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Electoral issues (VI): security policy

Controversy over expansion

One of the areas of domestic policy where opinion is most polarised is national defence. Parties on the left of the political spectrum want to reduce spending on the upkeep of the military, while those to the right of centre criticise the deployment of Swiss soldiers abroad and call for a greater focus on internal security.

The deployment of troops on peace-keeping missions abroad, care-giving to refugees, protection of foreign embassies in Switzerland and the popular initiative to halve military expenditure are all key areas of security

Dario Ballanti

policy on which Switzerland's various parties are taking up positions in preparation for the forthcoming federal elections.

Underscoring its critical stance on the army, the Left is pushing for a halving of the military budget, and is strongly opposed to deploying troops to care for incoming refugees. Right-wing parties, on the other hand, are focusing on internal security and are against the armed deployment of Swiss soldiers for peacekeeping assignments abroad. Between these two positions sit the centre parties, who essentially support the Federal Council's security policy, giving the thumbs-up to troop deployment abroad and approving in the main the arming of soldiers for self-defence.

Security through co-operation

Publication of the Federal Council's Security Report 2000 has further sharpened parliamentary polarisation on matters of national defence. The government is increasingly moving towards a policy of security through co-operation. By applying the principle of active neutrality, Switzerland is becoming more and more amenable to international co-operation.

With a few exceptions (for example guarding of the embassy in Algiers), Swiss Army Law forbids the arming of Swiss soldiers abroad. This principle was confirmed five years ago

by the popular vote on the Blue Helmets.

Peacekeeping assignments

The FDP supports the deployment of Swiss troops for peacekeeping missions in crisis regions and the concept of security through co-operation. Over and above this, it favours legal measures to allow Swiss soldiers to bear arms abroad for reasons of self-defence, should circumstances require this. The question of armed assignments abroad is one of the most controversial issues of domestic policy. "We urgently need a federal decree that would allow the arming of Swiss soldiers invited to take part in peacekeeping missions abroad," says Thurgau FDP National Councillor Ernst Mühlemann.

The Liberal Party (LPS) takes a similar line and believes it is necessary, given the present army structure, for Switzerland to adjust to new conditions and possibly even increase the number of professional soldiers. "It's

"International isolation could create security problems for us."

JACQUES-SIMON EGGLY, LPS

a pity the law forbids us to be among the international peacekeeping troops in Kosovo. This would in no way violate our neutrality," regrets Geneva National Councillor Jacques-Simon Eggly, who even believes that "international isolation could create security problems for us."

Against military deployment abroad

The SVP is sceptical about sending Swiss troops abroad. "Assignments abroad are the domain of the Swiss Catastrophe Aid Corps and the Directorate for Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Aid," stresses Zurich SVP National Councillor Ulrich Schlüer, adding that, "foreign policy in war zones must be of a humanitarian nature and not exercised by bearing arms." Nor does Schlüer see any merit in the Federal Council's Security Report, dubbing it a "rather transparent attempt on the part of the Federal Coun-

"Foreign policy should not be exercised by bearing arms."

ULRICH SCHLÜER, SVP

cil to legitimise the deployment of troops abroad." The same opinion is held by the Freedom Party, the Swiss Democrats and the Ticino League: for the parties on the right, the emphasis is on internal security.

"Internal security is increasingly dependent on events outside our borders," counters Lucerne CVP National Councillor Josef Leu, who speaks of internal party disagreement on the arming of Swiss soldiers for missions abroad. However, the concept of arming soldiers exclusively for the purposes of self-defence remains a central tenet. Leu is also in favour of using the army to look after refugees in Switzerland, as well as for border guard duties – "purely selectively as opposed to universally,

"Too wide a military remit could lead to problems in the professional area."

JOSEF LEU, CVP

ing army tasks

and only as a flanking measure". On the other hand he is against using the army to guard embassies in Switzerland: "We are a militia army. Too wide a military remit could cause problems in the professional area," he concludes.

