

“Critical limits of our health care system will be reached between the 8th and the 18th of November”

Very serious situation reports of the Swiss National Covid-19 Science Task Force

The debate about Covid-19 has become rather derailed in recent months. If it had been conducted on a more objective basis and without the completely unnecessary playing off of economics versus health and other issues, we could probably have spared ourselves the current situation. Fact is, that the cynical – and factually also wrong – talk “‘only’ people elder than 80 will die” collides with reality. Also, the debate about freedom and the concept of freedom are at a level that is rather frightening.

If our health care system reaches the limits of its capacities, which can happen very soon, this affects everyone of us – from toddlers to the eldest, from the currently very healthy to those who have been less fortunate in terms of health. Then “restrictions” of a completely different, quite actually existential kind will occur – without us then being able to influence them.

From the situation report of the National Covid-19 Science Task Force (NCS-TF) as of 23 October 2020

Summary and recommendations

Switzerland is facing exponential growth in the number of SARS-CoV-2 cases, hospitalisations and ICU admissions. This is a situation of extreme urgency where every day counts. We must take immediate action to prevent hospitals and intensive care units from becoming overflowing and to maintain standard-of-care.

The Science Task Force recommends a number of measures to quickly reduce the reproduction number R to well below 1.0. These measures should be realisable for society and protect the core of the economy (with compensation measures for particularly affected economic sectors). These measures should be sustainable over a long period, which may realistically extend to March/April 2021:

1. wearing of masks by young people and adults in all indoor and crowded outdoor areas (street markets, etc.)
2. home-office teleworking for all employees for whom this is possible.
3. closure of entertainment and recreation facilities in confined and poorly ventilated indoor spaces where conditions

But then, there will be “limitations” of existential nature – beyond our personal control. If we ourselves or someone close to us, a friend or acquaintance, suffers an accident or falls seriously ill – where do we turn to? This has nothing to do with panic-mongering – another completely inappropriate term in this context – but a lot of it is about common sense.

We already knew about it in spring – but it has obviously fallen into oblivion among all these debates. Now we are where we are. Now we are all asked to use our common sense, and to prevent this development for the sake of us and our fellow men. And, of course, the protection of human life and health of the population is the State’s supreme and most important task. At least, the right to life is the absolute fundament of all other rights – it doesn’t require too much insight to understand this.

allow the transmission of coronavirus between people in close contact.

4. restriction of private gatherings, for example to fewer than 10 people.
5. restriction of public gatherings, for example to fewer than 50 people.
6. restriction of the opening hours of restaurants and bars, for example to 21.00 hours.
7. stopping activities with a high risk of coronavirus transmission, such as sports with direct contact, singing or concerts with wind instruments.
8. switching to exclusive online education in all secondary and higher education institutions for which such education is possible.
9. increasing the number of coronavirus testing centers and the number of contact tracers.
10. regular testing of employees in high risk environments.

The exact thresholds for recommendations 4, 5 and 6 can be adjusted according to the situation.

The objectives of these interventions are

- to prevent the Swiss healthcare system from collapse and to ensure the quality of medical care,

And if in these times – we (and especially the healthy among us) realise more clearly again what a high good the protection of health and the best possible care for sick people is, we should take this as another reason to think about our health care system. We must finally get away from the “economization” of the medical system, since it is of existential importance for all of us. Concerning this matter, Current Concerns has repeatedly published valuable suggestions (see Current Concerns of 16 October 2020, 7 July 2020, 19 April 2016, 13 February 2015).

The following excerpts from the reports of the Swiss Scientific Task Force are clear, comprehensible and understandable for everyone. They are realities – and realities should be the basis of our actions, at the individual, state or economic level.

Erika Vögeli

- to ensure continuous access to education,
- to secure the basic needs of social life and avoid social isolation,
- to protect economic activity under the given circumstances.

These measures are to provide stability in autumn and winter and avoid yo-yo effects as far as possible. Their effects and acceptance by the population should be reviewed regularly. If the proposed measures are not implemented or if the spread of coronavirus fails to be contained quickly, a national “lockdown” to protect the healthcare system from collapse should not be ruled out. *Every day counts.*

We emphasise that measures need at least two weeks to show an effect on reducing the number of admissions to intensive care units. Even a complete and immediate lockdown would still put immense pressure on the ICU system.

From the situation report of the National Covid-19 Science Task Force (NCS-TF) on 30 October 2020

General overview of the situation; outlook of reaching capacity limits in the healthcare system:

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“Critical limits of our health care ...”

continued from page 1

Since the beginning of October 2020, the daily number of positive SARS-CoV-2 tests, hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths are doubling approximately weekly. As a consequence, we expect that critical limits of our healthcare system will be reached between the 8th and 18th of November, based on the predictions of October 29th. Here, we discuss limits in the capacity of hospital wards and intensive care units based on the available data.

Hospital beds: As reported in the Informations-und Einsatz-System of the Koordinierter Sanitätsdienst, there are over 24'300 hospital beds available in Switzerland, of which about 6'000 beds are currently free. If the number of hospitalisations increased at the current level, the limits of the capacity could be reached soon.

There is therefore a high risk of Switzerland reaching and then exceeding the capacity of hospital beds and ICU beds between the 8th and 18th of November, based on the predictions of 29 October. Such a situation would compromise care for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients alike. As discussed below – while we expect that the measures taken on a cantonal and national level in October 2020 will improve the situation, there is a substantial probability that their effect will manifest after the limits of the healthcare system have been reached or exceeded.

Even if the risk of reaching and exceeding the limits of the healthcare system is imminent, it is, of course, extremely important to reduce the extent and the du-

ration of capacity overflow. Reducing the extent and the duration means that fewer patients will be in a situation where standard-of-care cannot be maintained.

It is important to note that this situation – an overflow of the capacity of the health care system – can fundamentally only be solved by strongly reducing the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and thereby decreasing the number of COVID-19 patients. Increases in the capacity of the health care system can mitigate the situation in the short term, but do not offer a sustainable solution. This is because, without stopping the spread of SARS-CoV-2, any capacity increase would rapidly be offset by an increase in case numbers. Strictly as an example, if it was possible to add 200 fully staffed ICU beds, then, at a doubling time of one week, this would delay the moment when the limits of the capacity are reached by less than two days.

What needs to be done so that the measures are effective?

In October 2020, a number of national and cantonal measures were taken. The goal of these measures is to reverse the trend described above and achieve a reduction in case numbers, hospitalisations and deaths. Here we discuss the factors that determine the effectiveness of these measures.

The key determinants to achieve a high degree of effectiveness of the combination of measures that have been put in place are timeless as well as:

- **Compliance** by all stakeholders and the providers of the health and social services,

- **Adherence** of the people, decision makers and stakeholders to the measures in a spirit of solidarity and joint responsibility. Compliance and adherence are of particular importance in a situation where the interventions aim at protecting the health care system while also protecting the economy, social life, freedom and access to education.

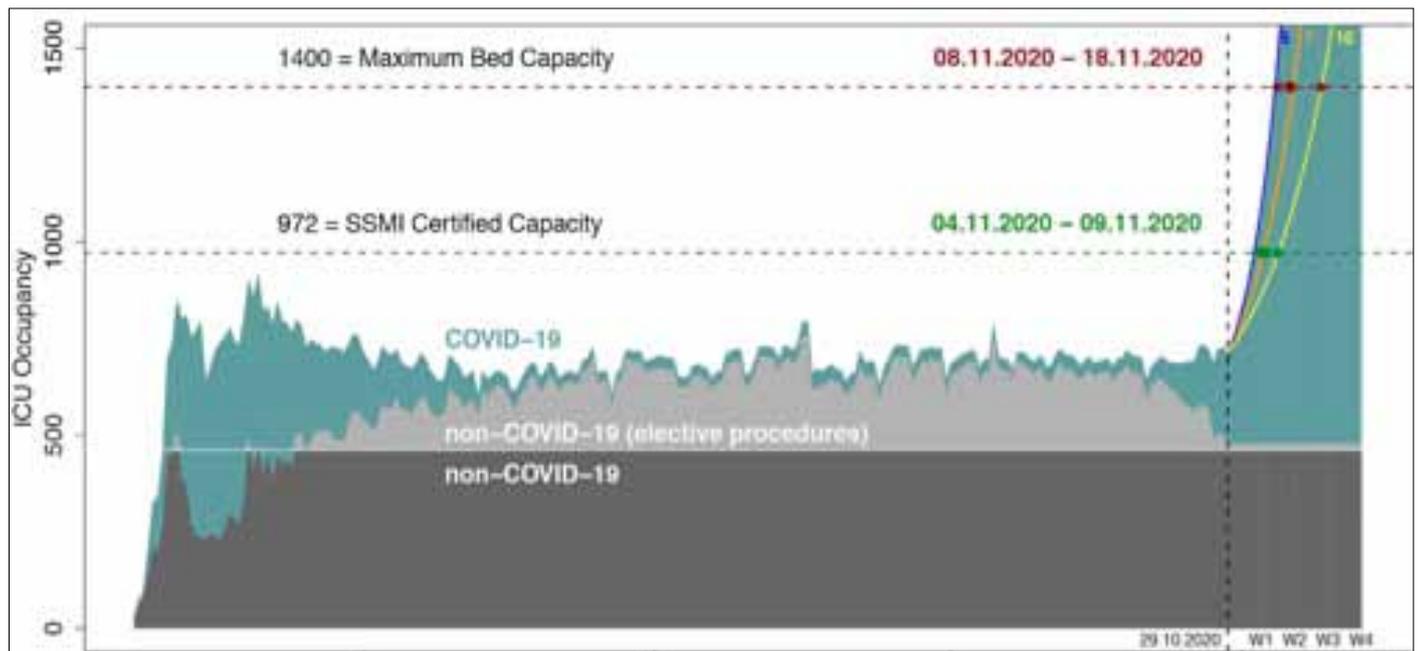
Consequently the implementation of measures need to be well understood by the whole population. Clear communication is key.

