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The Swiss People's Party's top issues dominate election year

Switzerland's now awkward relationship with the European Union and immigration will be the major issues over the coming months. They will also shape the 2015 election campaign. An overview of the position of the parties at the outset.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

Two party presidents attempted to draw comparisons with the Nazis in late summer 2014. Firstly, Martin Landolt, leader of the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), asked: "How brown must a policy be before everyone realises that it stinks to high heaven?" He was referring to the policies of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) from which the BDP splintered off in 2008. Christian Levrat, President of the Social Democratic Party (SP), followed suit shortly afterwards, remarking: "SVP policy in recent months has clearly shown fascist tendencies." The fact that such comparisons usually overstep the mark or are completely inappropriate is not the issue here. However, the harsh rhetoric is a clear indication of how charged the political mood is already a year before the federal elections on 18 October 2015.

There are good reasons why various parties are using their heavy artillery on the SVP. The predominant election campaign issues in 2015 are highly likely to be the SVP's major political concerns: Europe, immigration, foreign policy and defence against anything "foreign". Whichever way Switzerland's relationship with the European Union (EU) develops after the approval of the SVP initiative against mass immigration on 9 February 2014, the SVP will be at the centre of the debate.

All the others face a problem

The SVP is therefore entering election year 2015 with an invaluable advantage. It does not have to "come up with" its election campaign issues, they have

long been on the table and are matters of genuine concern to people. According to the election barometer of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG) in October 2014, immigration-related issues are the most pressing for the electorate. And the SVP is thought most likely to provide solutions here. The party lost more than two percentage points in the 2011 elections but has since made significant headway. It has increased its share of the vote in 14 of 19 cantonal elections. Whether this success will be continued at the federal elections depends heavily on how policies on Europe and immigration develop. According to the election barometer mentioned, maintaining the bilateral treaties with the EU is actually more important to the electorate than the implementation of the initiative against mass immigration. If a straight decision had to be made between these two options, 58 % would favour the set of agreements with the EU. The implementation of the initiative clearly jeopardises the agreement on the free movement of persons and therefore the bilateral treaties. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent this position on the bilateral treaties takes the wind out of the SVP sails.

The fact that the SVP is comfortable with the key issues at the outset presents a problem for the other parties. They will find it hard to bring other issues into play. That said, election years can take unpredictable turns. In 2011, the Fukushima nuclear disaster in the spring of the election year suddenly made energy a key issue. However, it is more likely that all the parties will attempt to provide their own answers to the EU and im-

migration issues which will inevitably see them enter SVP territory. The SVP is able to clearly differentiate itself not just from the left over these issues but also from the other conservative parties. These want well-structured relations with the EU and are keen to save the bilateral approach, an objective which the SVP now openly questions.

In light of widespread EU scepticism, the EU-friendly SP may face a particularly challenging task over the issues of immigration and EU relations. It is therefore focusing on its key political issue of social justice. It can also make headway here, according to the electoral barometer. The party keeps debate alive with some bold proposals, but the last three popular initiatives it supported – 1:12, the minimum wage and the single health insurance fund – have failed. Its opposition to flat-rate taxation for wealthy foreigners and its support for the introduction of inheritance tax are in line with the party slogan of "for everyone rather than the few". At the 2011 elections, the SP won three addi-

New formula for the Federal Council?

The parliamentary elections also always indirectly impact on the complete re-election of the Federal Council, which takes place shortly afterwards. The current composition (2 SP, 2 FDP, 1 CVP, 1 SVP and 1 BDP) is certainly

not guaranteed in 2015 although no Federal Councillors are stepping down. There will in any event be a lively debate about how the will of the electorate is reflected in the nation's most senior body. The SVP, as the strongest faction, is actually entitled to a second seat. If it does not lose ground or

even gains votes at the elections, Parliament will probably no longer be able to ignore its claims. The seat of the BDP, a minor party, or one of the two FDP seats will be targeted in such circumstances. But it is well known that Federal Council elections can always produce very surprising results.



tional National Council seats despite a slight 0.8 % fall in its share of the vote thanks to good fortune with the system of proportional representation. It would appear to have little chance of defending these seats without significant electoral gains. However, its performance in the cantonal elections since 2011 has been reasonably good: the SP has made ground in 12 of 19 cantons.

The traditional parties are faltering

The two other once strong conservative parties on the Federal Council are underperforming - FDP. The Liberals (FDP) and the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP). Both lost support at the 2011 elections. The FDP's performance at the cantonal elections in recent years has failed to impress, and the CVP has performed very poorly. The FDP as a business-friendly party is suffering from the political fallout of the financial and banking crises. Even if the party leadership is going to great lengths to distance itself from the excessive salaries and bonus culture and to position itself less as a party focused purely on representing economic interests - the reputational damage suffered by parts of the economy is tarnishing the party. The down-to-earth liberalism embodied by party leader Philipp Müller is nevertheless proving increasingly popu-

lar. The party is accredited with great expertise in policy on Europe in particular, not least thanks to the work of the free democrat President of the Swiss Confederation and Foreign Minister, Didier Burkhalter.

The CVP faces major challenges. Its support fell by over two percentage points at the 2011 elections and the downward trend has continued on a similar scale in many cantons. The CVP is steadfastly attempting to position itself as a traditional centre party which plays a vital role in Switzerland's political culture as a mediator between the two ends of the political spectrum. However, it is often difficult to predict the approach the CVP will adopt on political issues. It sometimes enters into pacts with the left and sometimes with the right. This can be seen in a positive light as a genuine willingness to compromise, but voters often have problems knowing what the CVP stands for. There is also great divergence within the party between social, business-oriented and rural-conservative factions. In the legislative period prior to 2011, the CVP worked closely with the Green Liberal Party (GLP) and the Evangelical People's Party (EVP), and then after the elections with the BDP. This reflects the CVP's perhaps somewhat excessive flexibility or maybe also its well-honed instinct for power since, despite being a small party, the BDP,

Relations between Switzerland and the EU will be a key issue in election year

with Finance Minister Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, still contributes a Federal Council seat to the partnership of convenience.

"New centre" unsteady

The BDP, which sees itself as a new centre party after breaking away from the SVP, is nevertheless not on very solid foundations itself. The BDP suffered a huge setback in one of its strongholds, the canton of Berne, at the elections last March. The diagnosis here is also a rather indistinct profile.

The same cannot be said of the GLP, also a relatively new centre party. Not only was it one of the winners during the last federal elections, it has also since recorded gains in almost all cantonal elections. The combination of liberalism and ecology makes the party an attractive alternative for many people. Its ethos of a sustainable energy and environmental policy and a liberal economic and social policy captures the spirit of the times.

The "original" greens, the Green Party (GPS), have never really recovered from their election defeat in 2011. Their key concerns are very much overshadowed by the predominant issues of policy on Europe and immigration.