Reduction of military duties

Although the parties on the left would like to see Switzerland playing a greater part in peacekeeping missions, they remain sceptical about the army. In the opinion of National Councillor Ruedi Baumann (Greens), "The report on security policy provides a good analysis," although he qualifies this by adding that "as usual, the study focuses too much on military and too little on civilian society."

The central thrust of the Red-Green camp is presenting the popular initiative "For a halving of the defence budget", which will probably be debated during the autumn session of parliament shortly before the elections. "Current spending on the military is flowing into the classical army areas," explains Berne SP National Councillor Peter Vollmer. In his opinion, "The funds saved by halving expenditure could be used to implement a humanitarian policy." This is also the view of the Labour Party.

Strengthening international co-operation

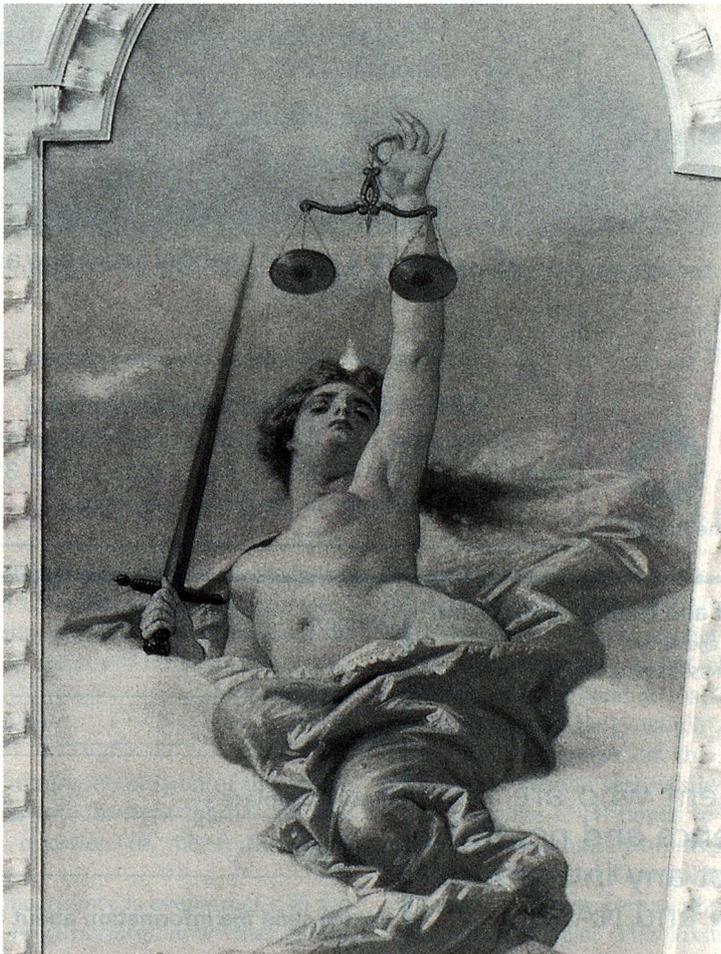
During the initial phase of the Kosovo War the SP was split, with Party

President Ursula Koch in favour of deploying NATO ground troops in Kosovo, while other party members like Ticino National Councillor Franco Cavalli spoke out against both an invasion and air attacks.

The Social Democrats support the idea of peacekeeping missions abroad, but under two conditions: international co-operation i.e. the deployment of

"Current spending on the military flows into classical army areas."

PETER VOLLMER, SP



Does Switzerland's defence and security policy enhance justice?

Swiss troops under the aegis of the UNO or OSCE, must be endorsed by the people, and the soldiers must only be armed for their personal safety. However, there is no unanimity on the latter condition within the SP. "It is embarrassing to have to rely on others defending you," says Vollmer, referring to the unarmed Swiss Yellow Berets who were protected by foreign soldiers when in Bosnia under mandate from the OSCE. On using the army to care for refugees and support border patrols, the Bernese National Councillor reiterates his party's firm negative stance: "That only encourages hysteria." ■

Federal referendums

12 March 2000

Subjects not yet decided.

21 May 2000

Subjects not yet decided.

24 September 2000

Subjects not yet decided.

26 November 2000

Subjects not yet decided.