

Russia today – Inside view of a Swiss

Switzerland is gambling away its good reputation and the goodwill of the Global South

Interview with Peter Hänseler, Moscow*



Peter Hänseler.
(Picture ma)

(CH-S/gk) Peter Hänseler is one of the few people who can draw direct comparisons between Switzerland, Germany and Russia based on his personal life experience. He worked in Russia for many years and now lives in Moscow, where he also works as a journalist. This makes his views on

various areas such as current politics, everyday life and the Russian perspective on Switzerland even more interesting. "Swiss Standpoint" had the opportunity to interview him in detail.

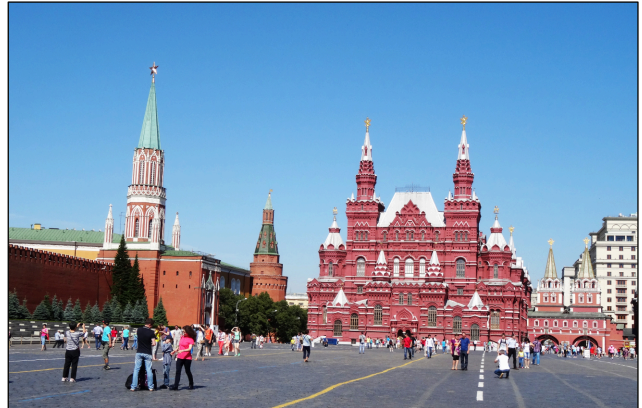
"Swiss Standpoint": In April, Vladimir Putin was re-elected President of Russia with a very high voter turnout and high approval ratings. The Western media claimed that it was not a real election. Is it true that voting is not compulsory in Russia? People could have stayed away from an election, couldn't they? And how do you assess the high level of support among Russian voters for Putin's re-election?

On the Russian presidential election

Peter Hänseler: In Russia there is a right to vote, not a duty to vote. Russian electoral law is crystal clear. Article 3, paragraph 3 of the election law reads as follows:

"The participation of a citizen of the Russian Federation in elections and referendums is free and voluntary. No one has the right to exert influence on a citizen of the Russian Federation to force him to participate or not to participate in elections and referendums or to prevent his free expression of will."

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The Historical Museum on Red Square. (All pictures sc)

Of course, the historically high voter turnout of 74% (after 67.5% in 2018) and the high election result of 87% (after 77.5% in 2018) were an expression of the people's great trust.

The reason for this is multi-layered. I have been following President Putin's election since 2000 and his approval ratings have always been around 80% – the reason for this is that the lives of Russians have continuously improved since his first election. Russia today can no longer be compared with Russia in 2000: It's like night and day.

The exceptionally good election result and the high voter turnout today are an expression of the fact that Russians have been very satisfied with President Putin's work since February 2022: It is thanks to him – and his excellent team – that Russia has weathered the storm of sanctions and the West's aggressive stance so well. The good military results on the front are another factor.

I keep saying that the Russians are sceptics and judge Putin by his results – and they are spot on.

In the meantime, Putin and the Duma have confirmed a large part of the previous government in office. However, there have also been personnel changes, most notably the appointment of a new defence minister. What was the official justification for this change and how is this change in personnel viewed by the Russian population and the military?

Presidential spokesman *Peskov* commented on *Belousov's* appointment to journalists as follows:

“On the battlefield today, the winner is the one who is more open to innovation, who is more open to the fastest implementation. For this reason, the President has decided to have the Ministry of Defence headed by a civilian.”

Approval of this change is particularly high among the fighting troops. *Belousov* is not a new figure but has been instrumental in the success of the Russian economy since 2000. He is regarded as extremely intelligent, loyal to Russia and uncorruptible. He has therefore earned the respect of the civilian population.

