness about disability inclusion on a national and international level.

Cyathlon also made its way to China. At the competition in Jiangsu in March 2023, disabled competitor Xu Min won the championship title alongside her team from the Suzhou Institute of Biomedical Engineering and Technology. Xu was equipped with a robotic forearm prosthesis and completed the challenges in the shortest time with no mistakes. Now the Chinese team is setting its sights on Cyathlon 2024, the international edition of the competition in Switzerland.

#### Disability + Me



**David Mzee**

Paraplegic, walking again  
after a spinal cord injury

David Mzee injured his spine in a gymnastics accident while at university in Zurich. He became a paraplegic at the age of 22 and was told he would never walk again. But seven years later, in 2017, a groundbreaking study from the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and Lausanne University Hospital (CHUV) helped David regain mobility.

Swiss scientists used wireless implants to send precise electrical stimulation to the required muscles, mimicking the pattern of stimulation the body delivered before David's injury. After a tough few months of training, David was able to control his previously paralyzed leg muscles even in the absence of electrical stimulation.

David went on to inspire more than 120,000 runners and wheelchair participants at the 2019 Wings for Life World Run. The event supports spinal cord research and David was able to stand up from his wheelchair and walk the first few meters across the start line on his own.



**Tatjana Binggeli**

First deaf person with a doctorate  
in Switzerland

Tatjana Binggeli was the first deaf person to get a PhD in Switzerland. Going to university is a challenge for many deaf people as studying requires the help of a sign language translator and going through a lot of red tape. Tatjana persevered and after passing her exams at a mainstream high school she went on to study medicine and biomedicine. She then worked in various hospitals in Switzerland before returning to her studies and obtaining a doctorate in scientific medicine.

As President of the Swiss Federation of the Deaf, Tatjana lobbies hard for the interests of the country's 10,000 deaf people. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, the federation requested more access to important government information just like the rest of the population. As a result, sign language interpreters quickly started to appear at all televised press conferences.

Now Tatjana wants to enter politics to campaign for more equality. If elected, she would be the first deaf person in Switzerland to become a national council member.



**Théo Gmür**

Triple gold medal-winning Paralympian

Théo Gmür caused a sensation when he won three gold medals in alpine skiing at the 2018 Winter Paralympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. He was chosen as Switzerland's flagbearer at the closing ceremony and also named Swiss Para Athlete of the Year.

Théo's hometown of Nendaz is a ski resort in the Swiss Alps, and most children living there learn to ski or snowboard at an early age. Despite being paralyzed on one side of his body due to cerebral edema, Theo's parents still encouraged him to take part and he soon took to the slopes.

As well as three Paralympic titles, Théo also has multiple world championships. And in 2022 he competed in the Beijing Paralympics where he added another medal to his collection. He won bronze in the men's downhill standing, despite sustaining an injury on his left knee shortly before the competition.



**Julia Häusermann**

Award-winning actor with  
Downs Syndrome

Julia Häusermann completed her acting training in 2012 and then became a professional actor with the Zurich-based company Theater Hora. Along with her fellow performers in the company, Julia has a disability. She was born with Downs Syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes physical and developmental problems.

Theater Hora is the only professional theatre in Switzerland whose ensemble members all have a certified learning disability. As well as in-house productions, the company also collaborates with well-established artists and collectives from the national and international arts scene.

Julia received the Alfred Kerr Actor Award for her role in Disabled Theater, a dance piece exploring the way people with disabilities are treated by society. Before Julia, nobody with an intellectual disability had ever won this prize. She was also nominated for a Bessie Award when the show came to New York in 2014.





# How did Switzerland become so culturally diverse?

## How did Switzerland become so culturally diverse?

### Cultural harmony

Switzerland is a mosaic of cultures, with many different races, nationalities, religions, ethnicities, and philosophies living together in one small alpine country.



The five neighboring nations have a significant influence on Swiss culture © PRS

Swiss life and culture is strongly influenced by its neighbors, Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Lichtenstein. And Switzerland's four regions, German, French, Italian and Romansh, have strong ties to the country they border and have consequently developed very different languages and customs.

### What is multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism is when diverse religious, ethnic or cultural groups coexist within a society. By fostering cultural diversity and ensuring all groups are given equal importance, nations can help promote peace and make their countries more interesting places to live.

Immigration has also expanded Switzerland's cultural diversity. While many migrants come from neighboring countries, more recently there has been an increase in settlers from Portugal, Kosovo and Spain. In fact, the Swiss



population now boasts more than 190 nationalities altogether.

Remarkably, these diverse groups of people live in relative harmony. But the Swiss didn't always get along so well.

### Religious tensions

Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Reformation swept across Europe. It split Switzerland along religious lines, with Protestantism taking hold in some regions and Catholicism in others. These tensions dragged on for many years and eventually culminated in a civil war in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when seven Catholic cantons formed their own separate alliance, known as the Sonderbund.

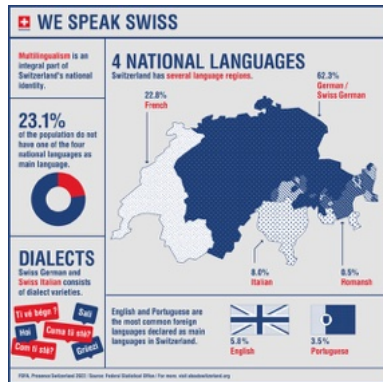


The Reformation Wall in Geneva depicts the leading figures of the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Switzerland © Roland Zumbühl, picswiss

Yet, conflicts that may have destroyed Swiss relations eventually brought people closer together and built firm foundations for multicultural Switzerland today. The Reformation turned out to be a significant turning point for religious diversity and broke the mold of one dominant religion. While the civil war resulted in Switzerland's transformation from a union of states to a federal state, putting an end to cantonal rivalries and enabling economic development.

### Diversity in unity

With federalism in place and a thriving



We speak Swiss © PRS

considering it their first language, the Swiss constitution ensures all national languages are promoted and protected. Even Romansh, which is only spoken by 0.5% of the population, receives significant federal and cantonal support to keep the language alive.

Most cantons only have one official language, but in some cantons both French and German are spoken, including Berne, Fribourg and Valais. And in the canton of Graubünden, there are even three official languages, German, Italian and Romansh. At school, all children must learn at least one other national language.

Foreigners also contribute to Switzerland's linguistic diversity. English and Portuguese are the most commonly spoken non-national languages. While Spanish, Serbian, Croatian and Albanian are also widely used. In total, 25% of the population do not consider one of the Swiss languages to be their main language.

#### • Music, art and literature

Switzerland has not one, but four literary traditions as authors are writing in German, French, Italian and Romansh. Some big names in Swiss literature include the novelist

Max Frisch, the dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the children's author Johanna Spyri – the latter introduced Switzerland and the world to one of the most popular German-language characters of all time, Heidi.

As with literature, Swiss music also features lyrics sung in all four national languages, as well as English and Swiss dialects. Traditional folk music, including yodeling and alphorn playing, remains popular in the more rural regions. While contemporary Swiss pop, rock and rap are popular across the country, with many big open air events taking place during the summer, including Paléo Festival, Openair Frauenfeld and Montreux Jazz Festival.

When it comes to art, there is no typical Swiss art. Although it tends to be modest in style and centering on the alps, Switzerland's art scene is very diverse. Among the best known Swiss artists are the painters Ferdinand Hodler and Paul Klee and the sculptors Alberto Giacometti and Jean Tinguely. Swiss artists have shaped various international movements, and Dadaism was even founded in Zurich during the First World War. As well as making art, Switzerland is also the place to admire it – no other country has as many museums and galleries per head of the population.

