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Daniel Koch



Every crisis has its defining characters. Switzerland's was Daniel Koch. Hardly anyone had heard of him before COVID-19. Koch came from the upper echelons of the Federal Office of Public Health, where he had been heading the Communicable Diseases Division for years. Yet during the epidemic he acted as the country's point of reference almost on a daily basis. Tens of thousands followed the government press conferences on television and YouTube at which the bald-headed physician was constantly present. Whenever it was his turn to speak, Koch would explain the facts coolly and calmly. He would articulate complex epidemiological information in a straightforward way and respond patiently to questions from worked-up journalists with a spark of dry humour now and again. His careful, deliberate tone and unassuming manner won over the nation. Koch allayed our fears. He was someone to trust, even something of a cult figure. Through the media, we learned that he used to work as a doctor in war zones, and that he likes to go cross-country running with his two dogs (Switzerland has now heard of canicross). The public forgave Koch on the few occasions he got things wrong. The way he dismissed the effectiveness of face masks bordered on stubbornness, yet the freedom-loving Swiss lapped it up. At the end of May, with the country over the worst, 'Mr Coronavirus' disappeared into retirement – one month later than planned. His political boss, Health Minister Alain Berset, offered warm words on his farewell. Instead of trolling or taunting, people went on social media to thank the 65-year-old civil servant for his efforts. A book about Koch is already in the making, due to be published in late summer.

SUSANNE WENGER

Sommaruga renews call for action on climate change

The President of the Swiss Confederation, Simonetta Sommaruga, said in June that climate protection and nature conservation need to “return to the very top” of the political agenda. We should not forget the climate crisis because of COVID-19, she said. It's essential that we “make the right calls now” – not only for our sake but, more importantly, for the sake of future generations. (MUL)

Parliament votes in favour of a climate tax on airline tickets

Flying is about to get more expensive after parliament voted in June to introduce a tax on airline tickets. Tickets will be 30 to 120 francs dearer depending on class and distance of travel. This is a green incentive tax: non-flyers will benefit, because more than half of the revenue from the new levy will be redistributed to the public. A new climate fund will also be created. Parliament had been firmly opposed to an airline ticket tax before the elections in autumn 2019; the June decision is symptomatic of a change in the political climate. (MUL)

Possible boost for PostFinance from the Federal Council

PostFinance is one of Switzerland's most important financial providers. However, the fully state-owned company is not permitted to issue loans. This is making it increasingly hard for PostFinance to generate profits. The Federal Council now want PostFinance to be part-privatised and allowed access to the credit and mortgage market, subject to certain restrictions. No final decision has been taken. Political parties and all the relevant stakeholders have until September 2020 to comment on the government's proposal. (MUL)

“Marriage for all” bill clears important political hurdle

Same-sex couples in Switzerland should be able to marry, the National Council has decided. Around seven years since the proposal relating to same-sex marriage was brought to parliament, the house's decision in June turned out to be surprisingly clear-cut. The National Council also voted to approve controversial sperm donations for lesbian couples, thus adopting a more socially liberal stance than before the 2019 elections. (MUL)

Who left the gold in the train?

Were you in Switzerland in October 2019 by any chance? If so, did you accidentally leave a package full of gold bars on a train travelling between St. Gallen and Lucerne? For the Lucerne police, the question of who owns the gold, worth around 180,000 francs, has been a mystery for months. The rightful owner has not yet been found, which is why the authorities have now made a public appeal. (MUL)