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Dogfight over new aircraft

Switzerland is set to acquire 22 new Gripen fighter jets. The Swiss people have to approve the defence deal with unclear follow-up costs.

By Jürg Müller

Does Switzerland need 22 Swedish Gripen fighter jets to replace the outdated Tiger fleet? That is the question that the electorate will answer on 18 May. The referendum campaign is generating lots of political noise but the positions are generally known. The Federal Council, Parliament and the conservative parties as well as the militia and defence organisations want the new aircraft, while an army-sceptical alliance of Social Democrats, Greens and the Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSoA) are opposed to the deal. They have successfully called a referendum. A liberal "no to the Gripen" committee has also contributed a modest number of signatures. It mainly consists of supporters of the Green Liberal Party.

Major turbulence

There was originally widespread scepticism over the choice of aircraft and not just on the left. There were constant allegations that the evaluation had not been conducted properly. The National Council's Defence Committee investigated the claims and came to an ambiguous conclusion: the selection procedure had been carried out correctly but the Federal Council had chosen the jet with the highest level of risk. The Federal Council was subsequently able to ease concerns to the extent that even the former conservative critics

backed Minister of Defence Ueli Maurer (SVP). Only the left unanimously rejected the purchase of the fighter jet. Both parliamentary chambers therefore approved the deal.

It is now the turn of the Swiss people. Opponents cast a general question mark over the need for the procurement. They believe effective air defence can be achieved without new jets and that Switzerland will still be very well equipped by international standards even after the withdrawal from service of the 54 Tiger aircraft. The 32 F/A-18 would be completely adequate for policing the airspace and actual air combat is not a realistic scenario in today's security policy climate, they say. Those supporting the proposal claim that the effectiveness of the air force cannot be ensured without new aeroplanes. This is even more important today than in the past because attacks – even terrorist attacks – are increasingly being launched from the air. Nobody can completely rule out the possibility of

threats from the air over the coming decades.

Not "paper planes"

Although the Gripen is the least expensive of the types of aircraft evaluated, finances are playing a major role in the referendum campaign. The Gripen jets will cost a little over three billion Swiss francs in total. Opponents say that maintenance and operating expenses will push up costs, calculated over their entire service life, to ten billion francs. The Federal Department of Defence (DDPS), however, is "only" estimating a cost of six billion francs for procurement and operation over a deployment period of 30 years. The DDPS is also dismissing opposition arguments that the Gripen is a "paper plane" and as such a risk because dozens of the aircraft's components still have to be developed. The Gripen is not an aeroplane newly designed from scratch, writes the DDPS, it is just an upgrade and technical

advancement on the existing model.

Which arguments the debate focuses on will play a decisive role in determining the outcome of the referendum – if technical arguments and the billion-franc investment predominate, the opponents may prosper. If those in favour of the proposal succeed in turning the referendum into a question of the future of the army the Gripen may well land in Switzerland one day.



Enhanced status for general practitioners

There has been a shortage of general practitioners in Switzerland for some time. Long working hours, a high administrative workload and emergency duty with night shifts – and all for a relatively low salary – are making a career as a family doctor increasingly unattractive. The Swiss Association of General Practitioners therefore launched the "Yes to family practitioners" popular initiative in 2010 which was

signed by around 200,000 Swiss citizens. A counterproposal emerged during the parliamentary debate that will now be presented to the Swiss people and which is also deemed satisfactory by those behind the initiative: federal government and the cantons should ensure "sufficient high-quality basic medical provision that is accessible to everyone" and promote family doctors because they "recognise that they are a key element of this basic provision". The general practitioners believe this meets the main objectives of their initiative. Their long-standing battle for improved status within

the healthcare system will be crowned with success if the Swiss people approve the proposal on 18 May.

The Association of General Practitioners also lauded the contribution of Alain Berset, the Federal Councillor responsible. "The representatives of the initiative committee found the Minister of Health to be a fair and credible partner," it said in a press release. This is partly because Berset did not leave the matter at a constitutional article but at the same time also drew up a master plan for family medicine involving the various players. (JM)