

Swiss real estate market

Buying property in Switzerland – a guide for foreigners

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Katharina Hofer, Economist, katharina.hofer@ubs.com; Matthias Holzhey, Economist, matthias.holzhey@ubs.com; Maciej Skoczek, CFA, CAIA, Economist, maciej.skoczek@ubs.com

- Legal provisions, financing regulations, and fees and taxes have to be considered when buying real estate in Switzerland.
- Home prices vary among municipalities depending on the distance to their centers and income taxes, among other factors.
- Buy-to-let investments are currently less attractive than in the past due to high vacancy rates and no expectations of rising prices.



Source: Anita Affentranger

Switzerland is viewed as one of the most desirable countries in the world to live in. Three Swiss cities rank in the Top 10 of the Mercer's Quality of Living Ranking this year. Solid legal and political institutions and stable economic conditions make the purchase of Swiss property attractive. This report addresses the most pressing questions of prospective real estate buyers.

Legal considerations

Right to buy property depends on the residence permit

Foreigners from EU and EFTA countries domiciled in the country have the same rights regarding property purchase as Swiss citizens. Also foreigners holding residence permit type C are allowed to obtain any type of property. Non-EU or non-EFTA citizens with residence permit type B are limited to purchases of their primary residence or a holiday home. Non-domiciled foreigners are restricted to purchases of second homes and holiday residences. While only domiciled EU or EFTA nationals and foreigners with a C permit can purchase multi-family homes, there are no restrictions on buying commercial space. Fig. 1 summarizes the legal framework dubbed "Lex Koller."

No need to sell when relocating

When moving within the country or leaving it permanently, owners are not required to sell their previous residence. They can use it as a secondary or holiday residence or rent it to third parties, even when purchasing another first home. But buyers who had no intention of living in their first home permanently violate the law, especially if they change domicile for the sole purpose of being able to purchase more dwellings. If the property was purchased legally and should the owner die, his or her heirs (in accordance with Swiss Federal Law) do not require any additional permit to own the home or land.

Fig. 1: Who can buy property in Switzerland?
Overview of the regulation ("Lex Koller")

Origin	Resid. permit	First home*	Second home**	Holiday home	Multi-family house	Commerc. spaces
Persons domiciled in Switzerland						
EU/EFTA	C B	allowed	allowed	allowed	allowed	allowed
Non-EU/EFTA	C	allowed	allowed	allowed	allowed	allowed
Non-EU/EFTA	B	(1)	not allowed	(2)	not allowed	allowed
Persons not domiciled in Switzerland						
EU/EFTA		not allowed	(3)	(2)	not allowed	allowed
Non-EU/EFTA		not allowed	(3)	(2)	not allowed	allowed

Source: UBS. * Incl. construction land, construction required to begin within a year; ** A dwelling which is not intended for permanent residence; (1) For owner-occupied home only; can be kept if domicile changes; (2) Quota of max. 1,500 in Switzerland; (3) Only if close connection exists, not to rent out; has to be sold within two years if not needed

Financing

Mortgage is limited to 80% of property value

A home purchase in Switzerland is typically financed by mortgage and equity. Banks offer mortgages in Swiss francs that cover up to 80% of the property value. The first mortgage, often accounting for two-thirds of the value, usually has an indefinite repayment period. The second mortgage accounts for the remaining sum and has to be repaid linearly over 15 years. The repayment time for buyers expected to retire within the next 15 years can be shorter.

Equity is required to make up at least 20% of the property's collateral value. Half of it (corresponding to 10% of collateral value) has to be put down in cash (from a savings account, private pension plans like the Third Pillar, gifts, inheritance). The remaining half of equity can be arranged by using pension funds from the Second Pillar. Again, if a buyer is expected to retire within 15 years of purchase, the required equity share can exceed 20% of property value (Fig. 2).

Gross income determines amount of mortgage loan

The lending volume is pegged to the borrower's gross income. The income of a partner can only be considered if both partners are jointly liable for the mortgage. As a rule of thumb, the total gross income should be at least three times the total annual imputed running costs of a property. The latter sum up to roughly 7% of collateral value and consists of: maintenance costs and amortization (about 1% of the collateral value respectively) and imputed interest rate payments (about 5% of the loan amount). This procedure ensures that debt does not exceed five to six times gross annual income. Exceptions are possible to a certain degree, depending on wealth and personal circumstances.