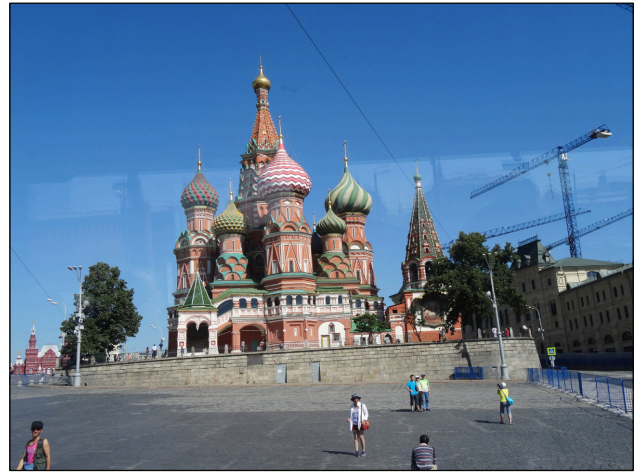
In the West, people always think that Vladimir Putin decides, controls and directs everything. That is complete nonsense. He sets the broad lines and gathers a team around him that outshines any government team in the West in terms of quality and efficiency. One of the reasons for this is the fact that Putin is an extremely intelligent quick thinker who has an incredible amount of detailed knowledge in many areas. He is therefore able to find good people because he can judge their abilities.

It seems that the switch in the government is not yet complete. A few weeks ago, one of *Shoigu's* deputies was arrested for corruption; this may have been one of the reasons for the new appointments in the Ministry of Defence. Corruption is not only an issue in Russia, but everywhere where people handle large sums of money. The great achievements that the Russian state has had to accomplish in the last two years also meant that huge sums of money were and had to be spent within a short space of time, which facilitated corruption. It seems that the time has now come to take a closer look. I would therefore not be surprised if more posts are filled and, if necessary, arrests and convictions are made. That is a good sign: The corruption problem is being tackled.

Significant developments in Russia

You have been living in Russia as a Swiss citizen for years now. What do you consider to be the most striking positive developments for the benefit of the Russian people that you have experienced and observed during this time?

My following statements relate to Moscow, as I live there. Moscow is a cosmos and always ahead of the rest of Russia. But that doesn't



St Basil's Cathedral on Red Square in Moscow.

mean that the regions aren't developing positively – it just takes time and Moscow is the trendsetter.

When I visited Russia for the first time in 1997, Russia was in a catastrophic state. Grey, dull and there was no middle class. There were a few rich people and many poor people.

The most striking development is the fact that a large and strong middle class has developed. If you want to work in Russia today and achieve something, you can. The situation is comparable to the situation in the West in the 1970s.

Another important point is that the administration has shed its Soviet gloom. In its dealings with citizens, the state is now a service provider. The efficiency that I experience as an ordinary citizen with the authorities in Moscow is on a par with Switzerland – hard to believe, but it is.

The poverty rate today is lower than in Germany. According to “Tagesschau”, it was 16.9 per cent in Germany in 2021. The figure for Russia in 2022 was 9.8%.

Such figures are always subject to dispute due to different life situations and calculation bases. But that is not the issue here. This is about the general development of the country. And the positive development is visible to everyone.

This is also reflected in the self-image and self-confidence of Russians, which today cannot be compared with 1997. The fact that I have decided to live here as a Swiss says a lot.

Before the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Moscow, a huge amount was invested in the infrastructure of the Russian capital. Moscow has become one of the most beautiful cities in Europe and the world. We have seen this for ourselves on previous trips and recall that US TV presenter Tucker Carlson was also impressed by it. There is no

longer any gloomy communist city flair to be found. At the time, the Russian government had announced that the infrastructure in other regions would gradually be improved and expanded. According to your observations, what is the situation today?

The infrastructure is being improved at a breathtaking pace and this was not just done as marketing for the FIFA World Cup to look good in front of the world. The Moscow metro is constantly being expanded and the motorways – including to the regions – are of a top standard, which is even more impressive as the distances are gigantic.

Previously, the outer motorway ring was the so-called MKAD with a length of 108 kilometres – today the next one is almost completed. The ZKAD circles Moscow over a length of 330 kilometres.

