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Gerhard Pfister



Swiss politics welcomed a new party at the beginning of 2021 after the merger between the Christian Democrat People's Party (CVP) and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP). The party's new name, "The Centre", sounds a bit lame. History is in the making nonetheless, because the Catholic Conservative movement, once a political force in Switzerland, has now consigned its religious ties to the past. Top Christian Democrat Gerhard Pfister, who was educated at convent school, is behind this radical break. Pfister (canton of Zug) highlighted his conservative values when he took over the party leadership in 2016. Now he has moved the CVP away from its traditional Catholic roots because the party has been losing voters for almost 40 years. It is even touch and go whether it will hold on to its seat in the Federal Council. Pfister is trying to attract new voters who would otherwise be put off by the "C" in CVP. "I want to talk politics with people, but end up having to talk religion with them," he says. Pfister, 58, is regarded as a clever strategist who is by no means averse to political manoeuvring and power. Eloquent and erudite, he appears just as comfortable talking about art and culture as he is about politics. Pfister has sold the merger as a "fresh opportunity", seeing potential for a new centre power with a social conscience to counteract the polarisation between left and right. Reaction from commentators has been mixed, ranging from praise ("an original solution") to scepticism ("final humiliation for the CVP"). Will Pfister's plan work? We will find out after the next federal elections in 2023.

SUSANNE WENGER

Military service – from home

It was an unconventional start to training for 5,000 of the 12,000 or so recruits who joined the Swiss Armed Forces at the end of January, as the Covid-19 pandemic meant they were confined to their homes for the first few weeks. Instead of courtyard drills and long marches in the wind and rain, the recruits did e-learning and wore in their new combat boots from the comfort of their sitting room. However, this gentle introduction was eventually followed by the inevitable summons to barracks. (MUL)

The Swiss Air Force is now open all hours

Since the beginning of the year, the Swiss Air Force's air policing activities over Switzerland now extend to all hours and days of the week, with two armed combat aircraft ready for operations round the clock. Nothing unusual about that, you may think. However, until 2015 fighter jets used to be only on stand-by on workdays during office hours. This attracted a lot of public ridicule at the time. Since then, air policing capability has been gradually expanded. (MUL)

No exit from "Exit" for the Swiss Abroad

The Swiss organisation for physician-assisted suicide, Exit, has decided not to exclude Swiss members domiciled abroad and will continue to make its services available to the "Fifth Switzerland". Exit announced in summer 2020 that, in future, it would only be open to members who lived in Switzerland and would delete existing members who moved abroad. It eventually backtracked after members voiced their opposition. (MUL)

The Federal Council wants to privatise PostFinance

The Federal Council wishes to privatise Swiss Post subsidiary PostFinance completely, so as to allow PostFinance to enter into the mortgage business. The planned privatisation is a contentious issue. Opponents fear it would weaken Swiss Post. It is thanks in part to PostFinance's profits that Swiss Post is able to fund its nationwide service in the first place. (MUL)

The FDFA wants to enhance its embassy network

Switzerland wants to strengthen its representations abroad. According to Swiss radio (SRF) sources, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) is planning to relocate some 35 Berne-based positions abroad in order to bolster its smaller offices around the world. The Federal Council believes that the FDFA's close-knit foreign network has proved particularly valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some Swiss representations are "understaffed", it wrote in its latest foreign policy report. (MUL)