Short or long-term financing

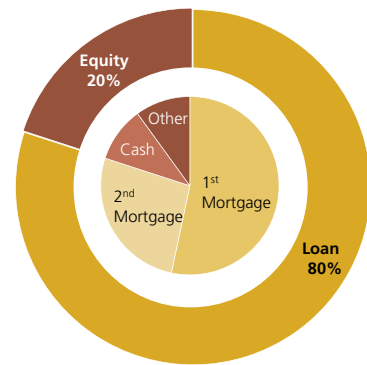
Over the last 20 years, borrowers in the money market were nearly always better off than long-term fixed financed ones. Today, too, money market mortgages are the cheapest financing method, according to market interest rate expectations. But the added costs of long-term fixed interest rates compared to money market financing remain low compared to the long-term average.

The choice of the mortgage scheme should not only be based on interest rate expectations, but also on the borrower's risk appetite. The following points should be considered:

- *Can I afford far higher interest rate payments (interest rate risk)?*
Despite the seemingly low probability of much higher interest rates (Fig. 3), even if they rise to 5%, housing costs should not exceed one-third of total gross income.
- *What are the costs if I need to terminate my mortgage agreement early (prepayment risk)?*
The early termination of a mortgage contract can be expensive. The prepayment penalty depends on the reinvestment opportunities at the moment of termination. The penalty increases in periods of falling interest rates but decreases when interest rates are rising (in which case a borrower can even be rewarded for early termination).

Fig. 2: At least 20% of house value has to be financed with equity

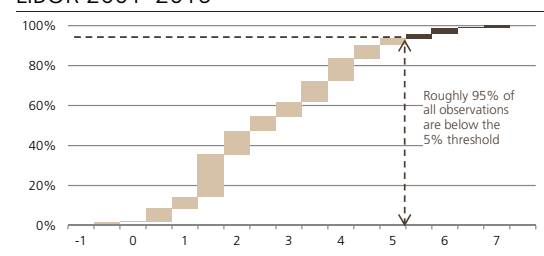
Sources of financing, assuming the maximum possible loan amount, in %



Source: UBS

Fig. 3: Rarely above 5%

Frequency distribution of bank rates 1907–2000 / LIBOR 2001–2016



Sources: SNB, UBS

- *What is the risk that I will have to renew the mortgage in a high interest rate period (refinancing risk)?*

Renewing a mortgage contract when interest rates are relatively high leads to higher new mortgage costs. To minimize the risk of renewing his long-term mortgage at an unfavorable moment, a safety-oriented borrower should diversify his mortgage portfolio at different time intervals. The refinancing risk is less relevant for cost-oriented borrowers with short-term mortgages.

Taxes and fees

Notary and deed registering fees and property transfer taxes should not be underestimated. Total costs depend on the canton where the property is purchased.

Imputed rent as taxable income

The imputed rent is subject to taxation as part of the homeowner's income (called "Eigenmietwert" or "valeur locative"). It is derived from the hypothetical rent that owners would receive if he were to rent out his property. Conversely, the owner can deduct the mortgage interest payments and maintenance costs from taxable income. In the current low interest rate environment, the imputed rent exceeds potential deductions. Discussion in the Swiss parliament about abandoning the taxation of imputed rents is ongoing, but no final decision has been reached. Moreover, owners of Swiss properties are obliged to pay annual property taxes (only in some cantons).

Once the property is sold, two types of taxes accrue. Property gains taxes can be considerable if the land value appreciates during the holding period. As this tax aims to cut housing market speculation, it is highest for short holding periods and decreases with longer ones. For example, in the canton of Zurich a capital gain of 100,000 Swiss francs generates a tax liability of roughly 44,000 francs given a holding period of less than a year. The amount drops to 28,000 francs if the property has been held for five years, and to 15,000 after 20 years. Moreover, the taxation will be suspended if the proceeds of the sale of the owner-occupied property are used to buy a substitute owner-occupied property. The property transfer tax can amount to up to 3% of the purchase price and is paid at the transaction time by either buyer, seller or both, depending on the canton.

