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Autor: Müller, Jürg
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All eyes on Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) has a good chance of securing a second seat at the forthcoming Federal Council elections.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

Whenever anything goes wrong in the country then "the government is to blame". This simple formula applies in Switzerland as in most other countries. And yet the Federal Council almost always enjoys great trust in surveys conducted amongst the Swiss people. The Federal Council's stability in terms of composition over recent years and a much more united appearance again outwardly may be contributing factors. However, the impression of stability is deceptive. A generally accepted magic formula no longer applies.

Continue as before?

The make-up of the government with its seven members – 2 FDP, 2 SP, 1 SVP, 1 CVP and 1 BDP – will be up for debate after the parliamentary elections on 18 October 2015 (see also survey on page 14-16). The Federal Council will be completely re-elected at the start of December for the next four-year term. Despite epic debate and wild speculation beforehand, the chance of no change at all cannot be ruled out. A possibility – but not very likely as things stand – is a Federal Council with a "traditional composition" if no Federal Councillors stand down and the parties' share of the vote does not change significantly at the parliamentary elections. Parliament has often got cold feet over de-selecting Federal Councillors even though Ruth Metzler (CVP) was sacrificed for Christoph Blocher (SVP) in 2003 and Blocher himself was forced out of the Federal Council by the election of his former party colleague Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf in 2007.

It is precisely over this issue of line-up that the wrangling will continue after the federal elections. Widmer-Schlumpf is today the figurehead of the Swiss Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) which splintered off from the SVP. In terms of concordance politics, it is an anomaly that the SVP, the best-supported party with 26.6 % of the vote at the National Council elections in 2011, only has one representative in national government. Widmer-Schlumpf's expulsion from the SVP resulted in the break-away of the BDP, which now also has one Federal Councillor with just 5.4 % of the vote. As the BDP is not exactly looking formidable and would be pleased to hold onto its already small share of the vote in the autumn, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf and her party will have some fundamental reflecting to do after the elections.

The search for the right formula

Whether the BDP's Federal Councillor and Finance Minister then steps down of her own accord or remains in office even in the event of her party losing ground, everything will revolve around her Federal Council seat. The SVP has always laid claim to it. The proponents of arithmetic-based concordance – primarily the strategists of the SVP and FDP – want, in any event, to return to the allocation formula that has traditionally applied whereby the three largest parties each receive two seats and the fourth-largest one seat. The dream outcome for the centre-right would be 2 SVP, 2 FDP, 2 SP and 1 CVP. This formula will come to the fore especially if the FDP makes significant headway at the elections,

which is widely predicted. The debate over whether the FDP is entitled to two seats or whether the SVP should be given its second seat at the expense of the FDP would then be off the table. The FDP, CVP and Green Liberals (GLP) are essentially supportive of two seats being awarded to the SVP as the strongest party. The SVP therefore has a strong hand. Only the SP and the Greens are opposed to a second seat for the SVP in principle. They like to highlight the notion of "substantive concordance" and do not regard the SVP as being consensus-oriented.

Such arguments also find a sympathetic ear amongst sections of the centre parties (BDP, EVP, GLP) and the CVP owing to the often polarising approach of the SVP. Together with the left-Green factions, they could attempt to save Widmer-Schlumpf's seat. However, this option could only be justified if the smaller centre parties increase their share of the vote at the elections which does not appear likely to happen, according to the polls. If the small parties in the centre lose support, such a move could no longer be justified in the general political mood.

The SP can go into the Federal Council elections unperturbed. Unless something completely unpredictable happens at the National Council elections, it is certain of its two seats. A serious and successful attack on one of its seats is unlikely, even if the SVP has already considered such a move. But don't forget, Federal Council elections have produced some major upsets in the past.

JÜRIG MÜLLER IS AN EDITOR WITH THE "SWISS REVIEW"