#### • Traditions and celebrations

Celebrations in Switzerland often depend on the season and the region. Carnivals, for example, take place in spring and have their roots in Christianity. The biggest is Basel's 'Fasnacht', a 72-hour celebration with drummers, flautists, brass bands, floats and carriages parading through the city center. While in Zurich, the 'Sechseläuten' also features a parade, but the real highlight is the burning of the giant artificial



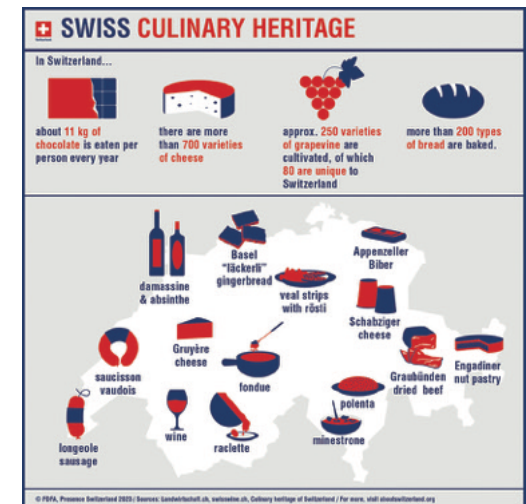
Swiss wrestling or 'Schwingen' is now a national sport in Switzerland © Pixabay

snowman. Made of fabric, wood shavings and firecrackers, the snowman sits on a bonfire and the sooner it explodes, the greater chance there will be a warm summer.

Many celebrations also stem from local farming and alpine life, including yodeling and Swiss wrestling. Traditionally yodeling was used by Swiss mountain herders to call their livestock or communicate between villages. Today, it is a popular form of folk music with many yodeling competitions and festivals during the summer. Swiss wrestling or 'Schwingen' also takes place in summer with the biggest competition held every three years in different locations across Switzerland. In



Paléo in the French-speaking town of Nyon is the biggest open air music festival in Switzerland, attracting 250,000 spectators every year © Paléo / Timon Bachmann



Swiss cuisine comes from a blend of German, French and northern Italian cuisine. Each region has its own specialties, some of which have become national dishes © PRS

recent years, Swiss wrestling has become so popular that it can be likened to Japan's national sport of sumo wrestling.

#### • Food and drink

Despite its small size, Switzerland has a big culinary heritage, including an impressive 700 types of cheese, 250 varieties of grapevine, 350 types of sausage and 200 types of bread. Each region has its own specialties, with many dishes influenced by German, French and northern Italian cuisine. From Basel Lächerli and Zürcher Geschnetzelte in the German-speaking region, to Saucisson Vaudois and absinthe in the French-speaking region, to polenta and merlot wine in the Italian-speaking region.

Many Swiss dishes which started out as regional specialties are now enjoyed all over the country and even internationally, such as rösti, raclette, fondue and muesli. And not forgetting Switzerland's most famous edible creation, chocolate. The Swiss chocolate-making tradition started back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and today the country produces 200,000 tons every year of which three quarters is sold internationally.

#### Multiculturalism & Me



**Albert Einstein**

Discovering the theory of relativity

Albert Einstein is a Nobel Prize winner and one of the most famous scientists in the world. But did you know he was also Swiss?

Einstein was born in Germany and grew up in the southern city of Munich before moving to Switzerland in 1895. He studied at what is now ETH in Zurich and graduated as a teacher in physics and

mathematics in 1901 – the same year he became a Swiss citizen.

Einstein then moved to Berne and began working at the Swiss patent office. It was during this time that he published many ground-breaking papers, including his special theory of relativity. In 1914, Einstein left Switzerland for a professorship at the University of Berlin, and later Princeton University in the USA. Although he never returned to Switzerland, he held on to his Swiss passport for the rest of his life.



**Martina Hingis**

Breaking Grand Slam tennis records

Before Roger Federer, the Swiss were represented by another tennis superstar – and she became the youngest player to win a Grand Slam tennis tournament.

Martina Hingis was born in Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia) in 1980. Both her parents played tennis professionally, so it was no surprise that she took to the sport from a very young age. In 1987, Hingis and her mother defected to Switzerland and eventually became Swiss citizens.

Hingis continued to play tennis and won numerous junior titles. At the age of 14 she began to play professionally and in 1996 she became the youngest Grand Slam champion of all time when she won the Wimbledon women's doubles title age 15. A year later, Hingis was ranked World Number 1 and she broke yet another record by becoming the youngest Grand Slam singles champion, this time winning the Australian Open at just 16. After 25 Grand Slam titles, Hingis ended her successful career in 2017 and now lives with her daughter in Switzerland.



**Nicolas G. Hayek**

Changing the face of the Swiss watch industry

Swatch is one of the most recognizable brands in the world. But who is the man behind it and how did he help save the Swiss watchmaking industry?

Born in Beirut in 1928, Nicolas Hayek moved to Switzerland in the early 1950s. His father-in-law owned an engineering firm in the canton of Berne and when he suffered a stroke, Hayek temporarily took charge of the factory. Taking care of the family business gave him valuable insight into the challenges of industrial manufacturing. So a few years later Hayek founded his own management consulting firm and built up a good reputation among his industry peers.

Meanwhile, watchmaking firms were in trouble. Exports were falling and firms were going out of business as they struggled to keep up with competition from abroad and the trend toward digital watches. Hayek was brought in by a group of Swiss banks to come up with a strategy to save two of Switzerland's largest watchmaking groups. He recommended a merger and went on to found what is today the Swatch Group, renowned for creating the colorful, lightweight and inexpensive quartz watch, Swatch.







# How does the Swiss direct democracy work?

## How does the Swiss direct democracy work?

Swiss democracy is perhaps the closest the world has to direct democracy.

Few other countries offer their citizens as many opportunities to vote on political issues as Switzerland does. In fact, more than one third of all global referendums ever held at a national level have taken place in Switzerland.



No other country votes as much as Switzerland. Up to four times a year, Swiss people can participate in approximately 15 different national votes © PRS

Why so much voting? A special feature of the Swiss political system is direct democracy. It allows citizens to express their opinion on decisions taken by the Swiss parliament and to propose amendments to the constitution – and they do this through regular voting. Up to four times a year, Swiss people can participate in approximately 15 different national votes.

### What is direct democracy?

In a democracy, citizens vote at elections – presidential, parliamentary or local – and the representatives they choose take political decisions on their behalf. While in a direct democracy, citizens vote directly on laws and policies themselves.

Referendums and initiatives are two forms of direct democracy. They give citizens the opportunity to challenge

decisions made by parliament and to change the constitution.

Direct democracy dates back to the origins of Switzerland as a federal state in 1848. Unifying the cantons (or states) was difficult because of their different languages and religions, so referendums were offered as a concession to get all sides to accept a modern central government.

Although direct democracy is not unique to Switzerland – Germany, Italy, Mexico, Uruguay and the USA also have it – the Swiss system is one of the oldest and most developed. It operates at all political levels – municipal, cantonal (provincial) and federal (national) – and covers a huge array of issues.

So, how does direct democracy work in Switzerland?

### Initiatives and referendums

Swiss people have the opportunity to voice their opinions through initiatives and referendums. Citizens can propose changes to the constitution (initiative), or ask for a vote to be held on any law proposed by the federal government or any other legislative body (referendum).

#### • The optional referendum

The laws made and passed by Switzerland's parliament can be put to a nationwide vote, provided 50,000 valid signatures (1% of eligible voters) are col-



Voting yes © PRS



lected no more than 100 days after the new legislation is published.

This was the case in 2021 when a new law was introduced on tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. The public voted not once, not twice, but three times on this issue – always voting in favor of the government.

In fact, voting multiple times on the same issue is not unheard of in Switzerland. The introduction of a national health insurance scheme has been voted on four times already in 1994, 2003, 2007 and 2014 – and each time has been rejected. Similarly, a proposal to scrap the military service has been voted on and rejected three times in 1989, 2001 and 2012 despite Switzerland being a neutral country and not having fought in a war for 200 years!