Prices: Where to buy

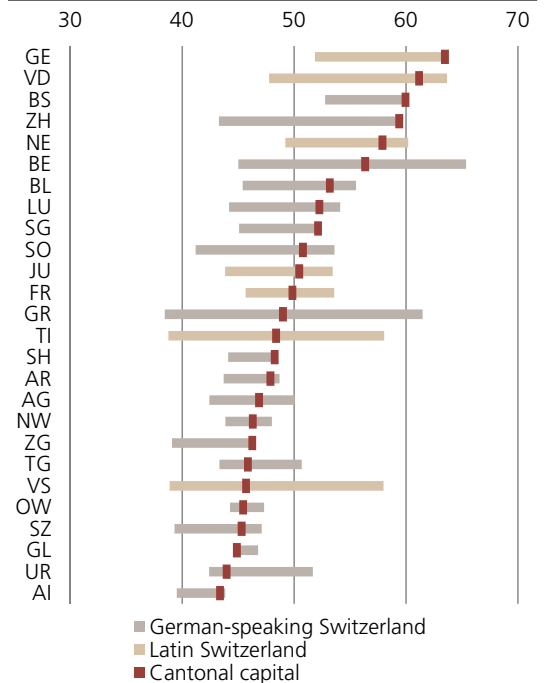
The highest prices for owner-occupied homes are paid in the Lake Zurich area, the Lake Geneva region and in the main tourist destinations in the Alps (Fig. 4). In those regions, prices of good-quality homes can easily reach 13,000 to 15,000 francs per square meter. In the luxury segment, prices often exceed 20,000 francs per square meter.

In the agglomerations of the larger cities, prices of good-quality homes hit 7,000 to 8,000 francs per square meter, depending on the accessibility to the next central business district and other factors. A rule of thumb says that prices fall 1% from those in the business district for every minute of commuting time it takes to reach it.

The income tax burden, health insurance premiums and property prices make up the bulk of location-related costs and vary greatly depending on the municipality. In the most expensive one they reach an average of almost 66,000 francs for condominiums, and are over 30% lower in the cheapest areas (Fig. 5). Property prices in low-tax municipalities tend to be higher than in high-tax ones – this may cancel out possible tax savings, especially for low-income households. For high-income households the income tax is the decisive portion of location-related costs, such that low-tax municipalities are the most attractive choices for such households.

Fig. 4: Comparison of location-related annual costs (user-costs of a condominium, taxes and health insurance)

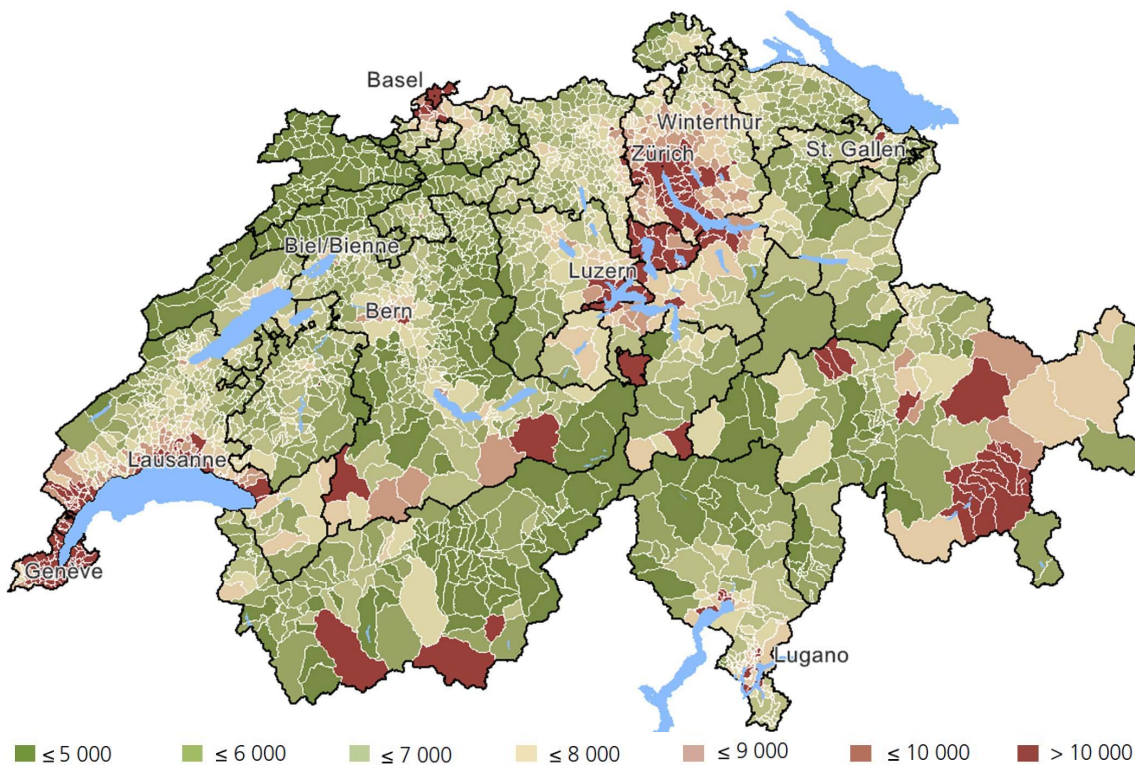
Bandwidth of all municipalities, in thousand CHF