I would also like to point out that 5G has been in operation in Russia for over a year – in this respect the EU is a development area. Internet at home is also very good and cheap, both via mobile phone and landline. My 250 Mbit subscription costs me less than 10 euros a month.

Services in general, for example those of the banks, are at a level that takes your breath away. If you come to Moscow as a foreigner, i.e. as a tourist, and want to open an account, it's done within a few hours, no matter when you call the bank. You don't even have to leave your hotel – a bank employee will come to you, opens the account, immediately hands over your (Russian) credit card and sets up the bank app on your mobile phone.

Anyone who has experienced the Moscow taxi system and previously travelled by taxi in Germany, for example, is, to put it mildly, stunned by the conditions in "good old Germany".

The same system works in practically all major Russian cities, so all you need is an app. Taxis are a means of transport for everyone due to their low price. The order is placed by mobile phone, the customer can choose between different comfort levels and can see the price before ordering. During the ordering process, the customer is constantly informed about the location of the taxi ordered and can also cancel it if necessary. Payment is made to the driver by mobile phone during the journey.

Healthcare

What is the healthcare system like in Russia?

The healthcare system is free and works extremely well and efficiently. My 84-year-old father-in-law had very serious heart problems in recent months and received excellent care – free of charge.

Pensioners who move to Russia from abroad, for example, are also insured free of charge as soon as they have a residence permit.

The search for a specialist doctor is completely different from that in Germany, for example. Whereas in Germany it is now a huge problem to consult a specialist, in Moscow it is a matter of a few days at most.

I've had back and shoulder problems in the last few months and had to have x-rays and an MRI. Waiting time: 24 hours.

But here too, Russia is big, and Moscow is far from being everywhere. Nevertheless, Russia's development is also clearly noticeable in the regions. Cities such as Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan or Samara are evidence of this, and the list can be extended considerably.

It is not uncommon for even EU citizens to turn to doctors in Russia for treatment of certain ailments.

In his speeches Putin repeatedly emphasises that it is important to him to support families in Russia. What does this mean in concrete terms and how does this benefit families?

The structure of support services is different to that in Switzerland or Germany. This is not surprising, as the system is different.

Family support

All child allowances and other family benefits currently in force in the country can be divided into two large groups: Lump-sum benefits, which are paid once when the preconditions for their award are met, and monthly benefits, which are paid regularly over a longer period or until the preconditions for a particular support measure expire.

It is worth noting that these benefits are indexed, i.e. they are adjusted each year on 1 February in line with the inflation rate.

For example, parents receive a lump-sum allowance on the birth of a child, which currently amounts to over 24,000 roubles (CHF 240/USD 270) as well as a so-called earmarked maternity or family capital, which single parents or adoptive parents also receive. This amounts to over 630,000 roubles (CHF 6,300/USD 7,000) for

the first child and over 830,000 roubles (CHF 8,300/USD 9,200) for each additional child.

The law specifies several uses for this family capital: for example, it can be used to purchase or remodel a home or to pay off a mortgage. It can also be used for mothers' funded pensions or children's education. Socially disadvantaged families can receive monthly payments. It is up to the families to decide how they want to use this maternal or family capital – in full or in instalments.

I will send you a detailed list of family support programmes in Russia. (See attachment)

To understand the significance of these family policy measures, it is not necessarily helpful to look at these figures from a Swiss or German perspective. Let's take a real-life example:

A young woman in her early 20s got married in the south of Russia living in a city with over a million inhabitants (i.e. not in the Moscow cosmos). She had two children and worked the whole time. She earned well by Russian standards, around 100,000 roubles a month, but like her husband she had no significant savings.

