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Voluntary military service?

A popular initiative going to referendum on 22 September 2013 is calling for the abolition of compulsory military service in Switzerland. However, the Swiss are clearly in favour of their army, more so than they once were.

By Jürg Müller

The issue lends itself extremely well to pathos: "Coexistence in our beautiful and secure country is based on citizens' rights and duties. Military service is an expression of the duty of personal commitment." These words were spoken by Corina Eichenberger-Walther, the Free Democrat security policy expert, in the National Council debate in December 2012. The popular initiative to abolish universal compulsory military service put forward by the "Group for a Switzerland without an Army" (GSoA) is proving emotive. There are times when you cannot fight with lightweight equipment and instead need to bring out the biggest guns – the opposition committee has relabelled the proposal the "insecurity initiative". This committee contends that the initiative does not just concern the issue of compulsory military service; it argues that the initiators are seeking to abolish the army. In the case of the Group for a Switzerland without an Army, this point cannot simply be dismissed. The GSoA, too, has come out fighting in the referendum campaign: "Not everyone has time to play war games" was the title of the lead story in the May issue of the group's publication "GSoA-Zitig".

Fewer people required

What the initiative is seeking to achieve is radical. Compulsory military service would be abolished and replaced by a volunteer army. Those behind the initiative argue that Switzerland still has the largest army in Eu-

rope in relation to its population and that today's security threats are no longer found in traditional military areas. National Councillor Evi Allemann, who is the Swiss Social Democrats' security expert, says that "the armies made up of compulsory service personnel and primarily designed to defend the nation in the traditional manner" have become less significant since the end of the Cold War. She advocates systematic specialisation of the military services to concentrate on modern-day threats. However, this would require significantly fewer albeit better trained personnel.

Attack on one of Switzerland's cornerstones

Supporters of compulsory military service see the initiative as an attack on one of Switzerland's cornerstones. National security is the task of all Swiss citizens, they argue. An army in which people from all professions and strata of society serve ensures an extremely high-quality resource pool. A volunteer army would almost inevitably lead to a professional army owing to recruitment problems and this would not only contradict Switzerland's militia principle, it would also prove more expensive. National Councillor Corina Eichenberger also addressed the problem of recruitment to volunteer armies during the parliamentary debate: "Every army tends to attract people with radical right-wing political views or an excessive thirst for adventure.

Under the current system, compulsory military service ensures that such risk groups remain in the minority."

Mass army or not?

SP National Councillor Evi Allemann's argument that mass armies are being phased out in Europe, and 20 of the 28 NATO countries now have or are planning to introduce a volunteer army, is countered by Defence Minister Ueli Maurer, who remarks that the cliché of a mass army must be discarded because "Switzerland does not have a mass army". Only around 5,000 soldiers serve at the same time, excluding recruits in military training schools and instructors. However, more personnel could be called upon quickly if necessary. In contrast, with a volunteer army "we have no guarantee of having the necessary personnel resources available at a critical moment". Maurer also points to the enormous recruitment problems of volunteer armies. He says: "Spain has to draft in people from South America, and the UK recruits its volunteers from prisons. Do we want to end up like that?"

This is hardly likely. The initiative's proponents have a tough job on their hands. The "Security 2013" study published at the end of May by the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich shows significantly more people in favour of universal compulsory military service than was the case last year. The representative survey indicates a major shift in opinion among Swiss people over army-related issues. Last year, 48% were in favour of the abolition of compulsory military service, but that figure has now fallen to just 33%. The researchers at the Federal Institute of Technology attribute this to the public debate, which has begun early, bringing various organisations with close links to the army into the arena. However, they do not rule out the possibility of more significant shifts in the range of opinions during the actual referendum battle when the GSoA and its allies launch their campaign.

FURTHER REFERENDUM PROPOSALS

In addition to compulsory military service two further proposals will be decided at a referendum on 22 September 2013. The amendment to the Epidemics Act aims to provide better protection against communicable diseases and a more precise definition of the competences of federal government and the cantons. The referendum was called by groups critical of vaccination as part of their fight against feared compulsory state immunisation. The Federal Office of Public Health has ruled out such mandatory measures. The Swiss people will also decide on the liberalisation of opening hours for petrol station shops. Various church organisations and groups on the left called the referendum against around-the-clock opening, which they see as a prelude to further liberalisation. Proposals on longer shop opening hours in general are indeed pending in Parliament. The referendum committee is opposed to nights and Sundays being completely sacrificed to business interests.

(JM)

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