Protecting the health care system: what parameters need to be observed, and what decisions are coming up?

[...] The main question is whether the measures in Switzerland are successful in leading to a reduction in the number of new positive tests, hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths per day. There are *indirect indicators* that can offer first insights into the effect of measures on travel, mobility, home office activity, and more. These indicators are valuable and can potentially reveal with almost no time delay whether implemented measures show an effect. However, since these measures are indirect, it remains to be established whether these indicators can reliably predict whether a reduction of case numbers will be achieved. To do so, one needs to monitor the development of positive tests, hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths.

Measures implemented today and thus reducing transmission today will become

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Current prediction of the number of intensive care beds to be occupied and the time until capacity limits are reached. The line ending in 7 at the top left means the occupancy of the intensive care units due to the doubling every 7 days at present. The numbers 5 and 10 stand for doubling times of 5 and 10 days respectively. (Graphic: Overview and evaluation of the situation, 30 October 2020 National COVID-19 Science Task Force)

The challenge now is to prevent new infections and further diseases

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

In many European countries, including Switzerland, Austria and Germany, the number of new corona infections and the number of Covid-19 diseases requiring medical treatment have again risen heavily. Those responsible in hospitals, but also doctors working in private practice, say that they will soon no longer be able to cope with the upcoming Covid-19 treatments. The correction of this development, which is necessary in every respect, is impeded by various factors. Fortunately, there are also initiatives that encourage people and make them feel confident.

One of these hindering factors are, from time to time, the media. Guidelines such as “satisfy donors”, “ideological standards”, “generate attention” or “increase circulation/rating” can run contrary to the goal of containing a pandemic. Media, which are primarily concerned with principles such as those mentioned above, do not create trust and do not help people to find their way safely. Anyway, there is still an awareness of responsibility in the media world. This became apparent in spring and can, it is to be hoped, prove itself again in the current situation. This can be seen already now.

Statements that are one hundred percent based on the will to prevent new infections and other diseases of Covid-19 are helpful in fighting pandemics. A good current example is the “appeal of the Swiss youth political organisation of the parties BDP, CVP, EPP, FDP and GLP to the young” of 24 October 2020 (see box p. 5).

What can I do to prevent infection?

Everyone is concerned with the question: What can I do to prevent corona infection

Human Rights: the right to be yourself

A lifetime of working in human rights – as senior lawyer with the UN, Secretary of the Human Rights Committee, Chief of Petitions, Independent Expert on International Order, President of a human rights ngo, professor of international and human rights law and activist author allows me to confirm the truism that human rights are interrelated and interdependent. Experience demonstrates that human rights constitute a holistic system of interdependent entitlements and freedoms. Yet, the oft repeated slogan that “all rights are equal” is a platitude, manifesting an absence of a sense for proportions and discernment. Indeed, human dignity, the source of all human rights, necessarily dictates priorities – a hierarchy based on common sense and mutual respect: First and foremost, the right to live in dignity, a commitment to promote and protect the sanctity of life, which encompasses physical in-

tegrity, the right to food, water, housing, healthcare, freedom from war, a human right to peace. Secondly, the right to freely develop one’s personality i.e. the right to be who we are, the right to our identity, the right to set the priorities of our lives – that essential right of self-determination, free from artificial constraints imposed by government or society – and as a corollary the duty to respect the rights of others. Codification of human rights has not been concluded, since continuing standard-setting remains necessary to better protect the practical exercise of our common human dignity. Yet, it would seem that all rights can be subsumed under the two categories above, and that the letter of the law must never be instrumentalized to subvert the spirit of the law, the primacy of the *dignitas humana*.

Alfred de Zayas

and Covid-19 disease? After all the answer is simple. The best protection so far is to follow the known rules (keep a sufficient distance, wear a protective mask correctly, pay attention to hygiene) and – to reduce the remaining risk – limit contacts to what is necessary.

It would seem that a country like China has the agenda of fighting the corona virus in its own country resolutely and with substantial resources so that further infections and diseases can be avoided as far as possible. The responsible authorities in the eastern Chinese city of Qingdao, a metropolis with nine million inhabitants, have tested all city dwellers around two weeks ago within a few days after a few new infec-

tions were found in the city. This ensured that there would be no further infections in the city. You do not have to take this example as a model, but the differences with our countries are striking. While here are complaints ranging from corona is equal to false alarm to mandatory mask-wearing is equal to restriction of freedom to pandemic control is equal to economic ruin, elsewhere the fight against the pandemic has absolute priority – not against the population, but with their consent. Not least in the economic interest, as China’s economic recovery seems to demonstrate (see box page 4).

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“Critical limits of our health care ...”

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manifest [...] only with a substantial time delay. The mean time delays are:

1. 8 days from infection to the confirmation of a case (more specifically, assuming a mean of five days until onset of symptoms and a mean of 3 days from symptoms to a positive test),
2. 9.5 days from infection to hospitalisation,
3. 12 days from infection to ICU and
4. 17 days from infection to death. [...]

For the measures imposed at the national level on 29 October, we therefore expect to know their effect with some degree of certainty on November 17. Individual can-

tons took comparable measures at an earlier time point that are comparable to the national measures imposed on 29 October. The canton of Valais took such measures on 21 October, and we expect to be able to evaluate their effect with some certainty around 9 November.

It is important to keep in mind that, if additional measures are taken at these time points (e. g. on 9 or 17 November), then it will again take 12 days until these measures would start to have an effect in terms of reducing ICU hospitalisation.

With the current ICU occupancy (227 cases based on database query on 28 October 2020 at 17:26) and the current doubling time (7 days) the expected number

of patients requiring ICU hospitalisation is around 1,450 in two weeks (on 12 November) and thus already beyond the estimated capacity of beds (1,400 beds) at which the current high quality of ICU care can be maintained. With a range of doubling times from 5-10 days, that 1,400 ICU bed limit is expected to be reached between the 7th and the 17th of November. Moreover the graph shows that in recent times elective procedures have already decreased, demonstrating that already at present the increase in COVID-19 ICU patients affects the health care in Switzerland.

Source: National COVID-19 Science Task Force Status Report of 23 and 30 October 2020 (excerpts)

"The challenge now is ..."

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Slovakia is the first European country that wants all of its adult citizens to be tested.

More protection against infections does not mean lockdown

The assertion that only an economic lockdown can prevent the proliferation of infections is misleading. In recent months, most companies and businesses have developed precautionary measures that provide good infection protection – if the rules are observed.

Obviously, this is difficult for some, especially in the private sector and during leisure time. Relearning and readjusting for the time of the pandemic has nothing to do with lockdown. Even the latest statements by the President of the World Medical Association, *Ulrich Montgomery*, should not be understood as capitulation. In an interview with the "Rheinische Post" on 23 October, he had said that with an infection rate of 20,000 per day in Germany (currently, as of 30 October, it is already at a peak of over 18,000) there has to be a new lockdown. It will then no longer be possible for the health authorities to trace and interrupt the infection chains; then "the situation gets out of control". Officials are already saying that in Germany now for 75% of those who were tested positive for the virus it is not possible to determine where and how the infection occurred.

It is also true that in particular we citizens have it in our hands to bring the situation back under control. Every single one.

Give priority to security

Of course, the knowledge of how to prevent infection is not yet one hundred percent. This makes it all the more necessary to increase knowledge and to continuously improve precautionary measures. And is it

Health and economy

"Is there a conflict of interests between health protection and economy?"

I do not see this conflict. If a virus spreads, the economy will not thrive. The idea that foregoing state mandated restrictions will help the economy is an illusion. Evidence from the Spanish flu a hundred years ago shows that where early and decisive measures were taken, the economic damage was least in the end."

Clemens Fuest, head of the Munich Ifo Institute, in an interview with the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" on 24 October 2020

"Last week, economists from important companies and associations spoke out clearly against further lockdowns. Appar-

ently, the idea behind the arguments is that there is a conflict of goals between the health sector and the economy. This notion is problematic because empirical studies and theoretical considerations (with all the uncertainties we have to live with in the pandemic) show that such a conflict of goals may exist in the short term, but not in the medium and long term. A healthy economy requires healthy people."

Martin Kolmar, Professor and Director of the Institute for Business Ethics at the University of St. Gallen, in an article for the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" of 26 October 2020

(Translation Current Concerns)

not reasonable to give priority to safety in cases of doubt?

There are now enough shocking descriptions of affected patients, but also of doctors and nursing staff about the course of disease in all age groups, with and without pre-existing conditions. Everyone is well advised to behave in such a way that they do not infect themselves, but also in such a way that they cannot infect others.

The state authorities and the responsible politicians in our countries, as we have been able to observe in recent weeks and months, have come under enormous pressure. Lobby groups for – quite understandable – material interests and advocates of a questionable concept of freedom have played a part in this. Theories according to which the state measures would have the primary goal of establishing a dictatorship with total control have attracted a vociferous minority that is receiving much attention. The double-edged notion that "criticism" is the spice of the democratic soup has also contributed to the uncertainty. A film like "Un-erhört" (Unheard-of/Outrageous), which recently premiered in Zurich, is more

likely to further fuel the polarisation that already exists anyway, and will most likely contribute nothing to the actual solution of the problem.

Trust in government agencies need not be a disadvantage

Thereby it is misjudged that it can serve a good cause if citizens have confidence in the state and its officials, and if these officials justify this confidence by honestly and openly assuming responsibility, providing guidance and helping to encourage and strengthen people.

Studies show that those countries with a good, trust-based relationship between the government and those governed are better able to get through the pandemic than countries where this is not the case. This need not even depend on the form of government, as is evident in some Asian countries.