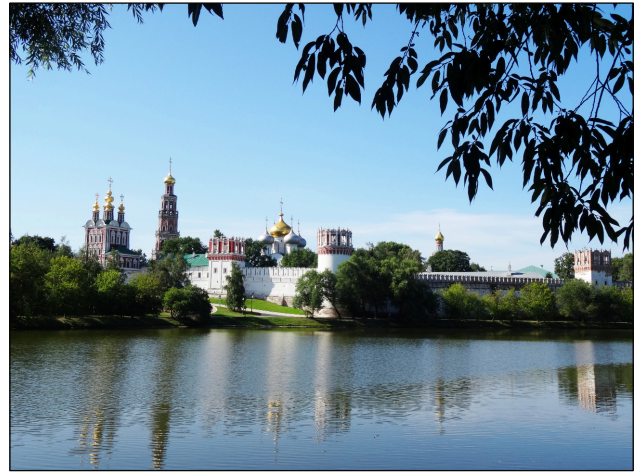
With her income and the income of her husband, who, as is often the case in Russia, earned less than the wife, and the financial family policy measures of the state, the family not only managed to pay off a new flat in full within 10 years. No, due to the addition to the family, the first flat became too small, so they needed a larger flat. They sold the first flat and bought a new, larger one. This has now also been paid off. In addition, both the husband and wife each have their own car. This example is no exception. Question for readers: Can you imagine such a story for an average family in Switzerland?

Pension reform

When we visited Russia four years ago, there was a debate about safeguarding pension provision. What is the pension system like in Russia?

The pension reform has now been decided. Under the new rules, the statutory retirement age in Russia is 65 for men and 60 for women. The current transition period for retirement in Russia ends in 2028, at which point men born in 1963 will retire at 65 and women born in 1968 at 60. The social pension is very low, it amounts to 7153 roubles.

However, there are support pensions due to special circumstances in the employment his-



The Novodevichy Monastery.

tory, for example for victims of Chernobyl amounting to 200 to 250% of the basic pension.

The average pension in Russia is now just over 18,000 roubles.

Coming from Germany, my wife and I have been living in Switzerland since 2000 and have been naturalised here. In the spirit of Egon Bahr and Willi Brandt, the so-called "change through rapprochement" was and is a matter close to our hearts. When we travelled to Russia, we were very touched by the fact that we were always met with open arms by all the Russians we got to know, despite the terrible deeds of our ancestors towards the Russian population. What do the Russians think today about the fact that the German government is once again supplying weapons against Russia and the Chancellor is being pressurised to supply long-range medium-range missiles with which, for example, the Crimean bridge is to be destroyed according to a plan?

I too was surprised back in 1997 at how friendly the Germans were treated in Russia. I met many Germans who lived and worked in Russia and who never heard a single stupid remark about the Second World War. This is due to one of the greatest qualities of the Russian people: they distinguish between the government and the people. Even today – now that aggression against Russia has reached an all-time high – Germans in Russia have nothing to worry about.

However, the Russians are dismayed by the statements and aggression coming from the German media and government and think – probably rightly – that Germany will never learn.

The will on the Russian side is clearly there to improve relations with Germany at all levels. But this also requires the will on the other side.

Swiss neutrality

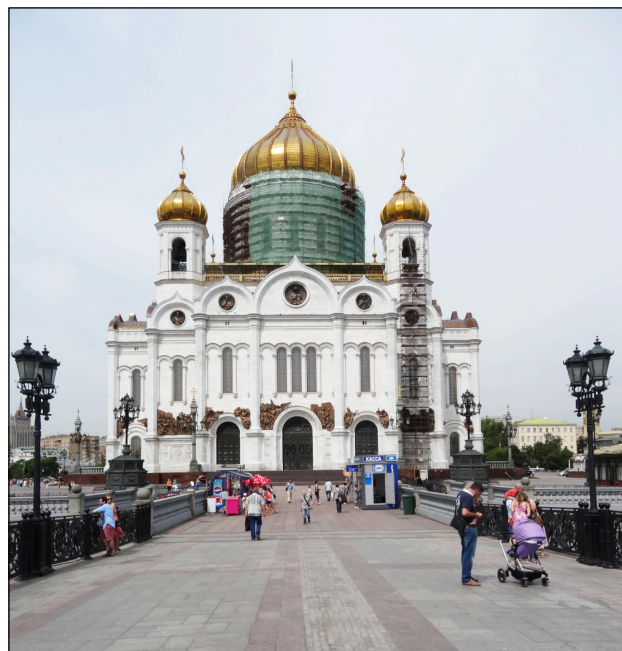
In Switzerland, the necessary number of signatures has been achieved for the neutrality initiative to be put to the vote. Against the voices of all major media houses and the Federal Council, it should be enshrined in our constitution that Switzerland – as the depositary state of the “International Red Cross” – not only does not supply weapons to parties in conflict, but also does not impose sanctions on parties in conflict. Instead, Switzerland should utilise every opportunity to engage diplomatically in conflict resolution.

