



# FOCUS



## REPRESENTING SWITZERLAND, A TRUSTFUL PARTNER

INTERVIEW WITH THE AMBASSADOR OF SWITZERLAND, **JEAN-FRANÇOIS PAROZ**

BY SÁNDOR LACZKÓ



After his first tenure between 2012 and 2016 as Swiss ambassador to Budapest, Jean-François Paroz returned for a second term to Hungary and presented his credentials here in December 2020. Now, at the end of this second term, he tells *Diplomacy&Trade* that he is satisfied with the fulfillment of his mission. “Swiss-Hungarian relations are influenced basically by three main elements. First, Switzerland and Hungary are two countries in the heart of Europe, and relations with the European Union are of utmost importance for both. It is very important to explain the Swiss relationship with the EU and to ensure that this policy is well understood in all the EU member states. So, it was clearly part of my mission here. Second, the economic relations are a pillar of the bilateral relations and therefore, ensuring that further Swiss investments and good framework conditions in Hungary continue and enable us to strengthen this strong economic pillar is a priority for the Swiss government, but I would

add that also for the Hungarian government as well as for my embassy. The Second Swiss Contribution for the reduction of social and economic disparity in Hungary is what I consider the third pillar of bilateral relations.”

He adds that a great part of his mission was showing that Switzerland is a trustful partner of the EU and Hungary and contributes to prosperity in Europe. “Thanks to specific initiatives like the project ‘Switzerland in your city’ that we organized in Debrecen, Veszprém, Pécs, Kecskemét and this year in Budapest, we have been, I think, quite successful. I must also mention that during the past almost five years here, we had several high-level visits also to explain this Swiss position towards the EU at the highest level. So, all in all, looking back at the initial expectations, I can say that we have managed to cope with the challenges, but there are always more left.”

### Coming for a second term

As to how much he was able to build on his experience from his first tenure here, Ambassador

Paroz notes that “interestingly, many would say an ambassador should not go for a second mission to the same country as one would start representing, in this case, Hungarian interests rather than Swiss ones. Of course, it does not happen but I was happy to have the opportunity of coming here for a second term as I arrived with the best possible preparation. I knew already most of the official partners – government officials, the management of the Swiss Chamber here, many of the CEOs of Swiss companies in Hungary and even NGO people. All in all, I had my network, I knew the people, including the team here at the Embassy. I had a relation of trust with most of these people, which was extremely helpful. As for Hungary, the country didn't change much between my two ambassadorial terms.”

However, he was determined not to make the same mission again, despite the fact that one cannot do everything differently. The challenges were partially also different. “There are things you cannot expect, for instance, the war in the Ukraine. For all ambassadors and other diplomats

in Hungary, it gave us new challenges to explain, to follow what was going on with refugees, which was totally different from the refugee crisis of 2015. Also, I arrived in the middle of the new coronavirus epidemic. I had this reputation that I was a friend in this country, that I respect the country, that I like it to be here. It also gave me sometimes more freedom to speak as a friend, which means you can really say what you like and also sometimes what you don't like. So, all in all, I think I was able to build on this previous experience. I really think it was a privilege to come back.”

### Successful business for Swiss firms

As far as bilateral economic relations are concerned, they are quite rich. Switzerland is a good partner for prosperity in Hungary as investments from Switzerland have continued to arrive to this country, based on the decision of Swiss private companies. As the Ambassador explains, they continue to come to Hungary because many of them receive good support from the government in subsidies. Many of them find good economic framework conditions

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and make successful business here. “We have recently had the opening of new factories or the enlargement of existing production plants. I can also mention the signing of a strategic partnership between the Hungarian government and the Swiss pharmaceutical firm Roche in 2022. We had the 30th anniversary of Ringier in 2023 and we had the announcement of the opening of a new production facility by Feintool in 2024, Stadler was celebrating 15 years of the Szolnok wagon box plant earlier this year and we had the inauguration of a SENSIRION production hall in Debrecen last April. I can also mention the importance of launching of new projects between Swiss pharmaceutical companies and Hungarian universities.” Swiss pharmaceutical firms and Swisscham Hungary, which celebrates 30 years anniversary this year, have taken the initiative of having Swiss-Hungarian healthcare forums. “Interestingly enough, it was on the occasion of the second Swiss-Hungarian healthcare forum in November 2022 that I signed, at a kind of official side event, the framework agreement on the Swiss-Hungarian Cooperation Program with Minister Tibor Navracsics,” he adds.

### The Second Swiss Contribution

Speaking of the Swiss contribution program and the framework agreement, Ambassador Paroz explains how the second phase is proceeding regarding its objectives of reducing social and economic disparities, supporting the general convergence efforts of underdeveloped areas, etc. “This was a significant part of my mission here. As you know, the memorandum of understanding between Switzerland and the European Union on the second contribution was signed in June 2022, followed by the signing, as I mentioned, in November that year, of a framework agreement between Switzerland and Hungary. Since then, we have launched several programs here. The winners of the ‘Geothermal energy sources for district and urban heating’ project were announced in November last year. The same month, we had the opening event of the vocational education and training program in Vác. The project of improving life-saving skills was launched in March 2025. In May, we saw here in Budapest the opening of the program for the



availability of digital spaces and improved digital competencies for disadvantaged groups. All this give the Swiss Embassy and the Swiss Ambassador the opportunity to meet with a much broader network of partners because these programs are in interesting sectors, which had been developed during more than two years of negotiation between Switzerland and Hungary before the start of my mission. It’s not for marketing because it was our Hungarian partners who indicated areas where our contribution program can really make a difference and help locals. Quite often, these projects benefit small settlements. There, I can not only meet those who were actually presenting the project, the program operators and those who won a call for project, but also the end beneficiaries. Therefore, it gives me a real occasion to see what we achieve on the ground.”