#### • The mandatory referendum

All constitutional amendments approved by the Swiss parliament must be put to a nationwide popular vote. Citizens are also required to approve Swiss membership of specific international organizations.

One of the most significant referendums was held in 1992 when the public had to decide whether to join the European Economic Area (EEA) or not. The 'no' side narrowly won with 50.3% of the vote, but Swiss people were not



Swiss citizens can propose an amendment or addition to the Swiss constitution by collecting 100,000 valid signatures in support of the initiative © Keystone

completely against joining international bodies. In 2002, they accepted United Nations membership and then in 2005 they agreed for Switzerland to become part of the Schengen Area, allowing free movement of people between participating European countries.

#### • The popular initiative

Citizens can propose an amendment or addition to the Swiss constitution, so long as 100,000 valid signatures (2% of eligible voters) are collected in support of the proposal within 18 months. The government sometimes responds to these initiatives with counter-proposals in the hope that the majority of people and cantons will support their view instead.

In 2012, Swiss people demonstrated their impressive work ethic by overwhelmingly voting against two additional weeks of paid vacation. Two thirds of voters chose to forgo six weeks off work in favor of protecting the country's economy. This result followed in the footsteps of another vote for austerity ten years earlier when citizens rejected shortening the Swiss work week from 42 to 36 hours.

As well as dismissing longer vacations and shorter working hours, Swiss voters also rejected plans for a nationwide minimum wage in 2014. At 22 Swiss francs (180 CNY) per hour, the limit would have



The role of president rotates annually among the seven members of the Federal Council © Swiss Government, 2023

been the highest in the world. Then in 2016, Switzerland became the first country in the world to hold a nationwide vote on introducing an unconditional basic income. Can you guess the result? Again, the Swiss voters chose to put their economy first with a clear 77% majority rejecting the proposal.

#### Electing parliament

Alongside regular initiatives and referendums, every four years Swiss citizens vote for their members of parliament. Switzerland has a bicameral or 'two house' parliament known as the Federal Assembly. It comprises the National Council (lower chamber or house of representatives) with 200 elected members and the Council of States (upper chamber or senate) with 46 elected members.

Eleven parties are represented in the Federal Assembly and those parties with the largest share of the popular vote are represented on the Federal Council. This is Switzerland's government, and its seven members reflect the country's different regions and languages – including three female councilors.

The fact that the Swiss government doesn't have a head of state distinguishes it from most other countries. The role of the president is regarded as 'Primus inter pares' or first among equals and rotates

annually among the seven federal councilors. Most of the time, members of the Federal Council move around without police protection or bodyguards – it's not uncommon to spot one of them at a local cafe in Berne or even taking local public transport – showing the high level of trust Swiss citizens have in their government.

#### Voter participation

Some 5.5 million citizens above the age of 18, roughly 63% of the total population, are eligible to vote at a national level. Swiss citizens living abroad also have the right to vote.

Because Swiss people are voting so often, it can lead to fatigue and therefore lower turnout compared to other countries where voting is seen as a privilege rather



At the Federal Palace in Berne, the federal councilors meet once a week and parliament holds sessions four times a year © Gettyimages



In the two Swiss cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus, many votes and elections are held by a show of hands on a square in the cantonal capital © PRS

than a norm. Turnout varies depending on the issue, but it averages around 40%. For example, the last federal election in October 2023 had a 45% turnout, while votes on the Covid-19 law in June and November 2021 attracted more than 60%.

For the majority who participate, they usually do so pragmatically rather than emotionally – as the results against extra vacation time and shorter working hours demonstrated. The Swiss system is very inclusive, with opportunities for citizens to have their say on practically every kind of issue at every political level, so they are less likely to want to 'rock the boat'. Furthermore, Swiss people are very politically aware, following the media analysis, listening to what political parties and campaigners are saying, and reading the vast amounts of information sent out by the government before voting day.

Today, most people cast their votes by post or electronically via the internet. The few remaining polling stations can therefore look quite empty on polling day. However, in the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus a more communal voting method is preferred. Cantonal votes and elections are held by a show of hands on a square in the cantonal capital. This form of democratic participation is known as the

Landsgemeinde or People's Assembly and harks back to the original form of direct democracy developed in Ancient Athens.

#### Cost of democracy

Switzerland has gone further than any other country in its development of direct democracy, but such an extensive political process comes at a price.

It is estimated that voting costs the Swiss government more than 230 million CHF a year, not to mention the resource needed to ensure citizens have all the information they need to make the best decision.

Yet, for Swiss people it is time and money well spent. Direct democracy gives them a voice and offers a platform to discuss issues that might otherwise be ignored. It also ensures the government is held to account because if citizens are not happy with any decision, they have the right to act on it.

#### Democracy + Me

Direct democracy gives any individual or group the possibility to bring an issue to vote – and even change the law.

Since the popular initiative was introduced in 1891, only 25 (or 7%) have actually been accepted by voters. But the opportunity alone for citizens to launch their own initiative helps to raise awareness of the issue and can attract national and even international attention.



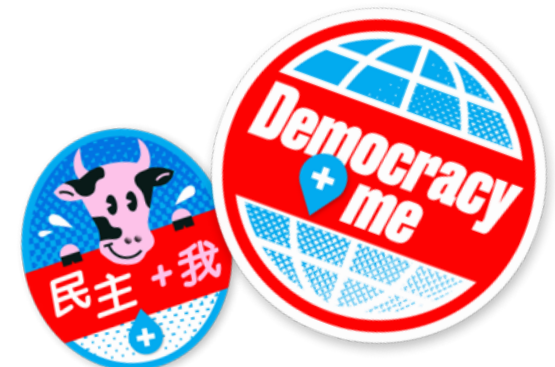
**Armin Capaul, farmer**  
Protecting animals and their horns

In 2016, the Swiss mountain farmer Armin Capaul asserted his democratic right and initiated a national vote on cow horns. He wanted farmers who allow their cattle to grow horns to get a financial bonus, arguing that removing animals' horns is painful and can also affect milk quality, body temperature regulation and communication within a herd. With support from animal rights groups, the farmer collected an impressive 120,000 signatures – 20,000 more than the minimum required – to bring the issue to a national vote. In the end, 55% of voters rejected the initiative. Nonetheless, Capaul still achieved one million 'yes' votes and created a lively national debate about dehorning animals.



**Franz Weber, activist**  
Defending the alpine landscape

The Swiss activist Franz Weber was responsible for more than 150 campaigns in his lifetime and was one of the first environmentalists to use direct democracy for his causes. He initiated several cantonal votes in the 1970s and early 2000s to protect the Lavaux winegrowing terraces in Vaud. And in 2008, he launched a popular initiative to stop Swiss Air Force training flights over tourist areas – which is virtually the entire country! But the campaign Weber is most remembered for is his 2012 popular initiative on limiting the number of second homes. He believed that the construction of unnecessary buildings was spoiling the landscape, especially in alpine areas. Despite fierce opposition from the construction industry, 50.6% of Swiss voters agreed that in every community where at least 20% of homes are second homes, no more may be built.





# How is Switzerland taking care of its aging population?

## How is Switzerland taking care of its aging population?

Worldwide, the proportion of people aged 60 and over is growing faster than any other age group.

Much of this growth has been triggered by the baby boomers, the generation which emerged after World War II when

subsequently delaying when they have children. Couples are also deliberately choosing to have fewer children, or no children at all. And more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has created a sense of financial insecurity, making people think twice about starting a family.

Meanwhile the average life expectancy in Switzerland is now one of the highest in the world at 82 for men and 86 for women. Why do Swiss people live so long? An excellent healthcare system is the main contributor, alongside healthy lifestyles, high levels of education, and easy access to nature and clean air.