For more than two years now, the opposite has been the case in Bern and in our media, which have clearly taken sides against Russia. The causes of the war in Ukraine have been ignored and the Minsk Agreements, the Istanbul Accords and the Helsinki Accords have been disregarded. The National Council and the Council of States have decided to instruct the Federal Council to develop an international legal mechanism that would allow the Russian central bank’s funds invested abroad to be confiscated and made available to Ukraine. What is the reaction to this plan by Switzerland in Russia and in other, non-Western orientated countries?

It is indeed the case that Switzerland is not only following the US policy but implementing it in full. The “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”, for example, the leading media outlet in Switzerland, is even more aggressive in its reporting – or rather propaganda – than the “New York Times”. It even goes so far as to completely ignore facts that do not fit its narrative. For example, the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” completely suppressed the “New York Times” report on the CIA bunkers in Ukraine.

However, as the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” continues to be highly regarded in the Swiss business and political communities and readers trust this medium, the business and political communities make their decisions based on this reporting. We already demonstrated in our blog* in December 2022 that the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” engages in the worst kind of propaganda.

The situation is fatal. The fact that Switzerland still describes itself as neutral is a joke – nothing more. However, official Switzerland has already received the backlash, it simply hasn’t realised it yet: the so-called peace conference at the Bürgenstock in June will be a fiasco. Not only are the Russians absent, but also most of the BRICS states, which the Federal Council de-



The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.

scribed as essential for the success of this conference.

At some point – possibly this summer – Switzerland will realise that it is Switzerland, not Russia, that has played itself into the diplomatic sidelines. The world has split into two blocs: The collective West (USA, EU, Japan, Australia and South Korea) is opposed to the rest of the world, which accounts for 90% of the world’s population and is called the Global South. Switzerland has not only lost the goodwill of Russia, but probably of the entire Global South.

Thank goodness that Switzerland, as a direct democracy, has the instruments of initiative and referendum at its disposal. The realisation of the neutrality initiative is a clear sign that a significant proportion of the population does not agree with the policy in Bern. It is impossible to say at this stage when the initiative will be put to the vote and whether it will be accepted. If this happens, we will have to walk to Canossa. But a lot can still happen before then.

Confiscation of Russian funds?

If Switzerland is persuaded to confiscate Russian assets or their interest income, this will have catastrophic consequences for Switzerland’s reputation and the financial sector. Switzerland lives largely from the aura of legal certainty. Every expert in international law who has so far commented on the seizure has labelled it illegal – that is a fact. Switzerland will therefore find it difficult to obtain foreign funds for its financial industry in the future.

The belief that only the Russians will drop out as customers is naive and stupid. We would qualify as a banana republic and as the lapdog of Brussels and Washington. In addition, Switzerland holds around 6 billion of Russia's central bank reserves, but Switzerland has invested over 26 billion in Russia. It remains to be seen how Russia will react to a confiscation, but this does not appear to be a good deal for Switzerland.

