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“For refugees, starting a new life in a country where you are not necessarily welcome feels almost like a miracle,” says our cover star, Priya Ragu. Priya, who hails from St. Gallen, speaks from experience. She grew up in a Tamil refugee family, but has seen her fortunes turn around dramatically. Priya is now a world-renowned singer (page 14). Her career has taken off like a rocket, and she now belongs on the biggest stages, winning over hearts not just at festivals like Montreux, but also in the language region where her parents come from. The values she endorses and spreads far and wide in Tamil reflect at the same time a very Swiss sensibility. For example, her best-selling song Kamali discusses the rights and status of women in society and the empowerment of girls to live out their dreams.

Also best-sellers but of a very different kind are Swiss-made weapons. Arms exports are high, and the issue is politically explosive. There is perpetual debate over which countries Swiss guns, munitions, armoured vehicles and other armaments and military equipment should be exported to. After all, arms exports affect Switzerland’s self-perception as a neutral, peaceful country that prefers diplomacy to sabre-rattling. As so often, the reality is more complex than one might at first imagine. For many years, the means to wage war – not cheese and chocolate – were the country’s biggest export. Over three centuries, Swiss mercenary soldiers served on the battlefields of Europe and in colonial armies all around the world. And they were not known for their restraint.

As such, the modern self-image of Switzerland as humanitarian, peace-loving and neutral is the result of consciously implemented changes. Mercenary soldiering has long been prohibited, and exports of military equipment are subject to strict rules. In fact they are now getting even stricter: parliament has tightened up the legislation further in response to public pressure. The government is losing its existing freedom to grant exceptions.

That is welcome, but it does not mean an end to the controversy over arms exports. Ultimately, the question of whether arms exports can ever make the world more peaceful has not been resolved by this legislative tightening.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover photo: Priya Ragu, Swiss singer with Tamil roots.
Photo: courtesy of Warner Music

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