Sources: FTA, FSO, Wüest Partner, UBS; Assumptions: gross income CHF 150,000, assets CHF 250,000, married (without children), condominium with 100m² of living space

Fig. 5: How much does a home cost in Switzerland?

Prices in francs per square meter of good-quality homes (70%-quantile), 2019Q1



Sources: Wüest Partner, UBS

Price outlook

Buying is cheaper than renting

Low mortgage rates underpin the owner-occupied housing market, supporting demand and prices. Currently, buying an owner-occupied property rather than renting an equivalent apartment is cheaper on average. We estimate that total savings add up to 20% of annual costs. For a flat of 100 square meters, they could amount to 4,000 francs per year (Fig. 6).

Because absolute purchase prices limit affordability, small apartments are in demand, and the relative willingness of buyers to pay for properties of lower quality remains high. So we expect another slight price rise of single-family homes while the prices of condominiums, which are exposed to greater competition as a result of falling rents, are likely to stagnate.

Prices at the peak of this cycle

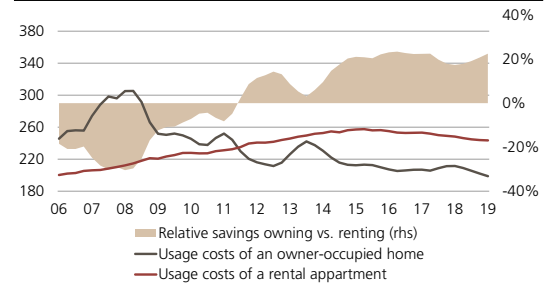
Real estate prices have been increasing in Switzerland for almost 20 years (Fig. 7). Further house price appreciation requires rising household incomes. The low interest rate environment is key to sustaining current prices. If mortgage rates increase by 1 to 2 percentage points, house prices would likely decline by 10% to 20%.

Best locations tend to be overvalued

The major economic hubs and their closest metropolitan areas were winners in the housing boom. But prices at the best locations are especially prone to exaggeration in boom periods and look inflated. Overall, given the small size of Switzerland, we do not expect a persistent divergence of centers and periphery – prices in peripheral regions have already been catching up since 2012.