Freedom and State Power are not opposites

But freedom and state power are not contradictions either. On the contrary, the free

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New state rules in Switzerland and Germany

km. On 28 October 2020, both, the Swiss Federal Council and the German Chancellor and the Prime Ministers of the German federal states adopted new measures to contain the corona pandemic and presented them to the public. With the help of the adopted measures a lockdown like in spring should be prevented in both countries.

The tenor of both packages of measures is the significant reduction of leisure contacts, more in Germany than in Switzerland. In Switzerland discos and dance halls will be closed until further notice, but restaurants and bars may remain open from 6 am to 11 pm under protective conditions. In Germany, all catering businesses will be closed, except

for the possibility of offering food and drink for consumption at home.

There shall also be more restrictions in Germany for events and private trips. For the next time there are no longer any overnight offers for tourist purposes. All institutions and facilities that can be allocated to recreational activities are to be closed. In Switzerland the number of participants in such leisure events is severely restricted.

In addition, both countries have extended the obligation to wear protective masks in public and at work.

For the time being, the measures in Germany are limited until the end of November 2020; in Switzerland there are no deadlines.

Kindergartens and schools are to remain open in both countries. Retail and wholesale trade will also remain open, provided it complies with strict protection rules. The same applies to all other businesses, but they should enable more work from home.

While the Swiss Federal Council has not made any financial commitments for the affected businesses, financial aid totalling 10 billion euros has been promised to the affected German businesses.

Stricter state sanctions for violations of the new rules are explicitly mentioned only in Germany.

Above all, however, both countries are appealing to the insight of their citizens.

"The challenge now is ..."

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and democratic republic under the rule of law is the state that is at all able to secure freedom and prevent a "law of the jungle". It does so by means of the monopoly on legitimate use of force, by means of the state guarantee of the basic and human rights, by means of principles of the rule of law, which include the binding of all state action to the law and the guarantee of legal recourse for every citizen, by means of the separation of powers and control of powers, horizontally between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, but also vertically through a federal order, and by means of republican representation of the entire people – ideally flanked by direct democracy.

Freedom does not mean despotism and arbitrariness, but responsible personal development in the knowledge of human social nature. The German Federal Constitutional Court had already stated this in 1954 in its interpretation of the concept of freedom. "The dignity of the person", as it says in a commentary on Article 1 in the German Basic Law, "consists in the fact that man as a spiritual-moral being is designed to determine himself in freedom

and self-confidence and to have an effect in the environment". "Spiritual-moral being" means that man can recognise and distinguish between justice and injustice, right and wrong, good and evil, and can choose the path of justice, right and good. It serves the common good when he does so, the common good is impaired when he decides otherwise. The former corresponds to his social nature.

Freedom, as *Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider* stated in his fundamental work "Res publica res populi. Grundlegung einer Allgemeinen Rechtslehre" (Res publica res populi. Groundwork of a general legal doctrine), is never only freedom from something, but always also freedom to something – in the sense of moral law¹. Chapter headings such as "Distinction between state and society contrary to republican law" or "Proximity and distance of the republican to the liberalist concept of freedom" underline this. The protection of life and physical integrity are basic rights that obligate not only the state but also the citizens.

The emotional basis for human solidarity is existing

Citizens would like to see officials who, as in spring 2020, take an honest stand

again, give clear guidance and at the same time express that a pandemic can only be fought if everyone works together as equals.

History cannot be repeated, and it is also a good thing that no one is trying to do so. Even if the cacophony has increased today, we must not forget that we know much more about the virus, about the diseases associated with it and about the ways to protect ourselves today than we did six months ago. This knowledge must be used for the benefit of mankind. That is why the main concern now is once again to prevent new infections and further diseases. The emotional basis of human solidarity, which has done so much good in spring in the first response to the pandemic, is in accordance with human nature. This is why it has not been gone and can still be fully effective six months later.

¹ cf. the term "Sittengesetz" (moral law) as well understandable introduction <https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Moral+Law>

"Together we can ensure that the virus will not have the last word"

Appeal of the Swiss youth parties of BDP, CVP, EVP, FDP and GLP to the young

"The corona pandemic is causing great damage and above all, is costing human lives. Additionally, many people, especially young people, have lost their jobs or are struggling to find a job. Nobody knows what course the crisis will take. Therefore, it is important, in this worsening situation, that we young people act responsibly and act in solidarity with both young and old people!

Government mandates can achieve much in this crisis, but government cannot force citizens to act responsibly and with solidarity. It is up to us young people to comply with the important hy-

giene measures and, above all, to wear masks and keep our distance. The virus can strike everyone.

Therefore, the Youth Parties all appeal to the young people to follow the following rules of hygiene and conduct seriously. Only together can we keep the corona virus in check.

- wear a mask where required
- always practice social distancing
- no shaking hands/no hugs
- wash your hands thoroughly
- in case of symptoms, get tested immediately and stay at home

- download the Corona-App and use it actively

These vital measures are particularly important now, because they protect human life at a time when case numbers are rising rapidly. Together we can ensure that the virus does not have the last word and that the situation does not worsen. Let us act together responsibly and for the well-being of the community – now more than ever!"

Source: <https://www.jcyp.ch/2020/10/24/appeil-der-schweizerischen-jungparteien-an-die-jungen/> of 24 October 2020 (Translation *Current Concerns*)

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A seat for Switzerland in the UN Security Council?

Neutrality jeopardised

by Dr iur. Marianne Wüthrich

The acute analysis of the Security Council debate on 5 October 2020 by Karin Leukefeld¹ cannot be overestimated. For the critical thinker this sobering report and political presentation of the intimate insider of Middle East affairs is an invitation to take a closer look. And for Swiss readers the inevitable question arises: Why on earth should the Swiss federal government pursue a seat for Switzerland in this body? The topic has already been scrutinised twice in Current Concerns.² On 30 October President of the Confederation Simonetta Sommaruga and Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis have submitted the candidacy of Switzerland for a non-permanent seat in the Security Council session 2023/2024 to the UN delegates. "Members who know how to build bridges are needed", Sommaruga said. Apparently certain figures in the Swiss federal capital would prefer the shiny international stage to the rewarding but tiresome treadmill of doing the 'good services'.

I followed Ms Leukefeld's advice and read through the original Security Council debate of 5 October³ in its entirety. The deceitful games NATO states are playing in the UN Security Council became more and more obvious. I started to ask myself many questions: How would the Swiss envoy react in such a situation? How could he take a responsible stance at all as the representative of neutral Switzerland, acting in the name of his country? Considerable damage to Switzerland's reputation – with grave consequences for the trust in our country – would be inevitable.

How to get involved as neutral voice in the power struggle

As Karin Leukefeld showed, the "permanent three" (France, UK, USA), assisted by the other representatives of Western states (Germany, Belgium, Estonia), engaged in a power struggle with the Russian chairman throughout the entire session. The latter had invited Mr José Bustani, former director general of the *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons*, to give his expert opinion at the session. Since the NATO states knew his viewpoint regarding the Syria question and didn't like it they used the opportunity to play a trick on Russia. The British envoy took the lead and refused to listen to the invited expert, speaking in the name of the other five NATO states as well, citing rather flimsy reasons. He demanded that "the presidency put the issue of its proposed brief-er to a procedural vote."

The Swiss population firmly adheres to the principle of neutrality

mw. For 30 years, ETH Zurich has been conducting annual surveys on the attitudes of the population towards Switzerland's foreign and security policy. The latest report from 2019 states: "The principle of neutrality has enjoyed an extremely high level of approval among the population since the start of measurements, and this has tended to increase in recent years." [Emphasis added mw]

When asked "In your opinion, how can Switzerland best protect its interests and at the same time contribute to security in the world?" 96%(!) answered: "Switzerland should maintain its neutrality." The research team explains: "The very high level of approval for maintaining the Neutrality is independent of the age, educational level, language region and gender of the respondents." (Security 2019, p. 120)

To the question "Which of the following statements would you agree with?" 94% of the participants answered: "Thanks to its neutrality, Switzerland can mediate in conflicts and render good service internationally" and 85%: "Neutrality is inextricably linked with our state concept." (Security 2019, p. 123)

A seat on the UN Security Council is definitely in contradiction to the will of the Swiss, which has been affirmed for 30 years.

Source: Szvircsev Tresch, Tibor and Wenger, Andreas. "Sicherheit 2019 – Aussen-, Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitische Meinungsbildung im Trend" (Security 2019 – Foreign, security and defense policy formation in trend.) Military Academy (MILAK) at ETH Zurich and Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich. (www.css.ethz.ch)

When the chairman pointed out that his position entailed the right to invite external experts according to the rules of order and it had almost never happened before that such an invitation was questioned by other members this was to no avail. Then the representatives of the UK, France and Germany started to attack the Russian chairman with absurd tit-for-tat arguments. He remained calm and responded even with a touch of humor, supported by the Chinese envoy who made a point with his balanced, matter-of-fact statements. When some of the other members of the Security Council tried to moderate they were simply ignored by the "big guys".

In such a scenario a Swiss representative would find himself in a precarious situation. Should he voice his opinion and risk to be ignored as one of the "small guys"? Should he teach his colleagues some lesson in democracy and explain the matter to them? In this case: "The chairman simply adhered to our rules of order when he invited this expert and I suggest we now just listen to him". Or should he remain silent until the "big guys" have finished their quarrels? But then, what's the point in his sitting in the Security Council?

The scam with the voting question

The fact, that the result of a procedural vote would be different depending on the wording of the voting question, was clear to everyone present. Nine (out of 15) votes must be achieved by a proposal in the Security Council to be adopted. Therefore, the Briton asked the president to put the

question to the vote: "The Russian Federation wishes to propose this briefer. Who supports it?" His tactical reasoning: Apart from Russia and China, hardly any member will agree, at least not the six NATO states, and most of the others are economically/politically dependent on the goodwill of the great powers and will therefore prefer not to get caught in the nettles.

The chairman, on the other hand, wanted to put the question to the vote: "Who is opposed to Mr José Bustani briefing today's meeting?" Probably only the six NATO states would have agreed to this question, in any case they would not have brought the nine votes together. Then José Bustani could have contributed his important information.

