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Arms industry in the crossfire

Swiss arms exports come in for regular criticism. Two popular initiatives have the weapons industry in their sights. One of these is due to be put to voters on 29 November.



THEODORA PETER

“Stop lining the pockets of arms manufacturers” is a popular initiative that was launched with the aim of halting Swiss investment in the global arms industry. The authors of the initiative – the Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSwA) and the Greens – say that pension funds, foundations, and the Swiss National Bank should not be allowed to invest in companies that generate more than five per cent of their sales from the manufacture of military equipment. As a neutral country and custodian of the Geneva Conventions, Switzerland must refrain from “taking monetary advantage of war victims”, they argue.

However, the Federal Council and parliament have rejected the initiative without offering a counterproposal. Economics Minister Guy Parmelin (SVP) believes that existing bans on the funding of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons as well as cluster

munitions are sufficient. The initiative would affect many companies with little or no connection to the arms industry, he says, citing the example of a glass manufacturer producing windows for the cockpits of fighter jets in addition to normal windows.

Backed exclusively by the left-green camp, the proposal is likely to find the going tough – as was the case with earlier GSwA initiatives. In 2009, a popular initiative calling for a ban on the export of military equipment was decisively rejected by around 68 per cent of the electorate.

No exports to war-torn regions

The prospects look rosier for a cross-party popular initiative that aims to stop arms exports to war-torn countries. Unlike the unsuccessful initiative of 2009, this initiative does not want a total ban on military exports. Instead, it is calling for a ban on the ex-

Model tanks, not real tanks – supporters of the “Stop lining the pockets of arms manufacturers” initiative protesting in Berne (2017).

Photo: Keystone

port of Swiss arms to countries engaged in civil war, or to countries in which systematic and serious human rights violations are taking place.

The “Correction Initiative”, as it is called, was launched after the Federal Council announced plans to permit military exports to war-torn countries if there was no reason to believe that these exports would be used in conflict. The government’s thinking was that this would boost the Swiss arms industry. Fierce criticism persuaded it to change its mind. Nevertheless, the authors of the initiative still wish to reverse a parliamentary decision in 2014 that permits arms exports to countries known for systematic human rights violations. The Federal Council wants to submit a counterproposal to parliament that will go some way to satisfying the aims of the initiative. The cross-party alliance have not ruled out withdrawing their proposal if appropriate legislation is passed. Hence, it still remains to be seen whether any vote on the initiative will take place.

Twofold increase in arms exports

In the first half of 2020, Swiss companies exported military equipment worth 501 million francs. This is almost twice the value of what was exported in the prior-year period (273 million francs). According to the government, this fluctuation is not unusual and is attributable to a number of major contracts. The list of buyers includes 55 countries. Indonesia was Switzerland’s biggest arms importer in the first six months of the year, purchasing air defence systems worth 110 million Swiss francs. Botswana spent 64 million francs on Swiss-made armoured vehicles over the same period. Denmark, Romania and Germany were the biggest recipients of Swiss military equipment in Europe. (TP)