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ing with the idea of the Greens having a seat in the Federal Council – at the expense of the CVP.

Dull centre, fitter liberals

The CVP, the oldest force of the political centre, remains in poor form. The party has been losing voters at the national level for some time now. For the past three years, under a new leadership, it has been trying to emphasise its Christian-conservative roots and lead a debate on values in dealing with Islam. This has not yet ended the downward trend, as suggested by the election barometer and the loss of seats in cantonal parliaments. On top of this, there is competition in the centre, where the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) and the Green Liberal Party (GLP) compete for votes. However, in cantonal governments and the Council of States, the CVP remains a sizeable party.

The FDP is starting the election year in promising form. The trend reversal that began in 2015 has continued: since then, no party has won more parliamentary seats in cantonal elections than the liberals. The election barometer also indicates that the FDP is gaining ground. According to surveys, the electorate believes it can help resolve important issues such as relations with the EU. The FDP seems to have succeeded in freeing itself from its image of economic cronyism. For this reason, the party leadership is not happy with executive politicians in French-speaking Switzerland who are suspected of having been paid for favours (see page 31).

New saplings

In addition to the rooted parties, new cultures are also growing in the Swiss political landscape: spontaneous, agile, digital. Operation Libero has attacked the SVP on all fronts before certain votes. It consists of young women and men who consider themselves liberal and would like Switzerland to be open towards the world. In some cases, sluggish political processes are being accelerated. When the Federal Council wanted to loosen the criteria for arms exports to countries torn by civil wars, so many outraged citizens pledged their support for a popular initiative online within two days that the government withdrew its decision. And the first Twitter referendum was held: three private individuals launched a collection of signatures against social detectives via the social network. The legislative reform was quickly put before the people. Referendum strength without party infrastructure and the backing of a well-funded organisation had not previously existed in Switzerland.

“Direct democracy reduces tension”

In nine months, elections will be held in Switzerland. Political scientist Michael Hermann on divides, what holds the system together and the state of Swiss democracy.



Michael Hermann from Berne is one of Switzerland's most prominent political observers. The social geographer and political scientist heads the Sotomo Research Centre in Zurich.

Photo: R. Ruis

Swiss Review: Mr. Hermann, over the last three years the British have voted to leave the EU and right-wing populists in Europe and overseas have won elections. At the same time, the national conservative SVP in Switzerland was reined in. How do you explain this?

Michael Hermann: What can now be observed in various countries took place much earlier in Switzerland. The rise of the SVP began in the 1990s. The relationship to Europe, migration, globalisation, the consequences of economic and social change: these issues, which occupy many people, were reflected more quickly and directly in politics because of Switzerland's direct democracy. Popular initiatives were launched, heated and emotional debates took place. Divides were created. Swiss referendums caused a stir throughout Europe.

The ban on minarets, the vote against "mass immigration", the deportation of delinquent foreigners, the rejection of simplified citizenship for Secondos...

Exactly. Foreign journalists called me looking for explanations. A British newspaper had the headline: "Switzerland: Europe's Heart of Darkness." The SVP's advertising methods, which tested boundaries, also attracted attention. Then came the big election success of the SVP in 2015, the shift to the right, and yet the situation has calmed down since then. In a typical Swiss reflex, the electorate restrained the SVP from making a power grab. Today, Switzerland is once again showing more moderation, and the population has repeatedly spoken out against extending direct democracy at the expense of the rule of law. The issues that have now emerged in Europe and the USA have already been dealt with to some extent and integrated into the system.

The Swiss system seeks a balance, but is the country still capable of reform? Important reforms, for example regarding the retirement provision, failed at the ballot box.

Direct democracy quickly absorbs people's concerns, reduces tension and resolves conflicts. It has many advantages; the ability to reform is not necessarily one of them. But that has always been the case. By European standards it took ages for the old-age and survivors' insurance (OASI) and women's suffrage to be introduced. What has actually become more difficult today is the forming of alliances that can survive the constant election campaigns. The polar parties SVP and SP, in particular, prefer to take a strong position along party lines rather than compromise. Yet the political differences are often not huge. Retirement provision was not about neoliberalism or socialism, but about an increase or decrease of pensions by 70 francs.

What does the current weakness of political parties in the centre mean for Switzerland?

Because we do not have a system of government and opposition, elections are not about bringing a particular political force to power. The voters can only slightly steer the supertanker in the desired direction: a little more to the left or right, a little more progressive or conservative, a little more green. Parties in the centre that, like the CVP, have no clear direction tend to have a harder time. Their strengths lie elsewhere: in building bridges, in forging compromises. But if the centre becomes narrower and narrower, this can weaken the glue that holds the system together.

Why are the social democrats in Switzerland able to maintain their voter share when this is collapsing in many places in Europe?

In contrast to other social democracies in Europe, the Swiss SP clearly positioned itself on the left after the turn of the century and remained there. This gave it a clear profile. It took up ecological and social issues much earlier and won over new voters, making it less dependent on traditional workers. In addition, the SP never had to bear full government responsibility in the Swiss system. Although it is in the Federal Council, it can also act as the opposition.

"Direct democracy quickly absorbs people's concerns, reduces tension and resolves conflicts"

In countries where right-wing populists are growing stronger, concerns about democracy are being expressed. There are attacks on the press, against the "establishment", agitation and online disinformation. Switzerland, on the other hand, is it still the model for democracy?

Switzerland is a stable country, we are doing well economically. The system prevents authoritarian figures or certain parties from becoming too big. But Swiss democracy also has its problems. The consensus system is eroding, and numerous lobbyists sit in parliament. There is a lack of transparency in party financing, there is no upper limit. And the media system is crumbling at a rapid pace because newspapers' business models do not work. Yet the finely ramified media landscape has always been an important part of federal Switzerland with its various regions.