Fig. 6: Low-usage costs of owner-occupied homes

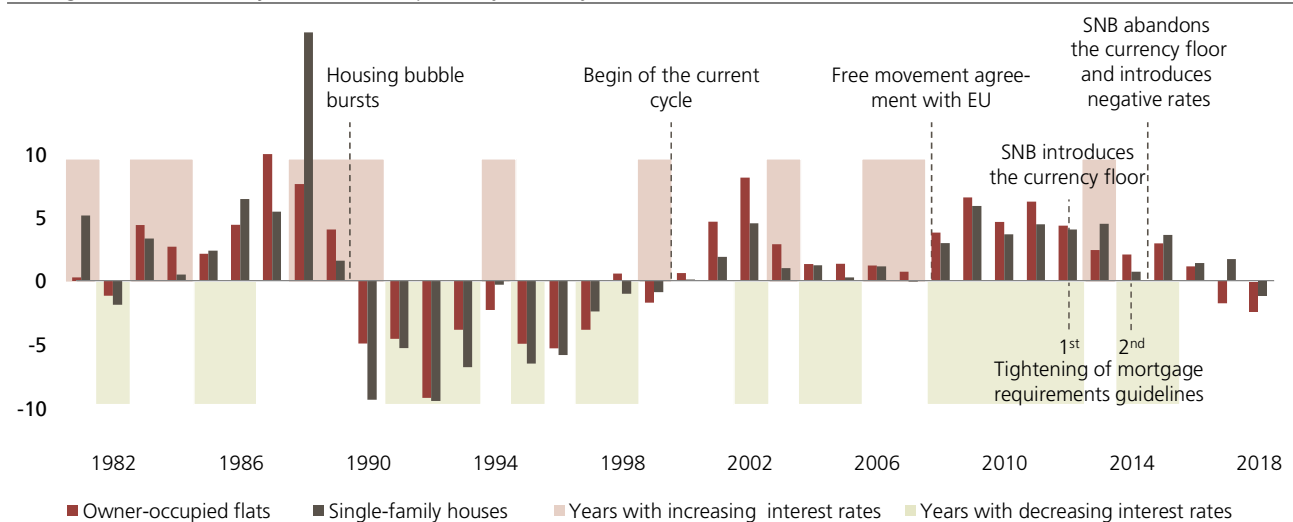
Nominal usage costs of an owner-occupied home* and a comparable rental apartment, smoothed in CHF per m² and year (lhs); difference in usage costs of an owner-occupied home and rental apartment per year in % (rhs)



Sources: Wüest Partner, UBS. *Mortgage interest payments on a long-term mortgage, provisions for maintenance and cost of imputed rental value tax

Fig. 7: Uncertainty before the turning point

Changes in inflation-adjusted offered prices, year-on-year, in %



Sources: Wüest Partner, SNB, UBS

Buy-to-let investments

Low financing costs and declining returns on other investments make buying condominiums to rent them out (buy-to-let) seem like an attractive option. But demand for buy-to-let investments has weakened over the last few quarters.

Rental income

Average initial yields in the largest Swiss municipalities will reach only 3%, in our view. After deducting allowances and costs, investors are left with roughly 2%, which is subject to local income tax. So income returns fall to 1.3%. The most attractive locations for buy-to-let investments are those with low vacancy rates in low-tax cantons. While returns are high on paper in peripheral regions, high vacancy rates and low rents depress returns there.

Outlook

In the past, capital returns made investing in condominiums particularly profitable as condominium prices rose 80% between 2005 and 2015. Buy-to-let investments are now likely to lose appeal on average. Vacancy rates are at historical highs and are expected to keep rising, making rental income less safe. Fiercer competition for tenants is depressing rents. Condominium prices have stagnated for the past three years, making future price returns unlikely – especially in the urban centers. For the rest of the year we expect asking rents to fall and condominium prices to stagnate.

Financing

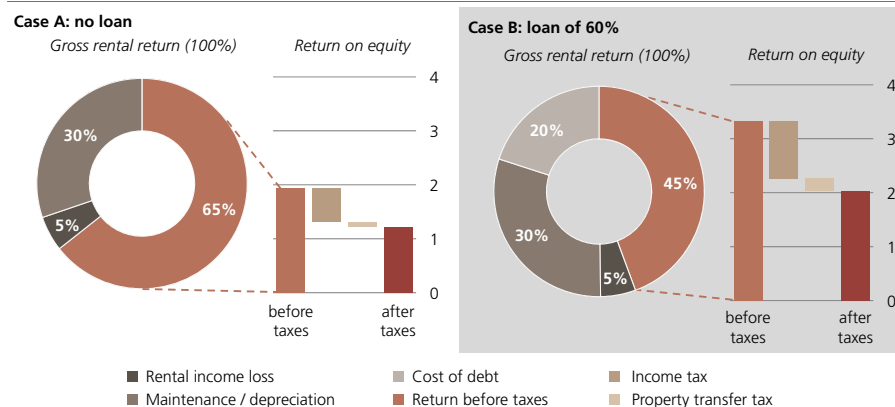
Buy-to-let investments are frequently financed with loans as higher leverage tends to increase returns. But to increase after-tax net return from 1.3% (without loans) to 2.2%, we estimate that a loan of 60% of the property value is required (Fig. 8). So high returns can only be achieved with relatively high loan-to-value ratios and accordingly high risk. New regulation for investment properties is currently on the way that will make high loan-to-value ratios even less attractive. While the details are not yet set in stone, the regulation is likely to take effect on 1 January, 2020.

