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Federal Councillor Schmid resigns

Minister of Defence Samuel Schmid, who has been under fire politically and suffering ill health, will leave office at the end of the year. By René Lenzin

"I am stepping down for the sake of my health, my family, my country and the army", said Samuel Schmid as he announced his resignation from the Federal Council. The 61-year-old from Berne added that he was going with a "certain sadness" and that he would in fact have liked to have remained in office. However, this had become unfeasible in view of personal and political circumstances.

Schmid was elected to national government in December 2000 against the will of the Swiss People's Party (SVP). He was often derided as "half a Federal Councillor"

by members of the SVP. The relationship fractured once and for all following the deselection of Christoph Blocher. Schmid joined the newly-formed Civic Democratic Party. The departing Federal Councillor had always managed to steer bills on the army through referenda, but his weak position in the SVP had made it increasingly difficult for him to obtain majority support in Parliament.

Schmid's ultimate downfall was probably the affair involving the army's chief-of-staff Roland Nef. He concealed from the Federal Council the fact that Nef was facing legal ac-

tion at the time of his appointment. Nef's departure was not enough to put an end to this matter. Political and media pressure on Schmid has been growing since the summer. He has also had to deal with threats made against his family and also health problems. He had his gall bladder removed just days before his resignation.

Samuel Schmid succeeded Adolf Ogi on 1 January 2001. He had taken the traditional route to office, working his way up through the political ranks. He was President of the Commune of Rüti near Büren, a member of Berne's Great Council, the National Council and the Council of States. In the army, he rose to the rank of deputy commandant of the 3rd field division. Schmid is a lawyer, husband and father to three adult sons. His successor had still to be appointed at the time of going to press.

Free movement of persons under scrutiny

The Swiss people will vote again in February on the free movement of persons in the European Union. They will decide on the continuation of the agreement and its extension to Bulgaria and Romania. By René Lenzin

After obtaining the resounding approval of the electorate, the first set of bilateral negotiations with the EU entered into force in May 2002. The most controversial issue was the free movement of persons between Switzerland and the then 15 EU states. As well as transitional periods for the introduction of the full freedom of movement, Switzerland also pushed for an opt-out clause as a safety net. Both parties concluded that the agreement could be terminated after seven years. In domestic political arrangements, the Federal Council and Parliament declared that the continuation of the agreement would be governed by a resolution that could be taken to referendum. They aimed to ensure that the Swiss people would have the final say on the matter.

In addition to the continuation of the free movement of persons, there is also the issue of its extension to Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU at the beginning of 2007. As with the previous enlargement of the Union to take in ten eastern and southern European countries, Switzerland has negotiated an additional protocol

with the EU on the free movement of persons. In the same way as the first enlargement protocol, this one also provides for a provisional period of seven years during which time Switzerland may restrict the access of Bulgaria and Romania to the labour market (preference for Swiss workers, controls on salary and working conditions, rising annual quotas). If the number of immigrants should increase disproportionately after seven years, Switzerland can also introduce maximum numbers for a further three years.

Bone of contention – linking the bills

The government and the majority of Members of Parliament believe the free movement of persons has proven successful. They argue that the agreement ensures a supply of skilled immigrant workers and has made a significant contribution to economic growth in recent years. They also emphasise the benefits for Swiss citizens already living in EU countries or who are thinking of emigrating there. Finally, they also highlight the fact that the other six agree-

ments from the first round of bilateral negotiations would cease to apply if Switzerland rejected the free movement of persons.

The main bone of contention in the parliamentary debate on the future of the free movement of persons was the linking of the bills. A small majority of National Councillors and members of the Council of States finally decided to package the continuation of the agreement and the extension to Bulgaria and Romania in one bill. They said the two issues were inseparable as the EU would not accept unequal treatment of the new members and would see a rejection of the expansion as an end to the overall agreement. However, a minority wanted two separate bills with the option of being able to renegotiate on the extension to the new EU countries if necessary.

It was this decision to combine the bills in particular that resulted in the Swiss Democrats, the League of Ticino and the Young Swiss People's Party (Junge SVP) successfully calling a referendum. Voting will now take place on 8 February. In addition to the three groups behind the referendum, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) is also supporting the No campaign. The Social Democrats, Free Democrats, Christian Democrats, Greens and the recently founded Civic Democratic Party are campaigning for a Yes vote. The bill was approved by the National Council by 143 votes to 40 and by the Council of States by 35 votes to 2.