

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 46 (2019)
Heft: 1

Vorwort: A brief storm, but thunder rumbles on
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Peaceful, neutral and committed to its humanitarian tradition – that's how many people see Switzerland. Many also see the country as well able to defend itself – as evidenced by its own army, and the domestic defence industry. Weapons produced by Swiss manufacturers are also used by foreign armies and police forces, however: Switzerland is an arms exporter. It is thus forever attempting to balance moral principle with business sense. That is why exports to belligerent nations are essentially taboo.

In the summer of 2018, the Federal Council challenged this taboo. It announced that, depending on the circumstances, it would also allow arms exports to countries engaged in civil war. The logic was that only an arms industry that could produce – and export – in sufficient volumes could keep pace with technology.

It was a bad idea, which met with a loud outcry and led to substantial political fallout. In just two days, incensed citizens had gathered more than 100,000 signatures for a popular initiative to stop arms exports to countries engaged in civil war. The lightning response was coordinated by a broad alliance consisting primarily of civil society organisations. Switzerland had never seen a new grouping play so quickly to its political strengths. It clearly demonstrated the current acceleration in the pace of direct democracy.

The Federal Council has since shelved its plans, but that doesn't mean they are off the agenda entirely. Hardly a week goes by without new reports of Swiss exports to belligerent nations: weapons to Saudi Arabia, party to the civil war in Yemen; munitions to Russia, flying sorties in Syria; and bombs and missiles to Turkey – the list goes on. Even without the planned further easing of regulations, exports to warring nations are rising at an alarming rate. In 2014, they accounted for 7.4 per cent of all armaments exports. By 2017, they were as high as 31.2 per cent, according to the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" newspaper's meticulous calculations.

The autumn storm has blown in an issue that Switzerland will find almost impossible to avoid in the current election year. It also demonstrated that, in Switzerland as elsewhere, new and agile civil society players are challenging the political status quo. That is perhaps good in this particular case, but what happens if, in the future, much less coordinated pressure groups attempt to push through their extreme goals by following the same pattern? It is a worrying prospect. Then again, perhaps our future Parliament will act shrewdly enough that interventions like that of the 'Alliance against Arms Exports' will no longer be necessary. The Vote Preview in this edition of the "Swiss Review" offers an initial introduction to the topic.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover image: Genevan sportsman Julien Wanders runs towards the horizon in the Kenyan morning light. Photo: Guillaume Megevand