According to the saying: "De Gschüider git noh, de Esel bleibt sctoh" (The saner gives way, the donkey stops.) the president, after pulling the rope for a long time, let the British version be voted on. As we learned from Ms Leukefeld, only three members voted for José Bustani's speech. Nevertheless, the Russian chairman held the upper hand in a shrewd manner by reading Bustani's speech himself – to the impotent indignation of his opponents.

How would the Swiss representative have voted? Would he have had the courage to cast his vote for José Bustani's speech, because this is the only correct answer based on international law? The representative of South Africa, Mr. van Shalkwyk, had this courage (see box below). Or would the Swiss have ab-

"A seat for Switzerland ..."

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stained? Together with the states that are dependent on the favour of the "big ones" and who think they have "nothing to say anyway"? Or even worse: would he have voted no, thus demonstrating that parts of the Swiss elite would like to belong to NATO completely? This, it should be noted, against the will of the people, who in polls regularly vote with 90 or more per cent in favour of maintaining Switzerland's neutrality.

The UN Security Council – no place for neutral Switzerland

In summary, it must be noted: For Switzerland a seat on the Security Council would not be responsible. Since as a small, neutral state, Switzerland has voluntarily committed itself to subjecting every act of cooperation in the world to strict criteria: How can our country, how can we privileged Swiss people contribute to making the world a more peaceful place? Who would like to make use of our much appreciated good offices? Where can we bring urgently needed humanitarian aid? To which conflicting parties can we offer a safe place and our experienced diplomats for delicate talks?

With a seat on the Security Council, on the other hand, Switzerland would share responsibility for the decisions that are made there – even if it makes no sound and abstains from voting. With this in mind, outgoing NZZ editor *Michael Schoenenberger* writes: "Switzerland as a member of the UN Security Council? This will raise difficult to unsolvable questions, or at the very least it will lead to very unpleasant positional references that will hardly be compatible with the current understanding of neutrality".⁴

The people in the federal administration are trying to appease such concerns: In the two years that Switzerland would

Statement by Ambassador Marthinus van Shalkwyk, South Africa's Representative to the UN Security Council

"I am not going to dwell too long on the vote that we needed to take today. It is unfortunate that we had to vote on a briefer. My delegation would be the last to stifle any kind of view that should or needs to be brought to the Council, or that others feel should be brought to the Council, as long as it is relevant. And we believe that Mr *Bustani*, as a former Director General of the *Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons* (OPCW), eminently understands the procedures of the organization — how it works and how to deal with previous and current chemical-weapon States. Therefore, we were not open to supporting the stifling of any kind of view, whether we agreed with it or not. We would not necessarily have agreed with his opinions, but we would have wanted to hear them. [...]"

As indicated on a number of occasions, South Africa will continue to

work for the depoliticisation of the relevant management and decision-making structures established under the Chemical Weapons Convention and also towards ensuring that States parties be held accountable for any violations of their obligations, based on credible, impartial and irrefutable evidence.

In conclusion, South Africa firmly believes that we should endeavour to approach the situation in Syria in a holistic manner, whereby the political, humanitarian and chemical weapons tracks all converge in a single unified path to long-term peace, security and stability for Syria. The only sustainable solution to the Syrian question remains the achievement of a political solution through an inclusive Syrian-led dialogue aimed at a political resolution reflective of the will of the people of Syria."

Source: www.un.org

be on the Security Council, there would hardly ever be any "important" decisions. Rather, only "technical issues" are usually dealt with there.

Was the vote on a speaker, who would stand up to the major NATO powers, not an "important" decision? Could the Swiss, who would have been involved, have contributed something to more honesty and humanity in the relations between the states? But it is true: Of course there are much more important questions that the Security Council has to deal with: Decisions on war and peace or on economic sanctions against a state, or rather to the detriment of its people. Would Switzerland dare to say no? Or would it remain "neutral" and abstain? However it would or would not get involved – a seat on the Security Council would do great damage to Switzerland's reputation.

After all, how did Switzerland's patron saint, *Niklaus von Flüe*, advise the Swiss 600 years ago: "Machet den zun nyt zuo wyt!" (Don't make the fence too wide!) and "Don't interfere in foreign affairs!" •

¹ "With Syria the would-be great power Germany shows up", in: *Current Concerns* of 28 October 2020

² Wüthrich, Marianne. "UN Security Council: No place for neutral Switzerland". in: *Current Concerns* of 18 March 2013, and "Foreign Policy Program of the Federal Council with question mark. What is neutral Switzerland doing in the UN Security Council", in: *Current Concerns* of 22 July 2020. See also the statements of the long-time Swiss ambassador Dr phil. *Paul Widmer* quoted there.

³ United Nations Security Council. Seventy-fifth year. 8764th meeting. S/PV.8764. Monday, 5 October 2020, New York

⁴ Schoenenberger, Michael. "Kleinstaat am Scheideweg" (Small state at a crossroads), in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 29 October 2020

The West must treat Russia with greater respect

Impressions of the meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club

by Alexander Rahr*



Alexander Rahr
(Picture spisok-putina.org)

The *Valdai Discussion Club* has existed for seventeen years. International and Russian political scientists meet there to discuss the world situation. Vladimir Putin has attended all these meetings and has always answered the questions from

interested participants. The results of the Valdai Discussion Club meetings are usually reported intensively, only the German media keep a dead silence about the meetings – they prevent the Valdai Discussion Club from being noticed by the public. They do this despite the fact that numerous renowned German experts are also involved in the work of the discussion club.

This year the meeting of the Valdai Club took place on 21 and 22 October in

Moscow under strict hygiene measures. The author was the only foreign participant who could come to Russia from Berlin with a special permit. For three days there were intensive discussions, topics were climate and environmental protection, the global economic crisis, questions of the future world order, aspects of the Asian security architecture and industrialisation 4.0; highly interesting were the lectures of two leading Russian virologists on the applied vaccines in Russia. It was quite astonishing to hear how Western politicians and the media are trying hard to denounce the success of the vaccination campaign in Russia. Russia itself wants to sell the vaccines worldwide, but is denigrated as an unpleasant competitor.

On the second day of the conference, Prime Minister *Mikhail Mishustin* spoke about digitisation. He said that Russia would soon cease to be a mere exporter of raw materials and modernise its economy with the help of new information technologies. Successes were already visible to the naked eye. Mishustin assured the West that Russia was striving for economic cooperation.

At the end of the Valdai event Putin discussed for three hours with the guests. His main statements were:

1. Russia is part of Europe, but not part of the West. Russia repudiates Western attempts to change Russia from outside.
2. Russia is not averse to entering into a military alliance with China. Moscow has nothing against further nuclear rearmament in China either. The West should disarm.
3. In the case of the poisoned *Alexei Navalny*, Berlin had behaved unfriendly towards Moscow. Russia was prepared to investigate, but demanded access to the poison samples taken from Navalny.
4. There had not been a collapse in prices on the oil and gas market, and Russian energy exports were functioning well. In addition, Russia is now the world's

largest cereal exporter. Western sanctions no longer mattered to the country. 5. Putin recalled his speech at the *Munich Security Conference* in 2007, where he warned the West against a NATO enlargement. His ministers had considered his statements at that time as too confrontational.

Putin contradicted Western analyses that he wanted to drive a wedge into transatlantic relations, but criticised Europe's bondage to the USA, especially in the case of *Nord Stream 2*. Germany, Putin said, was not an advocate of Russian interests in the West. In 1990, Russia, in particular, had done more than the West to promote German reunification. Germany should therefore have taken a positive view of the Crimean people's petition for a referendum on joining Russia.

The author was able to hold numerous talks in Moscow. He is convinced that a return to normality in bilateral relations is not possible today. The West and Russia have been divided by the many conflicts. Even after the end of the Corona pandemic, Russia does not really want to open itself to the West. First, the West must treat Russia with greater respect. Most political scientists in Russia have not excluded a further dramatic deterioration of relations with the West. Western democracy has little chance in today's Russia, they say, and the alternative to Putin was rather nationalism.

The author was surprised how much the temporary break in contacts and connections during the Corona crisis had damaged bilateral relations. They cannot be repaired overnight. The main culprit for the break in relations is seen by those who spoke out as being the USA. They would keep the Germans, who actually did not want to start a dispute with Moscow, on a short leash. •

Source: <http://www.ruslandkontrovers.com/putin-im-valdai-klub> of 26 October 2020. Reprint with kind permission.

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What can Afghans expect after 40 years of war?

The country at the Hindu Kush after the US agreement with the Taliban and in the midst of direct intra-Afghan peace talks

by *Matin Baraki**



*Matin Baraki
(Picture ma)*

After more than a decade of secret and official negotiations, the United States and the Taliban agreed on an “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” in Doha on 29 February 2020. In this

context, the US and Afghan governments issued a joint declaration on the same day. However, this was not yet a comprehensive peace agreement, but only a kind of “door opener” to enter into intra-Afghan negotiations. This was a first step towards a possible peace in Afghanistan. But the road to it will be long and rocky. When Barack Obama was elected president of the United States in 2008, the Taliban signalled their willingness to seek a political solution to the conflict at the Hindu Kush. But his announcement that the CIA’s Guantánamo concentration camp in Cuba would be closed down and for that reason no more prisoners would be taken as of now, meant that the moderate Taliban officials who were willing to negotiate were now physically eliminated by drone strikes. In 2013 alone, US forces killed more than 8,000 of them.¹

Now the direct intra-Afghan peace talks have also begun in Doha. But only free, democratic and strictly controlled, bottom-up elections for a constituent assembly (Loya Jirga) would save the defiled Afghan people.

