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Storm in a teacup over a "national crisis"

It is not the case that Switzerland has no problems. The economy has yet to recover, and the country's geographical advantages appear to be disappearing according to an international survey, where Switzerland has slipped to eighth on the international growth competitiveness index. The national debt is rising, healthcare costs are soaring, and the future of the Old Age and Survivors' Insurance (AHV) remains gloomy.

Yet if one were to believe the media, Switzerland has been facing only one major problem since the last national elections a year ago: SVP Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher. Tabloid headlines in recent days have talked of a "national crisis", citing the danger posed to Switzerland's democratic system. Leading political observers have questioned whether Minister of Justice Blocher would succeed in breaking the system of concordance, and many political journalists have wondered whether he would ever manage to set aside his role as leader of the opposition and, in time, behave like a "proper" member of the Federal Council. In this issue, my colleague Rolf Ribi reports in "Focus" on the difference of opinion between Federal Councillors Couchepin and Blocher and summarises the discussion on the future of direct democracy and Swiss concordance, and political scientist and National Councillor Andreas Gross answers questions on the importance of the electorate in Switzerland's political system.

The media campaigns against Federal Councillor Blocher verged at times on the hysterical, even though there was absolutely no sign of any national crisis. Of course it is unusual for one Federal Councillor to be publicly criticised by another; but it is hardly likely to cause any lasting cracks in the political foundations of Switzerland. If quarrels at the highest level lead to fundamental political rethinking and encourage debate throughout the country, then this can only be good.

All those neo-liberals who repeatedly complain that direct democracy poses an obstacle to political and economic reform should take note of Social Democrat Andreas Gross's assertion that Switzerland has seen the introduction of more, and further-reaching, reforms in recent years than its neighbours. The German word "Reformstau" ("reform gridlock") is not a Swiss



Heinz Eckert

The German word "Reformstau" ("reform gridlock") is not a Swiss invention.

invention. It first appeared in German newspapers in the early 1990s, and was named "word of the year" in 1997, ahead of "Bildungsmisere" ("education calamity"), by the Society for the German Language in Frankfurt.

The interview with Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher marks the last assignment of Gabrielle Keller as editor-in-chief of the "Swiss Review". I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her work over the past few years. Gabrielle Keller has returned to news journalism and has taken over as editor of the Neue Zuger Zeitung. We wish her every success and satisfaction in her new position.

As new editor-in-chief of the "Swiss Review", I look forward to carrying on the work of my colleague and, every two months, sending out a varied and interesting "Swiss Review" which will provide you with as diverse, differentiated and representative as possible a picture of current Swiss affairs. *Heinz Eckert*

Translated from German.



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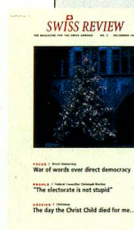
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Things are becoming more and more ridiculous. This year the first Christmas decorations began to appear in shop windows at the end of October. In a few years' time, if the trend continues, the first Easter eggs will be on display in January. The photo shows the traditional Christmas tree in front of Basle's town hall: always a particularly fine specimen.

COVER: Peter Schnetz

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