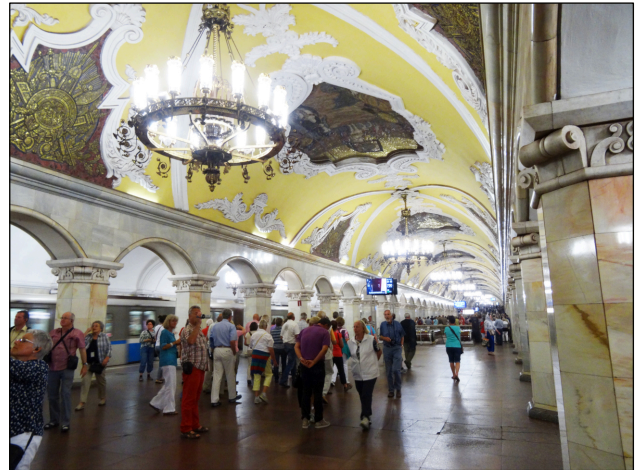
Russia is by no means willing to accept the theft of Russian property with impunity. There is now a great determination to exhaust all possibilities to defend its own interests, including so-called asymmetric ones.

Should the Western countries carry out confiscations, Russia will very probably take measures that correspond in value to the assets confiscated by whoever. It will probably not stop at the assets of companies and private individuals, as Western countries do not hold large assets in Russia.

Numerous private initiatives in the spirit of international friendship

During the hostile propaganda against Russia in Europe, numerous cultural and sporting events between the populations have been cancelled. Even the participation of disabled people from Russia in the Paralympics was banned. Town twinning programmes are no longer supported by the authorities. What opportunities do you see today to become active in the spirit of international friendship?

There are numerous private initiatives of various kinds. They all have one thing in common: they are massively obstructed by the official Western side; the initiators are sometimes put under massive pressure, or their accounts are blocked.



In a Moscow underground train.

One example is "Friedensbrücke – Kriegsofferhilfe e.V.", an association that has been providing material support to the victims of the Ukraine conflict in Lugansk and Donetsk in the Donbass since 2015. The organisation has since been stripped of its charitable status in Germany, but continues to operate, nonetheless. There have been repeated cancellations of accounts. The founder and chairwoman of the board, *Liane Kilinc*, now must live in Russia for security reasons. Incidentally, the journalist *Dagmar Henn*, who campaigned for the organisation, also sought and received political asylum in Russia.

Another initiative is "Druschba-Global – German-Russian Friendship and Peace Rides". This private association organises friendship trips to Russia every year. Swiss people also regularly take part. The participants then give talks about the trips.

Mr Hänseler, thank you very much for talking to us!

(Interview Georg Koch)

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

Attachment

Family allowances in Russia

Lump-sum allowance for the birth of a child

This type of allowance is available to all families living in the country, regardless of income and number of children.

Who can receive the lump-sum allowance?

Only one parent can receive the lump-sum allowance – either the parent who works or the parent who applies for it if both parents work.

If the parents are divorced, the parent with whom the child lives is entitled to the benefit.

All employed persons are entitled to the benefit – not only Russian citizens, but also foreign citizens and stateless persons with permanent or temporary residence in Russia, as well as citizens of the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union who live in Russia. Only Russians can claim the benefit if they are not in employment.

In the case of the birth of two or more children, it is paid for each child; in the case of the birth of a stillborn child, payment is cancelled.

Amount of the birth allowance

The basic amount of the lump-sum benefit for the birth of a child is 8,000 roubles but is indexed annually. Currently, the benefit is set at 24,604.30 roubles.

The amount of child benefit is determined based on the child's date of birth. It does not matter whether the parent works under an employment contract or as a freelancer, is self-employed or unemployed. The amount of the allowance is the same for all recipients, except for residents of districts and localities for which regional wage coefficients have been established; here the amount of the allowance is determined by applying these coefficients.

How do you receive the birth grant?

Working citizens receive the allowance proactively (without applying) based on information on the state registration of the birth of a child.

Maternity (family) capital

The maternity (family) capital has been an important support measure for families with children for many years. It was introduced in 2007 and has become an important part of the national "Demography" project. Originally, a maternity capital certificate could only be applied for on the birth of a second or subsequent child. The programme was later extended to the first child.