Switzerland's average life expectancy is one of the highest in the world at 82 for men and 86 for women. And the number of centenarians is also increasing at a rate of 100 per year, of which more than 80% are women © Keystone

But over the coming decades, Switzerland like most countries will face greater economic and social problems because of their aging population. While migration is helping to alleviate the issue to some extent, as many arrivals into Switzerland are of working age (20-64 years old), it is not a

lasting solution. Rather a focus on active aging is needed, improving the quality of life for senior citizens and encouraging them to participate in all areas of society. So, how does Switzerland promote active aging?

birth rates across the world spiked thanks to strong post-war economies. Today, most boomers are at or near retirement age, prompting concern from many countries about how to cope with this huge demographic shift.

And Switzerland is no exception. The country's population structure has changed considerably over the past few decades, with the proportion of children and young people decreasing and the proportion of older people increasing. This aging Swiss population is a mainly a result of low birth rates and increasing life expectancy.

The fertility rate in Switzerland is 1.5 children per woman compared to 3.7 children at the start of the 20th century. This falls far short of the fertility replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. One reason for this decline is that people are postponing family formation and

### What is active aging?

According to the World Health Organization, active aging is when people are given the opportunity to maintain their health as they age, to participate in life in their social environment, to ensure their personal security, and to thus improve their quality of life.

### Systems that work

According to Natixis's 2023 Global Retirement Index (GRI), Switzerland ranks



In 1996, Switzerland guaranteed comprehensive medical treatment for all its residents with the Federal Health Insurance Act. It is now one of the best healthcare systems in the world, offering a lot of choice alongside short waiting times © PRS

as the second-best country in the world to retire in, just behind Norway. Opportunities for maintaining good health and financial security are essential for active aging and Switzerland scores very high in these areas in the GRI.

Switzerland has an extensive – and expensive – social security network to protect its citizens from falling into poverty. The Swiss spend more on social welfare than most other economically prosperous countries in Europe, including Austria, Denmark and Germany. In 2022, 208 million Swiss francs was paid out, of which the majority was spent in the areas of old age (87 million) and health (69 million).

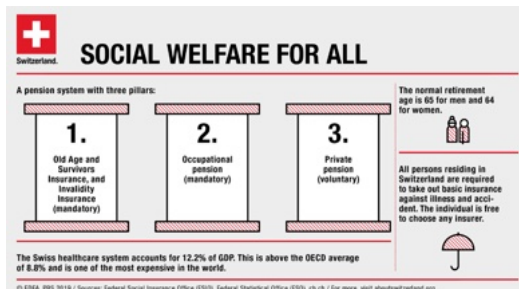
Old age expenditure generally covers pensions. The Swiss pension system consists of three pillars: state, occupational and private. The state pension or first pillar is mandatory and designed to cover a person's basic needs in retirement – if it does not cover essential living expenses, pensioners are entitled to apply for supplementary benefits from the government. The occupational pension or second pillar is also mandatory and allows people to accumulate enough

savings so they can maintain the same standard of living they had while working. Finally, the private pension or third pillar is optional for those that can afford to put extra money aside and is encouraged through tax exemptions on contributions.

Swiss people can claim their pensions from the age of 64 for women and 65 for men, which is around the OECD average. This retirement age is also when people begin to rely more on the healthcare system.

Switzerland's healthcare system is one of the best in the world. It offers a lot of choice as well as direct access to all levels of care with virtually no waiting times – not to mention the highest density of nurses than any other country in the world.

Since 1996, Switzerland has guaranteed comprehensive medical treatment for all its 8.8 million residents thanks to the Federal Health Insurance Act. All residents are obliged to take out basic health insurance, but the government will subsidize those with lower incomes. Swiss private insurers are required to offer basic coverage to everyone, regardless of age or medical history, and anyone



Spending on social welfare in Switzerland is higher than most other economically prosperous countries in Europe. In 2022, the country spent 208 million Swiss francs, of which the majority was spent in the areas of old age and health © PRS

who applies to join must be accepted. While the level of premium can vary hugely between insurers, rates must be identical within each company for all people insured within the same age category and region.

### Communal living

As well as maintaining good health and finances, opportunities to socialize and become part of a community are also vital for active aging.

During retirement, many pensioners prefer to stay living in their own homes for as long as possible. Between the years 2000 and 2019, the proportion of 80-year-olds and above living in retirement homes fell from 21% to 15%, an indication that Swiss people are not just living longer but living healthier. However, staying at home can be isolating, especially for those who live alone with no family close by to visit. So how can people grow old without becoming lonely?



In the canton of Neuchâtel, four Swiss pensioners are proving house shares can work for older people as well as young students © Guillaume Rey, RTS

Communal living offers a good solution. Although house shares are often associated with students, in the canton of Neuchâtel, four Swiss pensioners are proving they can also work for older people. The housemates, all in their seventies, have been living together for 20 years and each play a role in running the household. As well as the financial benefits of sharing food and energy costs, this living arrangement also provides a sense of security and companionship. So, if someone is feeling in a low mood, there are three other people to cheer them up.



In 2019, the city of Zurich brought the young and old together, with an initiative offering students the chance to live in a retirement home in return for paying less rent © ZVG Stadt Zurich

While senior house shares are still quite rare in Switzerland, intergenerational living has become a growing trend. This can be several generations living under the same roof or a housing cooperative where young families and pensioners live in the same apartment complex. Cooperatives can be good choice for pensioners because they offer communal living while still having the privacy of one's own home. Sharing

and participation are part of the design and residents have access to common areas and group activities – and some even offer complementary health and social care.

For senior citizens living in a Swiss retirement or nursing home, finding opportunities to interact with younger people can be more difficult. In 2019, the city of Zurich launched an innovative project to bring the old and young together. Students studying in the city were offered the chance to live in a retirement home in return for paying less rent. They were employed on a 10% basis to support the elderly residents, including organizing social events and supporting them with technology. The project helped to foster better understanding between generations and gave the older residents greater confidence and self-esteem.



In the city of Basel, pensioners had the chance to experience the Metaverse in a course arranged by the leading organization for senior citizens in Switzerland, Pro Senectute © Stefan Bohrer, Blick

### Getting involved

When people enter retirement, they can lose access to the mental and social stimulation that employment provides. Therefore, finding opportunities to stay active and learn new skills is important for active aging.

Pro Senectute is the largest specialist organization supporting senior citizens in Switzerland. As well as help at home and financial advice, they also run many online and in-person courses to keep both the body and mind active. Courses range from yoga to cooking to foreign languages, and there are also classes to help older people become more confident with using the latest technology. In fact, there is even a course in the city of Basel that gives senior citizens the chance to experience the Metaverse.

An end to employment can also mean older people struggle to find a sense of purpose in their life. Volunteering can therefore be a good way to help them feel valued after retirement.

In the city of St. Gallen, younger pensioners are investing time to help those more senior than themselves. The scheme is unique because it works on a 'time bank' model. For every hour the volunteers work, that amount is recorded as a deposit on a special personal account, which can be used to pay for their own care provision later in life. Ultimately it can help reduce healthcare costs as support from volunteers delays the need for elderly people to move into a retirement home.

### The solution, not the problem

In 1900, just under 6% of the Swiss population was aged 65 or over. Today it is 20%, or 1.7 million people.

The demographic aging of Switzerland's population is already having an impact on many areas of life. Year on year, Swiss citizens are expected to pay more for their health insurance premiums to support the rising cost of healthcare. And in 2022, voters reluctantly accepted a rise in the retirement age for women to help prop up the second pillar of Switzerland's pension scheme – and more pension reforms are anticipated in the coming years to make sure the books stay balanced.