Some might question how come Switzerland and Hungary are going to be working together in the framework of this program whereas EU funds are not coming. According the Ambassador, “it is important to say that we have a project-based cooperation. It means that we do not send HUF billions to Hungary but we are working together on a daily basis: the Swiss Contribution Office in my embassy and the National Coordination Unit, that means the Ministry for Regional Development, discuss the development of the given project. The Hungarian government is paying for all the developments and then, when everything went smoothly, we reimburse 85% of the costs. So, we have a common realization of the projects where we are in touch with the beneficiaries. And for me, it makes a relationship very interesting because I meet people in the small settlements, discovering another reality not just the one in the capital.”

### The role of the civil society

Another important aspect of Swiss-Hungarian cooperation is the participation of civil society organisations. As to how much and in what areas they contribute to relations between the two countries, Ambassador Paroz points out that in order to have strong bilateral relations, you cannot just have relations on the government level, but you also need to have it in many other aspects.

	HUNGARY	SWITZERLAND
<b>AREA</b>	93,028 sq km	41,277 sq km
country comparison to the world	110	135
<b>POPULATION</b>	9,670,009 (2023 est.)	8,860,574 (2024 est.)
country comparison to the world	94	102
<b>POPULATION GROWTH RATE</b>	-0.31% (2023 est.)	0.75% (2024 est.)
country comparison to the world	216	117
<b>BIRTH RATE</b>	8.58 births/1,000 population (2023 est.)	10.1 births/1,000 population (2024 est.)
country comparison to the world	208	185
<b>LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH</b>	77.44 years	83.9 years (2024 est.)
country comparison to the world	92	9
<b>NET MIGRATION RATE</b>	1.21 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2023 est.)	5.9 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2024 est.)
country comparison to the world	60	14
<b>REAL GDP PER CAPITA</b>	USD 33,600 (2020 est.)	USD 82,600 (2023 est.)
country comparison to the world	63	10
<b>UNEMPLOYMENT RATE</b>	4.12% (2021 est.)	4.1% (2024 est.)
country comparison to the world	58	71
<b>TELEPHONES - MOBILE/CELLULAR</b>	10,248,653 (2021 est.)	10.9 million (2023 est.)
country comparison to the world	92	92
<b>AIRPORTS</b>	41 (2021)	66 (2025)
country comparison to the world	103	74

Source: World Factbook

“For instance, there is good cooperation in the research sector, which has the involvement of civil society actors, not just NGOs, they are also researchers, professors, universities. We also have a network of twinning programs with municipalities of both countries. I attended the 30-year anniversary of the partnership between Tápiógyörgye in Hungary and Wünnewil-Flamatt in Switzerland this spring. You cannot just build on the cooperation between two mayors, you have a society and association in each settlement to look at the concrete actions, for instance, sending children to each other: every year, Hungarian children will go to Switzerland or Swiss children will come to Hungary. In the Second Swiss Contribution program, we have introduced a provision that in most of the programs and projects, you must have a civil society organization involvement. When I visited the latest opening of one of the geothermal projects, I met a local NGO that had partnered with the municipality of the small settlement. Together, they are using this geothermal project to raise the awareness among the population and school children about the importance of using renewable energy to combat climate change and global warming.” As part of the vocational education and training program, the Ambassador visited some projects aimed at minorities, including the Roma, in which the local municipality, in collaboration with the local university and possibly a local NGO, will develop a project including elements related to automotive for local youth of Roma community and concrete support for their digital education. “We also have a small fund to help NGOs themselves, because we believe that they play a very important role. As part of my mission here, I’m also committed to being in contact with important NGOs: we are working with Amnesty International and with Transparency International. We organized also seminars or small round tables in the embassy with NGOs, which are active in several sectors, like violence against women, or caring for homeless people. So, it is part of the bilateral relations that we built on these people, the civic society actors.”

### Bidding farewell to Hungary

This summer, after now almost nine years of presence as Ambassador of Switzerland to Hungary, Jean-François Paroz leaves this country. “I’m retiring after 37 years of Swiss foreign diplomatic

service. I will go back to Switzerland where I will meet my daughters and granddaughters with my wife and my son. I have nice projects in mind, but, of course, leaving Hungary is something special too because after nine years, you know a country well, you manage to have a very important relationship with many partners,” he says, adding that the building that houses the embassy and the ambassadorial residence is very important for him for two reasons. “First, because I am researching about the international efforts to protect the Jews during World War II in Hungary. I published an article in the online review of the Hungarian Memorial Center about this chapter of international diplomacy and the role of Carl Lutz and other diplomats, together with Jewish organizations here. This embassy building is the only one we have had in Hungary since 1938. The residence I have been living for nine years of my life is actually the place on Earth where I spent the second most time after my family house in Switzerland where I was a child and a young man. This residence is also where I have spent most of my life with my wife and we had our common son born here in 2015 in Hungary. He also spent most of his time here. So, leaving this country for other projects and other opportunities is not something very easy in the context of this special relationship with Hungary,” he concludes. **DSF**

