

Current Concerns

The international journal for independent thought, ethical standards, moral responsibility,
and for the promotion and respect of public international law, human rights and humanitarian law

English Edition of *Zeit-Fragen*

The power is in the microcosm Why the micro-tax initiative very much deserves support

by Martin Neff, Chief Economist Raiffeisen

In 1990, the world was on the threshold of globalisation.

The value of all goods and services produced worldwide at that time was about 22 trillion dollars (USD). Shares and bonds were traded to the tune of USD 9 trillion annually, over-the-counter financial derivatives for about USD 2 trillion, and the volume of foreign exchange transactions amounted to USD 147 trillion. Almost 30 years later, in 2018, the value of all goods and services produced was USD 75 trillion. In the same year, shares or bonds were traded for USD 162 trillion, foreign exchange for USD 602 trillion and financial derivatives (over-the-counter) for a staggering USD 1250 trillion. A nearly three-and-a-half-fold increase in real economic output in a good thirty years is thus offset by an almost twenty-fold increase in stock and bond trading. Moreover, today, 800 times more financial derivatives (including foreign currency options) are traded than in 1990. What the financial markets have achieved is called exponential growth. Compared to this, the real economy has literally fallen by the wayside in terms of growth.

Of course, not everything that caused the exorbitant growth on the financial markets in the last three decades is of a purely speculative nature. The advancing international division of labour and the resulting increase in cross-border flows of goods and services also automatically lead to more transactions on the foreign exchange markets and an increased need for forward and hedging transactions with derivative financial instruments. But the market for financial derivatives has taken off to such an extent that only one conclusion remains: The majority of what is traded today in derivative products has little or nothing to do with the real economy. Globalisation and the fact that capital is the “fastest and most mobile” factor of production compared to immobile land and the rather sluggish factor labour have also contributed to the world’s prosperity. But mainly they have given rise to the biggest casino in the history of the world, where the wildest bets are made and those who have or to whom it is given play for stakes

that are x-times the real economic output, i.e. the wages and profits.

With the exception of Corona, all recessions since the nineties have been triggered by speculation-related financial market crashes and not by “classic” economic overheating, as our parents may still have known it. In the age of globalisation, the financial markets degenerated into a hotbed of economic instability because quick profits were placed above the well-being of the community, money was no longer invested but often only speculated with – with manifold multipliers. In view of the figures presented here, I have been asking myself for some time why global tax practice still “only” taps into the real economy instead of helping itself to where the real money flows. And in view of the growing debt burden of the industrialised nations, I ask myself why they have been discussing a financial market transaction tax only half-heartedly for years, if at all.

We Swiss are a bit further ahead, thanks to direct democracy, and have the

so-called micro-tax initiative. It is undoubtedly revolutionary, so revolutionary that it will probably fail because it comes too early and mobilises the usual federal defensive reflexes, especially when it really comes to going it alone. The business lobby, the Federal Council and some “renowned” professors more or less dismiss the undertaking as a “fart”. Personally, however, I have some sympathy for the idea. In terms of tax theory, it is more efficient to tap a large substrate such as financial market transactions with a small rate than a small substrate such as income and profits with a large rate. This is actually scientifically beyond question. If this huge substrate also grows exponentially, it could well form the new tax base of the future. So why not think about it?

If, for example, Switzerland was to tax the CHF 40 trillion in payment flows subject to SIC (*Swiss Interbanking Clearing*) at just 0.05%, this would generate almost CHF 20 billion in tax revenue, almost as

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A pleasingly good sign

gl. The fact that *Martin Neff*, Raiffeisen’s chief economist, supports the micro-tax initiative* is remarkable and gratifying for several reasons. The *Raiffeisenbank* has had difficult years. When its chief economist criticises the development of the financial markets so clearly today – “In the age of globalisation the financial markets have degenerated into a stronghold of economic instability, because fast profits are placed above the well-being of the community” – this is a good sign for the return of the Raiffeisenbank into a true cooperative bank with traditional cooperative values.

For Neff, is out of question that a financial market transaction tax will come sooner or later. It may be revolutionary, but Switzerland has always been innovative. The idea of such a tax is not new; there have already been various considerations in this direction. So far, however, it has not been possible to convert a larger part of the population to the idea,

perhaps because the feeling of powerlessness towards the financial sector and the timidity to discuss economic interrelationships are widespread. In the meantime, however, the time has come. The excesses of the so-called financial casino are now common knowledge. To involve the general public with a small tax rate in the unbelievable sums of money, which are lost through speculation is by no means an absurd idea. Thanks to direct democracy, Swiss citizens have the rights of the people that many people around the world would like to have, and they may also take initiatives and vote on tax issues. For the good of all: sooner rather than later.

* The initiative was presented in detail in *Current Concerns* No. 11 of 25 May 2021. It provides the introduction of a marginal tax of 0.1 % to a maximum of 0.5% on cashless payment transactions. This is to replace value added tax, direct federal tax and stamp duty. The collection of signatures period expires on 5 November 2021.