If one wants to classify the significance of the agreement between the US administration and the Taliban of 29 February 2020 in Doha, the capital of the Gulf Emirate of Qatar², one will recall the saying attributed to the Roman poet *Horace*: “The mountain laboured and brought forth a mouse”. The document was signed by Mullah *Abdul Ghani Baradar*, head of the Taliban delegation, and US Special Envoy *Zalmay Khalilzad*, a native Afghan. US President *Donald Trump*, who called the Taliban “great fighters”³, sent his Secretary of State *Mike Pompeo* to the signing ceremony. Taliban negotiator *Abbas Stanikzai* proudly em-

phasised: “There is no doubt we have won the war”⁴. The Taliban Islamist fighters see themselves as the only jihadist movement that has defied the superpower and forced it to withdraw.

Pakistan is considered the Taliban’s main supporter. Therefore, the success of the agreement also depends on the relations between the Pakistani and Afghan administrations. In the run-up to the last round of negotiations, US Secretary of State *Pompeo* had “put a lot of effort into winning over the Pakistani leadership to the agreement. But their support remains questionable”⁵.

US-Taliban agreement of February 2020

After 19 years of war, the death of 1968 US soldiers⁶ and two trillion US dollars that Washington squandered in the war against Afghanistan⁷, the Americans “committed themselves to withdraw their troops from the state [Afghanistan] after years of failure. In view of their full-bodied announcements in 2001, this amounts to an escape. The USA experienced a mini-Vietnam in Afghanistan”⁸.

The ink on the paper was not yet dry when Afghan President *Ashraf Ghani* promptly spoke out on 1 March, rejecting one of the key elements of the agreement. According to the agreement, 5,000 captured Taliban fighters were to be released by 10 March. *Ghani* stressed that there was “no commitment”. “The United States mediated. Mediation does not mean making decisions.”⁹ The Taliban prisoners are an important strategic asset for the Kabul administration, which saw them as part of the intra-Afghan negotiations and did not accept them as a precondition for the negotiations. The decision to release the Taliban fighters was not up to the US, but to his government, *Ghani* stressed. In return, 1,000 captured government fighters must be released. In response to *Ghani*’s statement, a Taliban spokesman, *Sabihullah Mujahid*, announced that fighting would continue until an intra-Afghan settlement will be reached.

The war continues to kill people in Afghanistan every day

Two Taliban attacks in northern Afghanistan killed at least 20 security forces and 16 members of the national security forces were killed in an attack on the military base in the city of *Kunduz*. In another, four police officers were killed and one injured.¹⁰ “Once again, the Taliban want

to demonstrate military strength”¹¹, stated the German Commander for northern Afghanistan, Brigadier General *Jürgen Brötz*. They wanted to bring the Kabul administration to its knees. According to the national security authority in Kabul, the Taliban conducted a total of 2,804 operations until 26 April 2020. *Ashraf Ghani* then gave in and offered to release 1,500 Taliban fighters. But this was immediately rejected by the Taliban, with their political spokesman *Suhail Shaheen* emphasising that “5,000 prisoners should be released as a confidence-building measure, and this should be before intra-Afghan talks”¹². The Taliban thus insisted that, according to the agreement with the USA, the prisoners must be released before the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. They demanded the release of 15 of their named officials. Otherwise there would be no negotiations with the Kabul administration.¹³ By mid-April, the Taliban had released a total of 60 prisoners¹⁴, and the government for its part had released 850 prisoners by early May.¹⁵

The US Army took the Taliban attacks as an opportunity to launch an air strike against Taliban fighters immediately on 4 March. In the *Nahr-e-Saraj* district in the southern Afghan province of *Helmand*, a Taliban stronghold, the US Air Force bombed its fighters, according to US military spokesman *Sonny Leggett* on *Twitter*.¹⁶

US interests

One is inclined to ask whether everything is going down the drain?¹⁷ The US representative and the Taliban have held twelve years of secret talks and two years of official talks in *Qatar* to negotiate conditions for a political solution to the longest war in US history. *Trump* wanted to kill two birds with one stone: first, he wanted to realise his election promise to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and win the upcoming elections on 3 November 2020. The second was to integrate the Taliban into the colonial-like structures at the Hindu Kush and neutralise them by awarding them a few posts.

He criticised that the war, which has been going on since the end of 2001, has resulted in high costs for US troops, the American taxpayer and the Afghan people. According to official figures, this war cost \$1.5 billion a week during its peak phases (2002 to 2014). During the election campaign, he promised the American people “that I would start by bringing our troops back home and try to

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On 12 September 2020 the inner-Afghanian peace talks began in Doha, Qatar. For the first time, representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban are holding talks to end the decades-long war. (Picture keystone)

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end this war”¹⁸. Can we believe the capricious US President? Would US strategists allow the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, especially since NATO Secretary General *Jens Stoltenberg*, at the meeting of defence ministers on 14 February 2020, classified the People’s Republic of China as an enemy – diplomatically dressed up as a challenge to the West in the communiqué? Afghanistan shares a border with China in the far north. Exactly there a NATO base is located. The country at the Hindu Kush is an unsinkable aircraft carrier for the USA and NATO. *Barack Obama* had also promised the withdrawal of the US army. But he only reduced the combat troops and thus Afghanised the war. Since then, mainly Afghans, under whatever name, have been fighting Afghans.

A deal of promises

The agreement was thus merely “a deal of promises”¹⁹, as a basis for negotiating further measures are. “We are just at the beginning”²⁰, said Mike Pompeo. The proposed intra-Afghan peace negotiations would require “hard work and sacrifice from all sides”²¹, he noted. Once the agreement is implemented, foreign troops would be completely withdrawn by the

end of April 2021. “If bad things happen, we will return to Afghanistan”²², the US President threatened. The US could win the war in Afghanistan, but to do so it would have to “kill ten million people”²³.

The Taliban’s core demand would be met if the withdrawal of the foreign “invaders” were actually to take place. Taliban leader *Hibatullah Akhundzada* called the agreement a “great victory” for his movement. He said that the agreement would lead “to the end of the occupation”²⁴ of Afghanistan. Among other things, the Taliban pledged that Afghanistan would no longer pose a terrorist threat to the US and its allies. This is nothing more than an alibi argument, because Afghanistan has never posed a terrorist threat to the US and its allies.

Another element of the agreement is the stipulation that the Taliban should conduct negotiations with the Kabul administration. Those would be the actual peace talks. So far, they had refused to negotiate directly with the Kabul leadership because they consider the government a puppet of the USA. According to the agreement, the talks should lead to a lasting ceasefire and a political roadmap for Afghanistan’s future. There is a real possibility that the Taliban’s movement could split again. The faction would then join the *Da’esh* “Islamic State” (IS) oper-

ating in Afghanistan and contribute to its strengthening. The country at the Hindu Kush would then have gone out of the frying pan into the fire.

How many US troops will actually be withdrawn?

The US has pledged to reduce the number of its soldiers from around 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days. The strength of international troops will be reduced proportionally. Only five out of 16 major US military bases and 12 smaller ones would have to be closed in this period. If the agreement is honoured, all foreign troops would be withdrawn within 14 months – by the end of April 2021. The joint declaration by Washington and Kabul of 28 February 2020 restrictively states: “Consistent with the joint assessment and determination between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan” and “subject to the Taliban’s fulfilment of its commitments under the US-Taliban agreement”²⁵. In a commentary by the US State Department on the Doha agreement it is emphasised that the withdrawal of US troops is “conditions-based” and “will depend on how well the Taliban meet their commitments”²⁶. The statements have not yet been assessed by any international body, but only by the US administra-

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tion in consultation with the Kabul leadership. It would be a miracle if Trump really did have the intention of pulling his troops out of the longest war in the history of the United States. But it is more likely that he will act according to the motto of the former German chancellor *Konrad Adenauer*: "What do I care about my babbling of yesterday?" If he is re-elected for a second term on 3 November, he could decide quite differently about a US military withdrawal. He could also invoke the "Strategic Partnership Agreement" concluded in 2012, which allows the US to station troops in Afghanistan until 2024. In addition, there is a secret agreement of 2002 between the Kabul administration under *Hamid Karzai* and the US, which allows US units to remain in Afghanistan for 99 years. So there are a lot of imponderables, which could make the whole story absurd.

First you bring the war, then you retire?

In connection with the IS attack in the Afghan capital Kabul on 6 March 2020, more than 30 people were killed, Trump was asked how the US intends to ensure the security of Afghanistan in the future, since the Afghan government can no longer rely on US military support to defend itself against the Taliban or the IS after the withdrawal of US troops. "At some point, countries will have to take care of themselves", Trump said in the White House on 6 March when asked by a reporter whether he feared the Taliban would take power after the planned withdrawal. "At some point, they will have to protect themselves, he said".²⁷ US soldiers have been deployed in Afghanistan for almost two decades. Two thousand US soldiers have been killed²⁸ and more than 20,000 injured. "We cannot be there for the next 20 years."²⁹ *Zalmay Khalilzad* added in early March that the US had not asked anyone for permission when they invaded Afghanistan. Nor will they do so if they want to leave.

Presidential farce in Afghanistan

After a long wait, political rivals Ashraf Ghani and *Abdullah Abdullah* declared themselves president of Afghanistan in separate ceremonies on 9 March 2020 on the grounds of the presidential palace in Kabul. The US Special Envoy *Khalilzad* had only attended the swearing-in of Ghani, signalling that the US administration would support him in the power struggle against *Abdullah*.

During the swearing-in ceremonies with hundreds of guests, two explosions could be heard in the Afghan capital. Several guests fled. Ghani used this as a dec-

laration of war. To the howling of alarm sirens he told the remaining guests that he was not wearing a bulletproof vest. „I will stay, even if I have to sacrifice my head for it".³⁰ In Mid February, five months after the presidential election, which was overshadowed by accusations of fraud, Ghani was declared the election winner. His defeated opponent, Prime Minister *Abdullah*, did not recognise the election results and called for a counter-government. The rivalry is fueling fears of a renewed political crisis in Afghanistan and is also overshadowing the agreement signed at the end of February between the United States and the Taliban. Both Ghani and *Abdullah* had already declared themselves winners in the previous presidential election five years ago. It was only through the mediation of then US Secretary of State *John Kerry*, who had imprisoned the opponents in the Kabul US Embassy, that the two agreed on a compromise: Ghani became head of state and *Abdullah* head of government,³¹ although the post of head of government is not provided for in the Afghan constitution.