Buy-to-let: 10 facts

- (1) Concentration risk must be taken into consideration when purchasing an individual property.
- (2) Invested capital is tied up on a long-term basis, as the sale of an apartment often takes time.
- (3) Performance depends on real estate prices and rental income.
- (4) Rental income not only depends on the property but on the attractiveness of the economic region.
- (5) Sufficient liquidity must be put aside for unforeseen repair or renovation work.
- (6) The financial burden increases with interest rates, especially in the event of high debt financing.
- (7) Property management involves either the owner's own time or, if commissioned externally, added costs.
- (8) Rental income is taxable after deducting financing and maintenance costs.
- (9) For financing, using funds from occupational and restricted private retirement savings (pillars 2 and 3a) is not permitted.
- (10) Condominium ownership may give rise to conflicts of interest in multi-party buildings.

Fig. 8: Low returns after costs

Example of returns, average of 150 largest municipalities (according to population size)



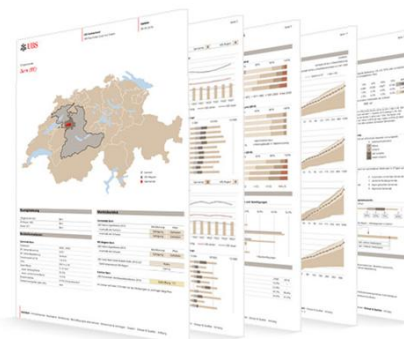
Source: UBS

UBS Real Estate Local Fact Sheets

Being new to a country can make choosing a place of residence a challenge. The *UBS Real Estate Local Fact Sheets* can make the decision easier by providing detailed information on real estate prices, population prospects, building activity, employment and taxation for all Swiss municipalities (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10).

Fig. 9: UBS Real Estate Local Fact Sheets

A comprehensive source of information for all Swiss municipalities



Source: UBS

Fig. 10: The housing markets in Swiss agglomerations – a comparison

25 biggest cities (according to population size) in Switzerland

City	Canton	Price ¹		Population ²		Tax burden ³
		Level	Change	Level	Change	
Zürich	ZH	15,000	2.1	409,000	1.5	17.1
Genève	GE	14,400	-0.1	201,000	1.0	21.5
Basel	BS	10,300	8.1	172,000	0.6	21.0
Lausanne	VD	11,300	2.6	139,000	1.2	22.3
Bern	BE	9,200	0.1	134,000	1.0	21.4
Winterthur	ZH	8,600	1.8	111,000	1.3	17.7
Luzern	LU	10,100	4.0	81,000	0.1	17.3
St. Gallen	SG	7,500	0.7	76,000	0.1	22.1
Lugano	TI	9,600	1.6	63,000	-0.1	18.3
Biel/Bienne	BE	6,300	4.5	55,000	0.6	21.9
Thun	BE	6,700	-1.1	44,000	0.3	22.2
Köniz	BE	7,500	3.0	42,000	1.2	21.3
La Chaux-de-Fonds	NE	4,400	1.5	39,000	-0.3	24.4
Fribourg	FR	6,600	2.4	39,000	0.2	21.6
Schaffhausen	SH	7,400	4.0	36,000	0.4	19.9
Vernier	GE	10,200	-3.4	35,000	0.6	21.9
Chur	GR	9,100	-1.4	35,000	0.5	18.3
Sion	VS	6,000	-1.5	35,000	1.0	21.3
Uster	ZH	9,700	10.6	35,000	1.1	16.5
Neuchâtel	NE	7,600	2.6	34,000	-0.2	23.4
Lancy	GE	10,600	0.3	32,000	1.1	21.6
Emmen	LU	7,000	-3.2	31,000	1.6	18.2
Yverdon-les-Bains	VD	8,000	1.5	30,000	0.8	22.1
Zug	ZG	13,200	0.2	30,000	1.8	12.4
Dübendorf	ZH	9,500	1.6	28,000	2.3	16.3

Source: UBS. ¹ Price in CHF/m² for newly-built homes (70%-quantile) in 2019Q1 and annualized growth rate since 2016Q1; ² Population in 2017 and annualized growth rate since 2014; ³ Single person with annual gross income of CHF 150,000

Appendix

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