Respect for one's elders is not as deeply rooted in European culture as it is in China. So, this negative impact can make older people feel like a burden in society. Yet, as Switzerland is beginning to show, pensioners can still play an important role in turning the tide on demographic aging. They just need to be given the opportunities to do so.

### Age + Me



**Marlies Näf-Hofmann**  
The oldest politician in the Swiss parliament

Marlies Näf-Hofmann was 90 years old when she took political office (again). She was a member of the Swiss People's Party for almost 50 years and in 1992 was elected to the Grand Council for the canton of Thurgau where she sat for 20 years. Her political agenda included issues such as accessibility in public transport and day centers for dementia patients. And in 2008, she initiated a successful palliative care initiative in her canton to enshrine the care of seriously

ill patients in law. Näf-Hofmann remained active in Swiss politics until she died in 2018 at the age of 91.

Swiss politics is now seeing a wave of younger politicians. Andri Silberschmidt from the Free Democratic Party was 25 years old when he was elected as a member of parliament in 2019. And more recently, Katja Riem from the Swiss People's Party was 26 when she was elected in October 2023.



**Roger Federer**  
The oldest tennis player to be ranked World No.1

Roger Federer is hardly an old man, but toward the end of his professional tennis career, he was competing against players half his age. Yet, despite his advanced years, Federer made sporting history in 2018 when he became the oldest player to claim the World No.1 ranking at 36 years old – the previous record was held by the American player Andre Agassi, who reached the summit aged 33. That same year, Federer also won the Australian Open, making him the second-oldest player ever to win a Grand Slam competition.

And what about the youngest World No.1? Switzerland also holds that record. In 1997, Martina Hingis became the youngest tennis player to be ranked World No.1 at 16 years old. Hingis also won the Australian Open that year, making her the youngest Grand Slam winner.



**Ulrich Inderbinen**  
The oldest mountaineer to climb the Matterhorn

Ulrich Inderbinen was a Swiss mountain guide who climbed to the top of the Matterhorn more than 370 times. Born in Zermatt in 1900, Inderbinen first climbed the mountain when he was just 21 years old with his younger sister. After passing his mountain guide exam at the age of 25, he accompanied guests up the Zermatt mountains for many years, both before and after the Second World War. In 1990, to mark the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first ascent of the Matterhorn, Inderbinen stood on top of the mountain for the last time. He continued his work as a mountain guide until an injury finally forced him into retirement at the age of 96.

At the other end of the age scale, Evelyn Binsack became the youngest alpinist – and one of the first women in the world – to receive a Swiss federal diploma as a mountain guide at the age of 24. Binsack was also the first Swiss woman to climb Mount Everest and is the only person to have reached the highest, southernmost and northernmost points of the world by muscle power alone.





# How are women in Switzerland making their voices heard?

## How are women in Switzerland making their voices heard?

On a summer's day in 1991, hundreds of thousands of women from across Switzerland took to the streets. They were demonstrating for gender equality and top of their list of demands was equal pay for work of equal value.

A vote in 1981 had secured the principle of equality in the Swiss constitution. But ten years on, the pay gap between men and women was still glaring. So a small group of female watchmakers from the French-speaking region initiated a women's strike. As well as equal pay, the organizers wanted the same education opportunities and social security entitlement, fair sharing of domestic labour, and an end to sexual and domestic violence.

- In 1996, Switzerland introduced the Gender Equality Act, prohibiting discrimination in the workplace on the grounds of gender.

- In 2002, more than 72% of voters approved a proposal to decriminalize abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

- In 2004, maternity leave was finally put into law, guaranteeing 80% of the mother's last income for 14 weeks.

- In 2018, an amendment to the Gender Equality Act was made requiring companies with more than 100 employees to carry out regular gender pay gap reporting.



Hundreds of thousands of women from across Switzerland took part in the 1st women's strike on June 14, 1991 © Keystone

The women's strike became one of the biggest political demonstrations in Swiss history. Although it wasn't the first time women had stood up for their rights – back in 1941 female workers at a yarn manufacturer outside Basel went on strike for a month – it was the certainly the most impactful. The 1991 strike drew national and even international attention and helped to bring about a series of political interventions:

### Women's right to vote

In Switzerland, men had the right to vote from 1848, but women had to wait a further 123 years for the same privilege. The first vote on women's suffrage took place in 1959, but it was rejected by 67% of voters, all men. Some cantons did allow women to vote on local issues, such as Vaud and Neuchâtel, but it wasn't until 1971 that suffrage was finally granted

at a national level – more than 25 years after neighboring France and Italy, and 50 years after Germany and Austria.

Today, women in Switzerland have the right to vote and be elected to parliament at all political levels. Although it did take one canton considerably longer than the rest. Women in Appenzell Inner Rhodes had to wait until 1990 and a ruling by the Swiss Federal Court to finally be allowed to vote at the cantonal level.

### Why did women have to wait so long?

The biggest issue was that Switzerland's system of direct democracy did not support women at the time. All voters were men and many of them did not want to extend their political privilege to women for fear they would neglect their domestic roles.



A propaganda poster from 1946 showing a contaminated pacifier was part of the campaign against women's suffrage.

### Women in parliament

Perhaps the most significant shift to occur since the strike has been the political representation of women. When women were finally granted the vote in 1971, they also had the opportunity to be elected. At the start of the winter session that year, the first female members of parliament took their seats. Eleven women made it into the House of Representatives, representing just 5.5%, and one woman made it into the 42-seat Senate.

Fast-forward 50 years and the picture looks very different. In 2019, amid the #MeToo movement and another large-scale women's strike in Switzerland, more women than ever before were elected to parliament. They made up 42% of the House of Representatives and 26% of the Senate. And in some



For the first time, between 2010 and 2012, there were more women than men on Switzerland's Federal Council © Swiss Government

local governments women even dominated. For example, Berne's city council had twice as many women as men following elections in 2020.

In the highest ranks of political life, women are also well represented. It took 13 years before the first woman was elected to the Federal Council in 1984, but in the last 20 years a further nine women have been elected. In 2010, there were actually more women in the Federal Council than men – an historic moment considering women only had the right to be elected four decades earlier. Today, three out of the seven federal councilors are women and the current president, Viola Amherd, is the now sixth woman to take that role.

### Women in business

As well as leading the country, more women in Switzerland are becoming leaders in business too. According to the 2023 Schilling Report, which surveys the largest employers in Switzerland, more women are in management and on the board of directors than ever before. 25% of the newly appointed executive board members are women and 20% of the companies surveyed have at least three women on the executive team.

This increase in female leadership is encouraged by gender quotas set by the government. In 2020, Swiss parliament agreed that companies with more than 250 employees should have a 20% share of women on management boards and 30% on executive boards.

Yet, women are still a rare sight in the CEO suite. Of the 100 largest Swiss companies, only ten are led by women. The most prominent is Magdalena Martullo-Blocher, CEO of the chemical manufacturer Ems-Chemie. She is currently the only female leader of a listed Swiss company.

The public sector, on the other hand, is progressing more quickly with 33% of new executive positions filled by women. In 2022, Mirjana Spoljaric Egger became the first woman to head the Swiss-run International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). And all five secretaries of state – the most prestigious job titles in the federal public service – are currently women.

It's not just the multinational companies that need to increase female leadership, but smaller businesses and startups too. Although Switzerland is one of the most innovative countries in the world, it is difficult for women to access the country's entrepreneurship ecosystem. Currently, only around 20% of startups are founded by women and the number is even smaller in the fields of science and technology at 10%.



