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Swiss people firmly behind compulsory military service

The proposal for voluntary military service put forward by the Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSoA) was heavily defeated in the referendum on 22 September.

By Jürg Müller

The army is too expensive and too large: these were the arguments advanced by the GSoA in its referendum campaign for the abolition of compulsory military service. The outcome was unequivocally clear with over 73 percent of the electorate voting against the proposal. This was despite the fact that some figures in conservative and liberal camps were also sympathetic towards it. Reiner Eichenberger, an economics professor in Fribourg, for example, says that general compulsory military service is becoming increasingly senseless from a military and economic perspective as the army has significantly reduced its numbers in recent years. He also points out that a volunteer militia is an “essentially liberal idea”.

The proportion of No votes among the Swiss abroad was over 9% lower than the Swiss average. This was revealed by the analyses carried out by the nine cantons that list the votes cast abroad separately.

The opponents of the popular initiative primarily argued that the abolition of compulsory military service would jeopardise national security. They also contended that the rapid deployment of large numbers of soldiers was vital in dealing with natural and man-made disasters and that the militia principle was deeply embedded in all spheres of Swiss society. Compulsory military service enabled optimal use of the wealth of civil skills possessed by army members.

The referendum battle was remarkably dull. The perception of the army has clearly become more matter-of-fact. Even if the approach to military issues is much less emotional than in the past, the referendum result shows that the army, compulsory military service and the militia principle are still deeply rooted in Switzerland. The “Group for a Switzerland without an Army” also faces a day of reckoning itself. With its programmatic name, it is not perceived as a credible security policy organisation by many

people who share some of its concerns. Moreover, one of the arguments in support of compulsory military service, namely that a volunteer army would attract adventure-seekers, Rambo types and right-wing extremists, has also gained the support of many on the left.

Yes to law on epidemics and petrol station shops

60 percent of voters approved the new Epidemics Act. This sets out the responsibilities of federal government and the cantons more clearly and provides better protection against communicable diseases. Anti-vaccination groups had called the referendum. The opponents of the liberalisation of opening hours for petrol station shops also failed with their referendum. With just under 56 percent in favour of liberalisation, employment law has been amended accordingly. This will enable petrol station shops on motorways to sell their full range of goods throughout the night as well.

FURTHER REFERENDUM PROPOSALS TO BE PUT TO THE VOTE ON 24 NOVEMBER 2013

Tax relief for families and a greater tax burden on motorists

The word “family” has a nice ring to it. The nucleus of society is increasingly under threat but still a source of security and harmony that is worthy of protection. It comes as little surprise that politicians are also focusing intensely on the family at the moment. An article, which sought to promote the reconciliation of professional and family life, failed in March when it did not secure the majority support of the cantons. Yet, an absolute flood of family initiatives from various parties is now set to be decided on at referendum. The Swiss people will vote on the first of these, the SVP’s family initiative, on 24 November.

There is not much family harmony to be found in politics at the moment. Fierce rows over very different socio-political ideas are highly prevalent. How much individual responsibility and how much state support are appropriate with regard to childcare? Who should primarily benefit from crèche places? Should politicians directly or indirectly encourage women to work?

These are also key issues in the SVP initiative entitled “tax relief also for parents who look after their own children”. This intends to enshrine in the constitution the right of parents who take care of their children themselves to at least the same level of tax relief as parents who leave their children with external childcare organisations. The cost of outside childcare has been tax-deductible since 2011. The SVP is now seeking tax relief for all families with children, no discrimination against families who look after their chil-

dren themselves and genuine freedom of choice and self-determination for families in terms of how they raise their children.

Opponents of the initiative claim that it violates the principle of taxation based on economic capacity because households that rely on external childcare, often through necessity, would be worse off. They say that the SVP’s proposal will promote traditional family models through tax law – the father goes out to work and the mother stays at home. There are also concerns over huge tax shortfalls.

Dearer motorway tax disc

On 24 November, voting will also take place on increasing the cost of the motorway tax disc from 40 to 100 Swiss francs. A right-wing, conservative committee has called the referendum against Parliament’s decision because it is opposed to “more and more charges and taxes being levied at the expense of motorists”. The left-leaning Swiss Transport Club (VCS) has also come out against the increase, saying that the additional revenues will only be used for the construction of new national roads, which runs contrary to the objective of eco-friendly mobility. The Federal Council and Parliament justify the increase by claiming that the revenues are required for the operation, maintenance and expansion of the national road network. The price of the tax disc is still the same as it was 20 years ago as it has never been adjusted in line with inflation.