The maternity allowance can be claimed by:

- Women who have given birth (adopted) a second child from 1 January 2007;
- Women who have given birth (adopted) a third child or other children from 1 January 2007 if they did not previously receive maternity benefit;
- Men who are the sole adoptive parents of a second or third child or subsequent children and who were not previously entitled to additional state support measures if the court decision on the adoption came into force on 1 January 2007;
- Women who gave birth to (adopted) their first child on or after 1 January 2020

- men who are the sole adoptive parents of the first child and who have not yet exercised the right to the payment if the court decision on the adoption entered into force on or after 1 January 2020
- men who are raising a second or third child or subsequent children born after 1 January 2007 and are their fathers (adoptive parents) if the woman who was not a citizen of the Russian Federation and gave birth to the children in question is deceased or has been declared dead;
- men who raise the first child born after 1 January 2020 and are the fathers (adoptive parents) of this child, in the event of the death of the child's mother, who was not a citizen of the Russian Federation and who gave birth to these children, or if she is declared dead.

The most important condition is that the child must have Russian citizenship at birth and the mother must have Russian citizenship on the day of the child's birth. The place of residence of both does not matter.

It should also be remembered that the right to maternity benefits does not apply to children whose parents have been deprived of parental rights or whose adoption has been cancelled, to children who have been left in a maternity hospital or other medical institution, to children who have the mother's written consent to their adoption, to children who did not acquire Russian citizenship at birth, and to adopted children who were stepchildren or stepdaughters of these persons at the time of adoption.

In this case, the father (adoptive parent) of a child has the right to the capital, regardless of Russian citizenship or stateless status. However, only if the mother died, was declared dead, was deprived of parental rights or committed an intentional criminal offence against the child (children) that resulted in the deprivation or restriction of parental rights, left the child in a maternity hospital or other medical institution, as well as if the mother's written consent to the adoption of the child has been obtained or the adoption has been cancelled. Fathers who are stepfathers in relation to the previous child whose order of birth (adoption) was considered when the right to maternity benefit arose, as well as if the child is recognised

as left without parental care after the death of the mother (adopter), do not have the right to additional measures of state support.

If the father has also lost the right to maternity capital, it is transferred to a minor child or an adult who is studying full-time until the end of their studies (but no later than the age of 23).

Amount of the maternity capital

The amount of the maternity capital is adjusted each year in line with inflation, regardless of the date on which the certificate is issued. However, indexation does not take place at the beginning of the year, but from 1 February. The amount of maternity capital is currently as follows:

- for the first child – 630,380.78 roubles;
- for the second child and each subsequent child – 833,024.74 roubles;

It should be noted that in case of partial utilisation of the maternity benefit after indexation, only its balance increases. The previously spent amount does not change. For example, if there are 135,000 roubles left on the certificate, this amount will be indexed by 7.4%. If the parent capital has not been used up by 1 February, the entire amount will be increased.

The certificate does not need to be changed after indexation, as it only confirms the entitlement to the maternity capital. The actual

amount of maternity capital, including its balance, can be found in the list of balances on the State Services portal.

How to obtain maternity capital?

Currently, maternity capital is granted to families proactively – when registering the birth of a child. The certificate should be received automatically in the personal cabinet on the State Services portal within 5 working days of registering the birth of a child at the registry office.

What can the maternity capital be spent on?

The law provides for several uses of maternity capital funds:

- Improvement of housing conditions, i.e. purchase of housing, down payment on a mortgage, repayment of housing loans, construction or remodelling of housing;
- monthly payments for a child up to 3 years of age to low-income families;
- education of children;
- funded pension for mothers;
- Purchase of goods and payment for services for disabled children.

It is up to the recipient to decide how to spend the maternity capital – in full or in instalments. For example, it is possible to use part of the funds for a monthly payment and use the rest to pay off the mortgage.

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)