By March, the dispute had reached a new stage. Two days after taking office, on 11 March, President Ghani deposed his rival and leader *Abdullah Abdullah*. The office of the Chief Executive no longer exists within the structure of the Afghan government, said Ghani's spokesman *Sediq Sediqi* during a press conference on 11 March.³² *Abdullah* then declared on his official Facebook page that Ghani was no longer president and his decrees were no longer valid. "We call on civilian and military personnel of the former government to continue their daily tasks and responsibilities as before", *Abdullah* wrote.

Settlement in Afghan

Nevertheless, Ghani and *Abdullah* had agreed on 17 May to jointly govern the country in the future.³³ However, this had only come about due to massive pressure from the United States. For the Taliban, it did not change the fact that they could gain a strategic advantage from the dispute between the two adversaries for the intended intra-Afghan talks aimed at achieving a political solution to the conflict. They can only be pleased to see such a divided group. The Taliban could look forward to negotiations with this Kabul administration in a highly relaxed manner.³⁴ The United States sees Ghani's and *Abdullah*'s inability to cooperate as a "direct threat"³⁵ to US interests at the Hindu Kush. On 23 March 2020, Mike Pompeo travelled to Kabul. There he met two "presidents", Ashraf Ghani and *Abdullah Abdullah*. After his talks with the two "presidents", the US Secretary of State was so annoyed that the USA threatened to slash their financial aid by one billion US dollars. The US administration was also prepared to

make further cuts, said Pompeo. Ghani and his opponent *Abdullah* should "get a grip on themselves"³⁶, then the cuts might not be necessary, Pompeo threatened before his departure. The US administration feared that the peace process initiated at the Hindu Kush might result in a failure.

Intra-Afghan dialog

The ink on the paper used to sign the agreement between the US and Taliban representatives was signed was not dry yet when the Taliban continued their attacks on the Afghan security forces in increased numbers. There were "within a week, in 32 of the 34 provinces, a total of 422 attacks by the militant-Islamic Taliban. In the process, 291 soldiers and other security forces were killed and 550 injured"³⁷, the *German Press Agency (dpa)* reported. The Taliban intended to demonstrate their undisputed strength to enter negotiations with the Kabul administration from this position. In addition, they wanted to enforce the complete release of their still imprisoned members. Initially, the Afghan administration refused to release the 400 prisoners considered particularly dangerous. This included 156 Taliban, who were "actually sentenced to death for their crimes, another 105 were in prison on a murder charge, and 51 on drug smuggling,"³⁸ according to *Sediq Sediqi*, the spokesman for the Afghan president. The governments of France, Australia and the United States have also spoken out against the release of those Taliban who participated in killing of their soldiers.³⁹ Now Afghan President Ashraf Ghani found himself in a quandary. With a skilful move, Ghani transferred responsibility to the representatives of the Afghan peoples. On 7 August 2020, he convened the traditional council meeting, the Loya Jirga, which was to decide on the release of the Taliban considered dangerous. As expected, almost all the 3,400 delegates spoke out in favour of the release of the Taliban fighters still in detention.⁴⁰ The member of parliament *Belqis Roshan* regarded the approval as "national treason". For this she was thrown to the ground by representative *Shekeba Safi*. The Loya Jirga's approval of the release of Taliban prisoners cleared the way for the eagerly awaited inner-Afghan peace negotiations. Within a week, we are ready for a dialogue, announced *Suhail Shahin*, spokesman for the Taliban's political office.⁴¹ On 12 August, delegations of the Taliban and the Afghan administration arrived in Qatar's capital Doha. Wrongly, the media are speaking of a Taliban negotiation with the Afghan government. Since the Taliban do not recognise the government in Kabul and see it as a US puppet, the delegation from Kabul does not consist of members of the gov-

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ernment but of parliamentarians, the entourage of the warlords, the so-called civil society, etc. President Ghani has given the chairmanship to his rival Abdullah. If the Taliban, who are considered dangerous, return to jihad, the Loya Jirga will be held responsible. If negotiations with the Taliban fail, Abdullah will be discredited as a failed politician.

The Taliban immediately rejected "the Loya Jirga's call for a ceasefire"⁴². Since the agreement between the Taliban and the United States on 29 February 2020, "more than 10,000 members of the Afghan security forces have been killed or injured".⁴³ In July 2020, the insurgents even attacked the office of Afghan Vice President *Amrullah Saleh*, and, on 9 September, his motorcade. The former killed 24 people and the latter 10.⁴⁴ Since Saleh was head of the secret service during the reign of Hamed Karzai and was considered one of the merciless torturers also of the Taliban, he is the target of the insurgents' attacks.

The Taliban reaffirmed their demands to first discuss the real reasons for the war against Afghanistan. After that, a ceasefire could be considered. The spokesman for their delegation, *Mohammad Naeem Wardag*, named as the most important goal "the end of the 'occupation' of Afghanistan and the establishment of a 'true Islamic system'"⁴⁵ at the Hindu Kush. In addition, the Taliban want to control the key ministries in the event of participation in government.

Since the negotiations between the Taliban and the United States took more than a decade, it can be assumed that the intra-Afghan talks resemble a job that Sisyphus had to do.

Withdrawal or voting tactics?

While US Secretary of Defense *Mark Esper* spoke on 8 August 2020 on the US channel *Fox News* of a reduction of the US army from currently 8,600 to 5,000 by the end of November,⁴⁶ US President Donald Trump announced on 7 October 2020 that he would withdraw the "brave men and women who still serve in Afghanistan",⁴⁷ from the Hindu Kush by Christmas. The February 2020 agreement between the US and the Taliban spoke of a complete withdrawal only in the year 2021. Whether this is another one of his 20,000 lies, so "fake news", having been counted by the "New York Times"⁴⁸ and the "Washington Post"⁴⁹, or whether it is more his electoral tactic, remains to be seen. Before now, he had promised his voters to withdraw the US army from Afghanistan. Since his poll results do not look good, he is trying with new drastic announcements.

In any case, the Taliban have taken note of them with satisfaction and as welcome. On 8 October 2020, Taliban spokesman *Sabihullah Mujahid* welcomed Trump's statement "as a positive step towards the implementation of the US-Taliban peace agreement. The Taliban were committed to the agreement and hoped for relations with all states, including the US."⁵⁰ Abdullah, acting as chairman of the High Council for Reconciliation and head of delegation to the Doha negotiations, said soberly: "It will take a while to digest this".⁵¹

If the US units were indeed to withdraw, the Taliban might be motivated by their military strength to overthrow the government in Kabul. That would then be the next round of an intra-Afghan war. After all, the warlords will not let the butter be taken out of their mouth. ●

¹ cf. Ettmayer, Wendelin. "Weltweite Übermacht der USA?" (Worldwide superiority of the USA?), *International*, Vienna, 1/2020, p. 7

² cf. Misteli, Samuel. "Die Taliban haben die besten Karten" (The Taliban have the best cards), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 29 February 2020, p. 11

³ Meier, Christian/Sattar, Majid. "Die Taliban sind grosse Kämpfer" (The Taliban are great fighters), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 2 March 2020, p. 5

⁴ Meier, Christian/Sattar, Majid. "Streit über Afghanistan-Vereinbarung" (Dispute over Afghanistan agreement), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 2 March 2020, p. 1

⁵ Glatz, Rainer L./Kaim, Markus. "Mandat verlängern – Abzug vorbereiten" [Extending the mandate – preparing for withdrawal], *SWP-Aktuell*, Berlin, No. 18 of March 2020, p. 21

⁶ cf. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/2006/umfrage/gefollene-oder-verungluecktesoldaten-der-westlichen-koalition-in-afghanistan/>. 2,400 US soldiers were killed in Operation Enduring Freedom (2001 to 2020), cf. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/72801/umfrage/krieger-der-usa-nach-anzahl-der-soldaten-und-toten/>. Between 2001 and 22 January 2020, a total of 3,587 Western Alliance soldiers died in Afghanistan, cf. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/2006/umfrage/gefollene-oder-verungluecktesoldaten-der-westlichen-koalition-in-afghanistan/>

⁷ The Federal Republic of Germany has suffered a total of 58 deaths and more than 100 injuries. Some 90,000 soldiers of the German Armed Forces have been deployed to the Hindu Kush since January 2002. In 2014 there were almost 5000 soldiers there, and to date 1234 have remained there. The mission has so far cost German taxpayers over six billion euros. Cf. Carstens, Peter. "Verteidigung am Hindukusch" [Defence in the Hindu Kush], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 12 March 2020, p. 10.