Magdalena Martullo-Blocher is CEO of the chemical manufacturer Ems-Chemie and the only female leader of a listed Swiss company © Keystone / Walter Bieri

The community is taking notice, and there have been some great initiatives in recent years to increase the number of female entrepreneurs in Switzerland. FEMtrepreneurs was launched in 2019 by the University of Basel and offers events, mentoring and sponsorship to help women start or grow their own businesses in Switzerland. While the Female Founders initiative by Impact Hub Zurich was formed in 2016 and includes an interactive map featuring 230 female entrepreneurs to inspire the next generation.



More women graduate from Swiss institutions than men, but the pressures of family life mean fewer remain in academia © Keystone / Gaetan Bally

### Women in academia

Now more than ever, women in Switzerland are in a strong position to take on leadership roles because they are as well educated as men. In 2000, 17% of women between the age of 25 and 34 completed higher vocational training or higher education. This figure rose to 54% in 2018. Comparatively, the proportion of young men who completed higher education increased less sharply, from 34% to 49%.

There are also more women than men studying at university. In the 2021-22 academic year, women accounted for almost 52% of students at Swiss institutions. But despite more women graduating from university, fewer remain in academia. It is what's known globally as the "leaky pipeline" and is a consequence of the pressures women face juggling family and academic life.

In Switzerland progress is being made. To help keep women in academia, research institutions and foundations have introduced special measures, such as grants, mentoring schemes and childcare support. For example, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) offers financial aid to promising female researchers at all stages of their career. This ranges from supporting gender-specific research questions and projects led by women scientists to assisting doctoral students and post-doctorates with children to cover their childcare costs.

But funding alone is not enough to turn the tide for women in academia, particularly in STEM subjects where the proportion of female researchers is even lower. That's why Ursula Keller, the first female





Since the first women's strike in 1991, women across Switzerland have taken to the streets twice more in 2019 and 2023 demanding equal rights © Keystone SDA

professor of physics at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ), established the Women Professor Forum in 2012. The goal of the forum is to create a community and improve the visibility of women scientists. More than 75% of female professors at ETHZ and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) are now members, and many of their students have gone on to pursue successful careers in the industry.

Despite being a little slow out of the starting blocks when it comes to gender equality, Switzerland is quickly making up lost ground, fueled by strong political representation and a powerful women's movement.

The Federal Office for Gender Equality spent 7.4 million francs in 2022 on projects to promote equality in the workplace and to combat violence against women and domestic violence. The office has also been tasked with implementing the first national-level strategy for gender equality in all areas of life. The aim is to achieve true equality by 2030.

Until that day comes, women in Switzerland will continue to make their voices heard. Just last year, 30 years after the first women's strike, hundreds of thousands of women took to the street once again to fight for their right to equality.

#### Gender + Me



**Tilo Frey**  
Politician

Tilo was born in Cameroon to a Swiss father and a Cameroonian mother. When she was five, she moved with her father to the Swiss city of Neuchâtel. Tilo was different to most other kids growing up in Switzerland during the 1930s, but upon the advice of her father she tried to fit in as best as she could. After her studies she went on to teach business classes for many years and during this time she developed an interest in politics. In 1969, Tilo became the first woman of color to be elected to the Neuchâtel Grand Council. Two years later, she decided to run for a seat in the National Council, one of the highest offices in the country. If elected, she would push for women's rights in Switzerland as well as stronger collaboration with developing countries. Despite much criticism of Tilo and her political agenda, she won the election and was among the first group of women to be elected to the Swiss parliament in 1971.



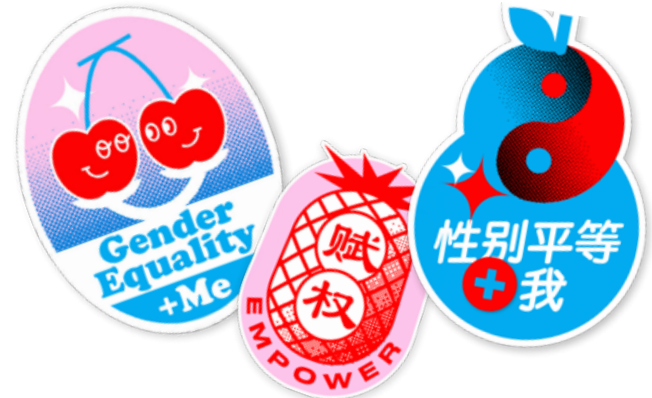
**Lea von Bidder**  
Entrepreneur

Lea founded her first startup, a chocolate company in India, at the age of just 22. Then two years later, together with three young entrepreneurs, she founded her second startup, Ava. Lea helped raise more than 12 million US dollars to develop Ava's first fertility monitoring bracelet, which has helped thousands of women become pregnant. In 2016, Lea moved to the company's San Francisco office and was shortly after included on the 2018 list of '30 most important young entrepreneurs under 30' by Forbes magazine. She became the CEO in 2019 and headed the company until it was eventually sold in 2022. But Lea didn't wait around long and that same year she founded her third startup, Expeerly, a Zurich-based marketing company specializing in user generated video content.



**Marie-Claire Graf**  
Activist

Marie-Claire was aware of the climate crisis in Switzerland from an early age. When she was a child, she would often go with her parents to the Morteratsch Glacier and each time she visited, she noticed the signs indicating the edge of the glacier moving further back. Some years later, she found her opportunity to do something about it. She and a group of other students in Zurich organized the first Sustainability Week in 2013, which has since grown to include 14 Swiss cities. Marie-Claire also started attending international climate conferences and met with the climate activist Greta Thunberg. Marie-Claire was inspired by the school strike Greta started in her home country of Sweden and in January 2019 she brought together hundreds of young people for the first school strike against the climate crisis in Switzerland.

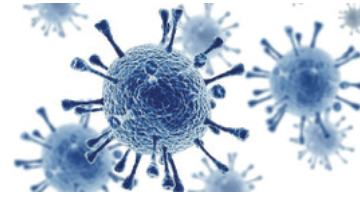




# How did Switzerland turn the tide on HIV?

## How did Switzerland turn the tide on HIV?

In the 1980s, Switzerland was an epicenter of HIV. The small alpine nation had the highest prevalence of the virus in Europe, largely due to drug injecting, which had become rife in urban areas.



HIV © National Foundation for infectious diseases

HIV cases peaked at 1,300 a year in the early 1990s – that's around five out of every 100,000 residents – before finally declining. But the following decade, cases rose again. And in 2001, Switzerland had one of the highest HIV infection rates among countries in western Europe. This time, most new cases were attributed to the heterosexual population who health experts feared were becoming complacent about the risks of catching the virus.

Since then, new infections have been on the decline, and last year only 261 HIV cases were reported.

### What is HIV and Aids?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. If left untreated, HIV can develop into Aids (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), a life-threatening disease. HIV can be transmitted through body fluids, usually during unprotected sex. Drug users who share needles or syringes can also become infected. Additionally, HIV can be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding.

Approximately 37 million people globally are living with HIV. Although there is no cure for it, there are effective treatments.

### Pioneering strategies

Access to testing and pre-exposure medication, as well as earlier treatment, has certainly helped to curb the spread of HIV in Switzerland. Yet it is also Swiss pragmatism, and the government's willingness to take bold decisions at the right time, that has really made an impact – and established Switzerland as a model for other countries battling with Aids.

#### • Needle exchange program

Platzspitz Park is a beautiful green space between the Sihl and Limmat rivers in Zurich. But just 30 years ago, it was the home for heroin addicts in the city. Back then it was known as 'Needle Park' and attracted drug users from all over Europe who openly bought and injected illegal substances.



The Platzspitz Park 30 years ago when many people gathered there to openly inject drugs © Keystone and Zurich Tourism

Drug injection was not just a problem in Zurich, but in many cities across Switzerland. The police tried to stamp it out, even closing down Platzspitz Park permanently, but without any health or social support to turn to, addicts and dealers had no choice other than finding an alternative location nearby.