⁸ *Moskowskij Komsomolets* of 2 March 2020

⁹ Meier, Christian/Sattar, Majid. "Die Taliban sind grosse Kämpfer", [The Taliban are great fighters] op. cit., p. 5

¹⁰ Cf. "Anschlag in Nordafghanistan: Taliban töten trotz Abkommen weiter" [Attack in northern Afghanistan: Taliban continue killing despite agreement], *dpa* of 4 March 2020

¹¹ Käßner, Joachim. "Die Kämpfe sind intensiver geworden" [The fighting has become more intense] (Interview), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 16 April 2020, p. 5

¹² "Taliban weisen Angebot aus Kabul zurück" [Taliban reject offer from Kabul], *AFP* of 11 March 2020

¹³ cf. "Taliban widersprechen Ghani" [Taliban contradict Ghani], *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 3 March 2020, p. 7

¹⁴ cf. "Taliban lassen weitere Gefangene frei" [Taliban release more prisoners], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 18 April 2020, p. 6

¹⁵ cf. "Afghanische Regierung liess weitere 300 Taliban frei" [Afghan government released a further 300 Taliban], *Salzburger Nachrichten* of 5 May 2020

¹⁶ cf. "USA flogen Angriff auf Taliban" [USA launch attack on Taliban], *dpa* of 4 March 2020

¹⁷ cf. Matern, Tobias. "Friedensabkommen zwischen USA und Taliban wackelt" [Peace agreement between USA and Taliban is shaky], *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 2 March 2020, p. 1

¹⁸ "Trump: USA und Taliban unterzeichnen Abkommen" [Trump: USA and Taliban sign agreement], *dpa* of 27 February 2020

¹⁹ Meier, Christian. "Ende eines endlosen Krieges?" [End of an endless war?], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 2 March 2020, p. 1

²⁰ Meier, Christian/Sattar, Majid. "Die Taliban sind grosse Kämpfer" [The Taliban are great fighters], op.cit., p. 5

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Mellenthin, Knut. "Bedingt bereit" [Conditionally ready], *Junge Welt* of 2 March 2020, p. 8

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ "Trump: Machtübernahme der Taliban in Afghanistan möglich", *AFP* of 6 March 2020

²⁸ vgl. "Bislang 2000 US-Soldaten in Afghanistan getötet", *dapd/AP* of 30 September 2012

²⁹ "Trump: Machtübernahme der Taliban in Afghanistan möglich", *dpa* of 6 March 2020

³⁰ "Zwei Vereidigungen in Kabul", *AFP* of 9 March 2020

³¹ vgl. "Zwei Vereidigungen in Kabul", *AFP* of 9 March 2020

³² cf. "Afghanistans Präsident setzt Wahlrivalen ab", *dpa* of 11 March 2020

³³ cf. "Rivalen in Afghanistan raufen sich zusammen", *AFP/dpa* of 17 May 2020

³⁴ cf. Matern, Tobias. "Alles läuft für die Taliban", *Tages-Anzeiger* of 2 March 2020, p. 2

³⁵ Matern, Tobias. "Vermittlungen gescheitert", *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 25 March 2020, p. 7

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *dpa* of 22 June 2020; "Fast 300 Tote in einer Woche", *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 23 June 2020, p. 6

³⁸ Matern, Tobias. "Taliban erzwingen Amnestie", *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 10 August 2020, p. 7

³⁹ Meier, Christian. "Kabul stoppt Gefangenaustausch", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 19 August 2020, p. 6

⁴⁰ cf. Meier, Christian. "Die schwierigen Fragen kommen noch", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 13 August 2020, p. 8

⁴¹ cf. Matern, Tobias. "Taliban bereit für Dialog", *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 12 August 2020, p. 7

⁴² Meier, Christian. "Die schwierigen Fragen kommen noch", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 13 August 2020, p. 8

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ cf. Meier, Christian. "Attentat in Kabul", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 10 September 2020, p. 5

⁴⁵ Meier, Christian. "Noch keine Einigung auf Waffenruhe" (No agreement on ceasefire yet), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 18 September 2020, p. 5

⁴⁶ cf. Matern, Tobias. "Taliban erzwingen Amnestie" (Taliban force amnesty), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 10 August 2020, p. 7

⁴⁷ *dpa* of 8 October 2020; "Zufriedene Taliban" (Happy Taliban), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 9 October 2020, p. 6

⁴⁸ cf. <https://www.jetzt.de/netzteil/new-york-times-veroeffentlichung-liste-mit-allen-luegen-von-donald-trump> (New York Times publishes list with all donald trump lies)

⁴⁹ cf. "Trump lies on average twelve times a day", *The Washington Post*; quoted after: https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/usa/id_85665402/trump-luegt-im-schnitt-zwölf-mal-am-tag-10-000-luegen-seit-amtsantritt.html

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

The Smartphone – gift or joint project?

by Dr Eliane Perret, remedial teacher and psychologist

If we take a look at the social changes of recent decades, digitalisation is certainly one of the most significant influencing factors. Originally intended for scientific exchange, digital devices now permeate our lives to a great extent. Although they were not intended and designed for children and young people when first created, these are now confronted with them in private life and at school. The following contribution is intended to stimulate reflection on how we can enable our next generation to use digital devices in an emancipated way, and as to our task and responsibility as adults.

I recently had a conversation with a colleague about our school students. As is so often the case with our children and young people today, we ended up discussing their often excessive and problematic use of digital devices; how and when they should be accessible to our children. My colleague was currently considering whether she should provide her now 13-year-old son with a smartphone instead of his mobile phone without internet access. What she told me made me think.

“Actually, we had planned ...”

“Actually, we had planned not to buy a smartphone for our son until he turned 14. But you know how things go sometimes. He has a lot of charm and he can apply his energies and arguments convincingly and skilfully to something if he wants to have it. And that’s how it also went this time. Persistently and slightly reproachfully, he kept telling me that all his friends had a smartphone – all except him. What position was I to take on that? My husband and I want to fulfil our duty of digital care for our children. Was our son afraid of not noticing something (supposedly) important and did he feel (rightly?) excluded among his peers – FOMO, fear of missing out, as it is called in Neo-German? After all, we live in the media age; I can’t get past that, that was clear to me. The question for me was therefore no longer whether a smartphone is good or bad, but whether a child already has the necessary mental maturity to make good use of the possibilities of this device.”

On the road on WhatsApp, TikTok, SnapChat, Youtube etc.

To me, my colleague’s assessment seemed very differentiated, and I found the last question in particular worthy of consideration. Almost all my pupils already have a smartphone, even the lower grade children. They use *WhatsApp*, *TikTok*, *Snapchat* and *YouTube*, often for many hours



Father and son are reading together. (Picture de.freepik.com)

a week. This repeatedly results in border crossings and arguments that then go over into school and disrupt our joint learning. The other day we had a case of bullying to sort out, which had essentially happened online. During a recent radio broadcast, Professor *Françoise Alsaker*, the pioneer in mobbing research, had rightly pointed out the importance of social media platforms as factors causing and perpetuating bullying. I was therefore eager to hear what decision my colleague had come to.

Important considerations

“So our son was desperate for a smartphone. Well, he knows that when he wants to enforce a wish, he often has an easier job of it with me than with his father. His charm can be irresistible. However, it was clear that my husband and I would decide together. We carefully considered whether our son was mature enough. And had we given him the knowledge and social values he would need to use a smartphone properly? Did he have a sincere interest in his fellow human beings and in the world and the necessary fellow feeling that would enable him to navigate the net critically and with consideration for others? We knew that children do not acquire media competence by using electronic de-

vices; it has to be laid in the family. Were we a role model for him in using our own digital devices? During dinner and at night, the mobile phones were switched off and placed in a box in the cloakroom, and we were not available. From time to time we would take a media-free weekend. We were therefore in agreement that if we were really to provide our son with a smartphone, then only with clear rules”.

Had all the parents of our students also given such consideration to the subject, I wondered. According to the *JAMES 2018 study*, 94 % of young people in Switzerland have a profile on at least one social network.

In January 2020 there were 10.44 million mobile phone connections and 4.5 million social media users in Switzerland. How many of these were children and young people? Most know very well how to use social media platforms, but media literacy means more than typing and wiping. My colleague continued:

A smartphone – a gift?

“We remembered a theme night on digital media that we had attended at our son’s school. It had been some time ago, but de-

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spite technical progress, the basic statements still made sense to us. 'Can you even give your child a mobile phone as a present?' the speaker asked us at the time. How surprised we and most other parents were that this was not possible. Yes, we could give the device. But to make it work, a contract has to be signed, and our son was too young for that. So his smartphone would be registered to me or my husband, depending on who stored his personal data and activated the SIM card. Our son was not the contact person for the contract with the telephone company either, because he could only sign this from the age of 18. Of course, there are now various ways of circumventing these regulations with prepaid cards and combination packages. But we wanted to develop an open and honest solution with our son. That means we would lend our son the smartphone. Legally and if necessary also financially, however, we would bear the full responsibility.

Loan with contract

At that parents' evening, the media educator had advised us to sign a contract with the young smartphone user, in which the conditions for borrowing the device were set out in advance. To be sure, how many parents will have used this possibility? He had also provided us with a model contract, which we now retrieved from the bottom of the drawer. But then we found a very appealing site on the Internet that helped us to write such a contract. We involved our son in the further considerations and drafted our contract together with him. This was a first joint project and there was much to discuss. It was about the careful use of the smartphone, time regulations, financial aspects, behaviour and language on the net, downloading apps and websites that are taboo for him. The smartphone would also be switched off and deposited in our common mobile phone box during study time and at night. So one thing was made clear: If he was to have a smartphone, then only under these conditions! He had to know: Everything he would do with his smartphone, he would do in our name, the name of his parents, or at least the one of us to whom the phone number was to be registered. We would bear full legal responsibility, for example in the event of a complaint for insulting, bullying, sexting, etc. We therefore also had the right to see at all times what he was doing on his smartphone. Our son had to accept this and to understand that the device did not allow privacy and confidentiality. It was not an electronic diary. He was to make appointments for important talks and confidential

exchanges. We also wanted him to continue to be tracked by us and not to ignore our calls. Furthermore, he would have to contribute to the expenses with his pocket money. No simple task for our often somewhat rebellious son! He was understandably a bit dismayed and took a lot of time to read the contract once more and very carefully, because he knew that we would be consistent. Then he signed it."