Then the HIV virus arrived in Europe and Switzerland found itself at the center of a fast-growing epidemic. And it soon became obvious that needle sharing by drug users was the likely origin of so many infections. Switzerland was now in a crisis and urgently needed a new

approach to drugs that focused less on criminal justice and more on public health.

So, the Swiss health authorities introduced some radical new proposals to prevent needle sharing, including needle exchanges, safe injecting rooms and vending machines dispensing needles and syringes. These services were highly controversial at the time, but Swiss attitudes quickly changed as the program proved to be successful. Today, almost every large town and city has facilities for supervised drug use, and as a result the rates of HIV among drug users has decreased.



Today's Platzspitz Park © Zurich Tourism

#### • 'Stop AIDS' campaign

In 1987, a series of posters were published across Switzerland featuring overt sexual references and images of condoms. The posters were commissioned by the Swiss government as part of their nationwide Aids prevention campaign.

Using highly suggestive slogans and imagery, the 'Stop AIDS' campaign was a real departure from the usual government communications. But with HIV cases on the rise in Switzerland, the government needed to make sure its citizens would take notice.



The first 'Stop AIDS' campaign posters in 1987 shocked the Swiss population © FOPH

The campaign, which openly talked about sex and changing partners, made waves both in Switzerland and abroad. While some were against it – namely the more conservative groups who believed marital fidelity was the only effective protection against HIV infection – many admired the Swiss government for being so courageous.

Although cases of HIV began to fall in the mid 1990s, they rose again in the early 2000s prompting the government to re-think its strategy. Health officials believed many people, esp. the younger generation, were becoming complacent about Aids and no longer saw it as a real threat.

So, in 2005, 'Stop AIDS' changed to 'Love life, stop AIDS'. The provocative posters and messages about safe sex



The government's Aids prevention campaign has evolved over time, but the provocative posters and messaging about safer sex have remained © FOPH



The NAPS program provides more testing opportunities for high-risk groups, including HIV self-tests that give an accurate result in just 30 minutes © Keystone

remained, but there was now a more positive focus on sexuality and enjoying life. Then in 2014, the slogan evolved further to 'Love Live – regret nothing', now encompassing other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), some of which were on the rise in Switzerland.

Four decades on since the first 'Stop AIDS' posters sent shockwaves through the Swiss population, the government continues to roll out its campaign each year, finding bold new ways to prevent the spread of HIV and other STIs.

#### • 'Swiss Statement' on HIV

In 2008, some senior HIV doctors in Switzerland published a statement on HIV transmission. It stated that people who have been properly taking HIV treatment for at least six months, and who don't have any sexually transmitted infections, could have sex without a condom. The statement was only published in German and French, and only intended to be read by doctors in Switzerland, but it soon attracted attention from the international media, as the suggestion condoms were no longer necessary to protect against HIV infection was extremely divisive. Up until this point, people with HIV in Switzerland were criminalised if they had sex without using a condom. Some of these convictions took place even when the defendant was on antiretrovirals and their HIV-negative partner was aware of their condition and consented to not using a condom.

But this all changed following the publication of what later became known as

the 'Swiss Statement'. People with HIV and their partners finally had the same rights as all other couples. And for heterosexual couples, where one had the virus and the other didn't, it meant they could finally choose to have children naturally without facing legal charges.

Although the 'Swiss Statement' was controversial when it was first published, the gamble paid off, and further research has proven that if someone has an undetectable viral load, they cannot sexually transmit HIV to others.

#### Eliminating HIV by 2030

According to recent estimates around 17,300 people, or 0.2% of the population, are now living with HIV in Switzerland. While the number of new infections (less than 300 per year) is significantly lower than the 1990s peak, the country's fight against Aids is not over yet.

The government has now introduced a new national program, known as NAPS, targeting people who are at increased risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. The program provides simple and low-threshold testing opportunities, including HIV self-tests that can accurately detect an infection in less than thirty minutes. Swiss health insurance companies will also begin covering the costs of HIV pre-exposure treatment for people at increased risk of infection. The ambitious aim is to eliminate the transmission of HIV in Switzerland by 2030.





**Ruedi Lüthy**  
Swiss doctor and Aids expert

When HIV came to Switzerland in the early 1980s, Ruedi Lüthy became one of the first Swiss experts on the virus. Although no treatments were available at that time, he still wanted to help his patients. So in 1992 he founded the Zurich Lighthouse, a hospice providing terminal life care for HIV and Aids patients.

When effective drugs were finally developed in the mid-1990s, Lüthy went on to treat hundreds of patients in his role as Head of the Department for Infectious Diseases at the University Hospital Zurich.

After 20 years combating HIV in Switzerland, Lüthy then turned his attention to Zimbabwe. In 2004, he opened an outpatient clinic for patients who were too poor to afford healthcare. Today, the Newlands Clinic in the Zimbabwean capital of Harare provides care for 8,000 people, supported by the Ruedi Lüthy foundation.

For more than four decades, Ruedi Lüthy has been committed to fighting Aids in Switzerland and southern Africa and was voted 'European of the Year' by Reader's Digest magazine in 2007.



**André Ratti**  
Swiss television presenter and journalist

On July 2, 1985, the first public case of Aids in Switzerland was announced. The person behind it was André Ratti, a well-known Swiss television presenter and journalist.

Following his Aids diagnosis, Ratti was elected president of the Swiss Aids Association and during the organization's first press conference, he bravely declared: 'My name is André Ratti. I am 50, homosexual, and I have Aids.'

In his role as president, Ratti stood up for those affected by HIV and Aids, while fighting against his own rapidly progressing illness. He survived two bouts of pneumonia but was eventually admitted to hospital in June 1986 and died the following October aged 51.

André Ratti will be remembered as a courageous figure who gave a face to Aids and helped the Swiss public take notice of the disease for the first time.





# How is the Swiss queer community achieving equality?

## How is the Swiss queer community achieving equality?

In 1942, Switzerland became one of the first European countries to end laws prohibiting sexual activity between adults of the same sex.

The cantons of Geneva, Ticino, Vaud and Valais already legalized homosexuality back in 1798 by adopting the Napoleonic Code – a set of laws ensuring equality for men – but it was more than 140 years later when same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized at a national level.

Although it was no longer a crime to be gay in Switzerland after 1942, it still wasn't accepted. Homosexuality was unfairly linked with criminality and the police often carried out raids at meeting places and even retained an official 'gay register'.

The gay scene was forced underground, but it somehow found a way to flourish. In Zurich, a society for gay men known as Der Kreis (The Circle) organized regular meetings and events. Der Kreis also published a groundbreaking magazine of the same name, one of the few queer periodicals circulating in Europe at that time.

### What is LGBTQIA+?

LGBTQIA+ is an acronym of the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or other. The abbreviation exists in several variants and acts as an umbrella term for all marginalized sexualities and gender identities.



The police raid of a New York bar in June 1969 sparked many gay rights demonstrations in America and across the world © Leonard Fink, theygaycenter.org

Then in June 1969, the police raid of a New York bar triggered a public rebellion. Queer people took to the streets to fight for their rights. The global LGBTQIA+ movement began.

### The Swiss gay rights movement



The Swiss gay magazine *Der Kreis* was one of the most significant publications for the queer movement in Europe.

In 1970, the Swiss Organization of Homophiles (SOH) was founded. While there had been unofficial queer rights groups in Switzerland long before this, SOH was the first to go public. In the years that followed, more and more public advocacy groups formed, and the social climate changed noticeably in favor of queer people.

But equality was still far out of reach. So, in 1975, the first public demonstration took place in the city of Basel. And three years later, the first St Christopher's Day rally commemorating the New York riots (later known as Pride) was held in Zurich. During the rally, more than five thousand signatures were collected calling for the total abolition of the police's homosexual register. The Swiss media also got on board and eventually helped to force the destruction of the files and end the decades-long surveillance of queer people.

Then in 1985, Aids arrived in Switzerland leading to many deaths, particularly among gay men. Now gay rights organizations had to shift their commitment to fighting the epidemic rather than fighting

- 1942, same-sex sexual activity decriminalised nationwide.
- 1992, age of consent for same-sex sexual activity lowered from 20 to 16 years old.
- 2007, registered partnerships introduced for same-sex couples.
- 2020, discrimination based on sexual orientation made illegal.
- 2022, same-sex couples allowed to marry.



At the time of the 'Marriage for all' vote, Switzerland was one of the last countries in Western Europe yet to allow same-sex couples the right to marry © Fabrice Coffrini, AFP

for equality. But despite this difficult period, two new national organizations emerged – the Lesbian Organization Switzerland (LOS) and the organization for gay and bisexual men, Pink Cross – as well as one of the biggest political victories for the LGBTQIA+ movement in 50 years.

In 1992, an overwhelming 73% of Swiss voters accepted new legislation on sexual offences. As part of the reform, the age of consent was lowered from 20 to 16,

in line with the age of consent that was already in place for heterosexual people.

#### Ending public homophobia

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seemed that the LGBTQIA+ community in Switzerland was not just accepted but celebrated. Pride festivals regularly took place in Zurich, welcoming thousands of queer and heterosexual partygoers from across the country.



In 2020, 63% of voters were in favor of extending Switzerland's anti-discrimination law to include sexual orientation © Keystone

But acceptance did not extend to every part of society and homophobic attitudes were still widespread in Switzerland. For instance, in 2017, a gay reporter posted a video on social media of him being verbally attacked on a tram in Geneva. And, in 2019, several news sites reported that two 3-year-old boys were rejected by a day care center in Central Switzerland because their parents were gay.

Something needed to be done. So, in 2018, parliament agreed to extend Switzerland's discrimination law – which at that time only included race, religion, and ethnicity – to sexual orientation. But some conservative groups opposed the change, arguing the new law would undermine their right to free speech.

The matter was forced to a vote in which 63% opted in favor of the government and protecting the LGBTQIA+ community against discrimination. Now public homophobia, including comments made on television or messages posted on social media, is a punishable offence with up to three years in prison.

#### Marriage for all

Following the anti-discrimination vote, queer people had more legal protection than ever before. However, Switzerland was one of the few countries in Western Europe yet to grant gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. While civil partnerships had been legal since 2007, church groups and conservative political parties opposed the idea of marriage, saying it would undermine the traditional family.



Thousands of people from across Switzerland attend the annual Zurich Pride, the largest festival celebrating the LGBTQIA+ community in Switzerland © Urs Jaudas

Nonetheless, the Swiss government eventually pushed through new legislation allowing same-sex marriage in 2020. The amendment was called 'marriage for all'. But the law was challenged by some political parties and forced to a public vote the following year. In the end, more than 64% of voters and every canton supported the amendment, which then became law in July 2022.

In the first six months that same-sex marriage was legal, hundreds of couples tied the knot and thousands more changed their civil partnerships to marriages. But "marriage for all" was more than a vote on matrimonial equality. Same-sex couples could now adopt children, and lesbian couples could access IVF treatment, including sperm donation. Furthermore, same-sex foreign spouses could apply for fast-track citizenship, a much quicker and cheaper process than previously.

The vote on marriage also had a significant impact on transgender rights. Transgender and intersex people could now change their first name and gender in the civil registry without going to court.



Queer Officers Switzerland was founded in 2005 and supports LGBTQIA+ members of the armed forces © a-marga, Flickr

Just over 80 years ago, being gay was a crime in Switzerland. The nation has come a long way since then, liberalizing its position on LGBTQIA+ rights at an increasing pace. In the past five years alone, anti-discrimination laws have been extended to sexual orientation, it has become easier to legally register a different gender, and same-sex couples are able to marry.

But the country's rapid progress goes further than only legal rights. Today, Switzerland is host to numerous LGBTQIA+ events, including the queer film festivals Queersicht and Pink Apple. And Pride parades are still held throughout Switzerland, of which the largest and oldest, Zurich Pride, attracted 70,000 visitors last year.



The same-sex marriage law had a significant impact on transgender people in Switzerland, allowing them to change their official gender without going to court © Keystone, Peter Schneider

There are now more advocacy groups supporting a broader spectrum of the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically those in vulnerable situations. Queer Amnesty, for example, supports queer asylum seekers in Switzerland. While Queer Officers Switzerland, is a network for queer members of the armed forces.

Switzerland also has stronger political representation than ever before. Anna Rosenwasser and Tamara Fumicello are two prominent queer activists in parliament. While the mayor of Zurich, Corine Mauch, is the first woman and openly lesbian person to serve the city. And most recently, the Swiss government has announced that LGBTQIA+ issues will receive more resources and funding from 2024 onward, including the creation of a national action plan against hate crimes relating to sexual orientation.

## LGBTQIA+ + Me



**Kim de l'Horizon**  
Non-binary novelist

Kim de l'Horizon is a Swiss novelist and playwright who became the first non-binary person to win the German Book Prize in 2022.

Kim de l'Horizon grew up near Berne and then moved to Zurich to study German, film and theater. Kim is part of the editing team for the Swiss literary magazine *Delirium* and has also been resident playwright at the Bühnen Bern theater.

In 2022, Kim published their debut novel *Blutbuch* (Blood Book) which took 10 years to write. The novel is written from the perspective of a non-binary narrator who begins to open up about their gender identity when their grandmother falls ill with dementia.

*Blutbuch* was awarded the 2022 German Book Prize, as well as the Jürgen-Ponto Prize and the 2022 Swiss Book Prize. During the German Book Prize ceremony in Frankfurt, Kim shaved their hair as a sign of solidarity with the women protesting in Iran at that time.



**Christine Hug**  
Transgender military officer

Christine Hug was a Swiss military officer and became the first openly transgender officer in the Swiss Army in 2019.

Christine Hug joined the army at the age of 20 and studied military history.

She eventually rose to the rank of Lieutenant colonel and commanded a battalion including seventy tanks and 1,000 soldiers.

In 2019, Hug came out as transgender and became the first transgender officer in the Swiss Army. At the time Hug went public, the Swiss Army considered transgender people to be medically unfit and would not consider them for military recruits.

In 2023, Hug died in an accident while preparing for a vacation with her wife and daughter. After her death, the president of the Swiss Officers' Society released a statement calling Hug 'a role model for members of the armed forces who also struggle with different identities and sexual orientations.'



**Claude Janiak**  
Gay member of parliament

Claude Janiak is a Swiss politician who became the first openly homosexual president of the Swiss National Council.

He studied law in Basel before pursuing a political career. As a member of the Social Democratic Party, he was elected to the National Council for the canton of Basel-Land in 1999. Alongside his parliamentary duties, Janiak was also president of the Aids organization, Aids-Hilfe beider Basel, during a challenging period of the epidemic in the 1990s.

Between 2005 and 2006, Janiak became the first openly homosexual President of the Swiss National Council. He was then elected to the Swiss Council of States in 2007 where he remained until his retirement in 2019. Janiak currently lives in a registered partnership.



**Tamy Glauser**  
Non-binary fashion model

Tamy Glauser is a Swiss fashion model, writer and LGBTIQ rights activist. They have been a model since 2012, working for many famous fashion houses such as Vivienne Westwood, Louis Vuitton, and Jean Paul Gaultier. Tamy is known for their androgynous appearance and in 2021 they came out as non-binary.

Alongside their modeling career, Tamy is also politically active. They received a nomination from the Green Party to run for a seat in Switzerland's National Council in 2019 and they continue to campaign for LGBTQIA+ rights.



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