The unpleasant general terms and conditions

My colleague and her husband had made their decision. Their son would get his smartphone. "We bought a used device in a second-hand mobile phone shop. Our son screwed up his nose a bit, since his dream would have been an *iPhone 11* (he would even have waited a while to get an *iPhone 12*). We suspected that with this,

cases the providers do not check the personal details of the user, we did not want to encourage him to lie and cheat. Then 'my two boys' dealt with the data protection rules of the platform. What happens to the data entered? They may be passed on to third parties and used for personalised advertising. This was another lesson in media competence. Were there any alternatives? They came across the Swiss provider *Threema*, who could do everything *WhatsApp* had to offer; there was no data trail and all communication was encrypted end-to-end. It was not an easy task to convince my son's friends to switch from *WhatsApp* to *Threema* because 'everyone is on WhatsApp ...' But in the end it made sense to them that they didn't want to get into any future trouble with posts they were posting at best in youthful exuberance. The traces on the

"Often our children and young people are slightly admirably referred to as 'digital natives'. But aren't they often rather 'digitally naïve' through no fault of their own? It is true they have a certain lightness of touch and try out all kinds of things on digital devices – but without any awareness of possible personal risks. They often try to fill a relationship void in digital anonymity (which would be a social issue!)."

he hoped to make an impression on his colleagues. From then on, my husband, who was more technically adept, took the lead. The first thing to be discussed was the general terms and conditions, the terms of use.

They were written in difficult to read legalese, but this was a contract. When I saw 'my boys' sitting on the sofa together for two evenings, ploughing through the text of the contract, I thought about how many times I had clicked on 'accept' when downloading an app together with its terms and conditions, without having read a word and knowing what I had said 'yes' to. I later asked my husband whether this made sense; without accepting the terms and conditions, the use of the mobile phone would not be possible anyway. His reply stopped me short, 'Should we teach our son to sign contracts without reading them? A rental, employment or purchase contract? Don't we have a responsibility there?' he said."

Data protection – but how?

"When the time came, our son naturally wanted to first of all install *WhatsApp* so as to initiate a group chat in his class. But stop, when would that be possible? He was still too young. And even though in most

Internet are indelible, and there is no control over what happens to data published on the net. They could easily afford the small one-off payment for the new social media platform and they did without the free offer from *WhatsApp*. So you see, there were and still are a number of hurdles to overcome".

Having the necessary mental maturity

The conversation with my colleague stayed on my mind for a long time. How would I have decided? And what does "media literacy" actually mean, a buzzword that is used inflationarily and even demanded in the curricula today? In the meantime, "media and information technology" has been integrated as a school subject. However, it is often reduced to learning how to operate the equipment. Very little importance is attributed to all the other questions connected with their use. Do school children have the necessary mental maturity to assess how they should or should not use the equipment? Are they capable of self-critically assessing how they move in the digital space and what risks they should not take? Do they consider what psychological, social,

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The Alps, history of a landscape

by Renate Dünki

Recently I was given a book, a small booklet out of the Beck-series “Knowledge” by Hansjörg Küster. “Die Alpen. Geschichte einer Landschaft.” (The Alps, History of a Landscape). When opening it, I quickly realised the broadness of topics, ranging from geology over vegetation, first settlements and finally the formation of the alpine landscape since the Middle Ages. There is a particular chapter each, for Switzerland, its folk music, the opening of the mountains for tourism and the present.

Küster is plant ecologist at the University of Hannover. He published on other landscapes as well.

The author starts his story with a glance out of his window at the beginning of his first alpine travels. “I opened the window and there was a wonderful landscape spread out before me.” There were many personal travel impressions enlarging this first glance and enhancing his conviction

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How were the Alps formed? (Picture weltderwunder.de)

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ethical and even legal consequences their actions might have? And do they have a sense of what the protection of their private and intimate sphere means? Often not even we adults are aware of these coherencies. However, these competences can only be acquired in real life and not in virtual life.

Driving a car in kindergarten?

Of course, digital devices are part of everyday working life today. But does that mean that even small children have to be able to handle them independently? Then I remembered a remark made at the above-mentioned theme evening that my colleague had remembered. “At that parents’ evening, one of the speaker’s arguments made sense to me. He gave the example of driving a car: Of course, cars are part of our everyday life, and we do not deny that fact because our children can only get their driving licence at the age of 18. But we don’t let them drive, we take them with us in the car with the necessary safety precautions. With us, they learn for the first time how to behave in traffic, what legal regulations there are and what dangers can be associated with it”.

Careful guidance

Right, I thought. The situation is similar with internet-enabled devices. Why not explore together with the child which possibilities might be useful for us? My colleague had taken this advice from the media educator to heart and showed her

son, for example, how to use a *tutorial* to learn how to do handicrafts or repair a device, how to use a dictionary or learn about a subject and how to counteract unwanted advertising. So he already knew a lot and had some previous knowledge and experience important for the use of a smartphone. But it will still be a joint challenge to handle it well.

Performing the duty of (digital) care

In these areas we adults are ahead of the children. We have more life experience and can better understand the consequences of our actions. We can show them that the Internet should not be used mindlessly, and that the protection of our private and intimate sphere is an important asset in human coexistence. We should also be able to deal with assigning the appropriate place to these devices in our lives. Unfortunately, however, the timewise use of devices is becoming an increasing problem, especially for young people. It is not without reason that media addiction has been included in the *DSM 5*, the Handbook of Psychiatric Diseases, as an *Internet gaming disorder*, and corresponding therapy offers are on the rise. So any parent providing his or her child with an Internet device and not bothering about it afterwards is obviously violating his or her duty of (digital) care. Providing a smartphone and other electronic devices means starting a joint project.

“Digitally naïve” and “digital native”

Often our children and young people are slightly admiringly referred to as “digital natives”. But aren’t they often rath-

er “digitally naïve” through no fault of their own? It is true they have a certain lightness of touch and try out all kinds of things on digital devices – but without any awareness of possible personal risks. They often try to fill a relationship void in digital anonymity (which would be a social issue!). Many of them reach for an electronic device at the slightest hint of boredom – a creativity killer par excellence! Here too, my colleague gave me a tip. To help her son get started in programming and to make today’s technical possibilities accessible – which might indeed be useful for his professional future – he received a programmable Lego brick from *Lego Mindstorms* as a birthday present, in addition to his *Stokys* metal construction kit. This not only enabled him to acquire further technical skills, but also gave him his first experience in robotics. This also was a joint project of father and son. •

The following sources and personalities accompanied me while writing:

“Enabling our children to deal with media”. Interview with Uwe Buermann, in: Current Concerns of 16 June 2015

Theme evening of the Toblerstrasse Zurich schools of 27 March 2018

Alsaker, Françoise. “Ensuring the well-being of all – together with all”, (interview), in: Current Concerns of 24 January 2012

Alsaker, Françoise. “Morgengast in DRS 1 – Morning guest on DRS 1” of 22 September 2020

www.medienutzungsvertrag.de, accessed on 16 October 2020

www.no-zoff.ch, accessed on 16 October 2020

www.erziehung-zur-medienkompetenz.de

Media concept of the Rudolf Steiner School Zurich, www.arbeitskreis.ch, accessed on 16 October 2020

"The Alps, history of a landscape"

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tion that the character of this landscape is molded by nature as well as by culture and must definitely not be understood merely as an object of nature conservancy, as wilderness. Küster wishes to trigger a more complex understanding of the Alps and its history and he certainly succeeded in this endeavour with this little book that is written intelligently and well understandably also for a layperson. A map of the Alp's mountain range from East to West is included and the texts are always illustrated by pictures, but no glossy ones.

Never before have I read the history of the Earth – starting 200 million years ago until this day – in such an appealing way. Also the history of man's steps from first questions about nature up to secured knowledge are included.

Ice Times and vegetation

In the chapter "Vegetation" the descriptions about the impact of the ice times are particularly enlightening. The Alps behaved like a barrier against Europe's vegetation. "In every Ice Time all the trees north of the Alps died back" (p. 38) In other continents with a similar vegetation the mountain ranges did not form an insurmountable wall but the trees could re-occupy their former positions after the ending of the Ice Times. That is why in other continents there is a much greater biodiversity than is the case in Europe. The vegetation became scarcer and scarcer after each Ice Time period. The result is that today in many parts of Europe there is only one tree species dominating. These forests are particularly susceptible to pest infestation, which is a consequence of their vegetation history and topography.

The historian's view on the Alps' settlements reveals the following: From the early colonisation by hominids up to the period after the Ice Time, the pre-historical pile dwellings, the "Ötzi" (the Ice-



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Soil protection in the Alps. (Picture Umweltbundesamt.de)

man), the Alpine farming, which may have given the mountain range its name, up to the network of roads built by the Romans.

The next chapter deals with the settling during the Middle Ages, with the diverse types of houses evolving in accordance with the different weather conditions, going on with the laying out of gardens, meadows and fields and the multiple forms of agriculture.

Switzerland – a mountainous state

Whereas large parts of this alpine landscapes belonged to different state formations and their economic regions, Switzerland developed as a mountainous state of which only small parts are located outside the mountain region. Again, the author succeeds in picturing Switzerland's particular economy comprehensively and in an enthralling manner. The development of natural science by *Conrad Gessner* in the 16th and by *Jakob Scheuzer* in the 17th century with his "138 questions about the nature of Switzerland" (1699) for instance, is very informative for the reader. In the 18th century, *Albrecht von Haller* described the Alps' altitudinal belt with its characteristic vegetation for the first time. This work became the basis for the research of *Alexander von Humboldt*, which was paid tribute to in 2019, before the lockdown, in great exhibitions in Berlin. So, many an impulse for the emerging natural sciences took its starting point in Switzerland.

The author also grants a survey on art, music and literature, as well as the development and significance of tourism.

And what about today? "The objective can never be only one goal, e.g. the protection of one animal or plant species, but there are many very diverse phenomena that have to be observed simultaneously." To appreciate and preserve this "extraordinary and beautiful landscape of world-

wide significance with all its treasures of nature, culture and ideas" must be the goal as well in future times.

The richness of this small booklet on the history of the alpine landscape could only be outlined here. It is a pleasure to get to know the ingenuities of this remarkable plant ecologist and obtain a more precise view on the Alps, the first high mountain that was successfully opened and developed. •

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