"The power is in the microcosm"

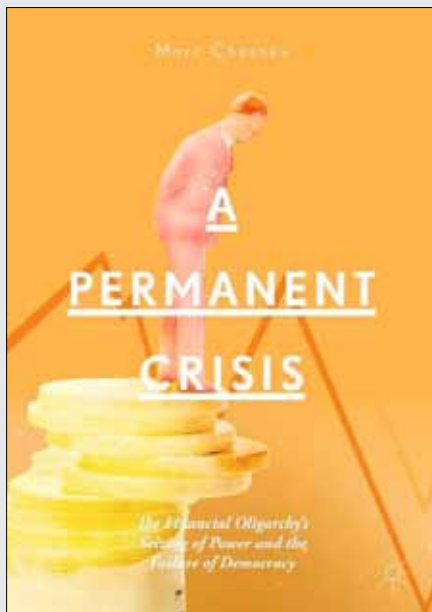
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much as the entire value-added tax today. Private households would be noticeably relieved by the abolition of VAT, and the micro-tax would not hurt them very much. Why then do so many nevertheless dismiss the undertaking as a crackpot idea? Quite a number of innovations of the last centuries were or are Swiss Made. While others were waffling and debating, we were putting it into practice. The financial market transaction tax will come sooner or later, that's out of the question for me, because

the debts of the states are exploding and their tax sources are drying up. *Joe Biden* wants to make companies pay more, the EU wants to make internet companies pay more, China wants to make its citizens pay more, everyone is desperately looking for new potential sources of revenue, but always on the same ground. Why not look in the casino? Yesterday, *Bitcoin* was traded for almost 48 billion USD, *Tether* for 113 billion USD – that is more than twice the market capitalisation of this cryptocurrency – and *Ethereum* for 40 billion USD – without any real economic motive, pure

speculation. Half a per cent of that alone would be a good 500 million USD, every day, and there are even more cryptocurrencies, not to mention billions of other financial market transactions. *Krethi* and *Plethi* could probably get over a small obulus on it, financial hyenas anyway. There would even be something left over to relieve the tax burden on those who have borne the brunt of it for generations. So, the idea of a micro-tax is not that stupid at all.

Source: *Raiffeisen Economic Research* of 26 May 2021
(Translation *Current Concerns*)

Marc Chesney: A permanent crisis.**The Financial Oligarchy's Seizing of Power and the Failure of Democracy**

ISBN 978-3-0300-0517-7

"The title of this book may be surprising. It might even seem contradictory to evoke a 'permanent crisis' when, at the same time as this book is going to print, the media are talking about a resurgence in economic growth and, according to so-called experts, economic fundamentals are healthy, even strong. Proof of this would lie in the rise of stock prices.

Strangely enough, until today, none of these commentators has mentioned the artificiality of this growth which is essentially based on the explosion in global debt, or the increasing disconnection between bullish stock markets and the performance of both companies and the overall economy. Nor, for that matter, have they alluded to the astronomical sums perpetually injected into the financial sector by central banks in

order to keep the too big to fail banks afloat, or to every sort of advantage from which they have benefited, most often at citizens' expense.

For many economic commentators, enhanced labour statistics also appear to constitute one of these encouraging 'fundamentals'. It seems anecdotal therefore that numerous unemployed have disappeared from the statistics and reappeared as working poor or impoverished pensioners. Whereas the emergence of new technologies and the expansion of digitalisation of the economy should result in more leisure time, the main consequence until now has been an increase in casual employment and under-employment.

Regarding the trickle-down theory, often put forward by the media, it does not seem to obey the law of gravity, seeing that, in this case, it works from the bottom up, and allows those who are already the wealthiest in the world, to accumulate even more wealth.

The operation was a success, they lead us to believe, but the patient, in this case society, is still ill. It is precisely on this skilful trickery presented as an effective economic remedy that these positive 'fundamentals' lie.

This book endeavours to provide an objective assessment of reality which is quite different. It describes the currently operative financialisation of the economy and of society, and the role of the big banks and hedge funds in this process. It denounces financial croupiers' state of mind and the mercenaries of the financial war, the consequences of which affect each of us every day and in every corner of the world." (back cover)

"This financial caste absorbs astronomical amounts that it is incapable of actually investing in the economy. These

amounts always move more quickly within the framework of a casino finance contrary to an entrepreneurial logic which this oligarchy claims, where dubious betting on the bankruptcy of companies, banks or countries takes precedence over standard financial operations inherent to the economy. What characterises these bets is that they are most often made discarding the risks to the rest of society. For those institutions known as "too big to fail", having reached such a critical size and such density of connections within the economic and financial network, it is in fact the state, and at the end of the day the taxpayer, the pensioner, the customer and the unemployed who assumes the risks and, if need be, pays the bills. This financialised economy at such a scale weakens both the economic and social fabric." (chapter 1)

"Finally, the implementation of all these measures requires citizens and politicians to be able to analyse the situation and to demonstrate the will to find real solutions as well as... a lot of courage. The author is aware that doing so will not be an easy task, neither now nor in the future, and will require time. Paradoxically, it is more than a priority to get the economy and society out of the deadlock it is in. Finally, it is a choice of society, a choice between the dictatorship of the financial sector and a democracy where active citizens take their future in their own hands. We have a responsibility vis-à-vis present and future generations who have the inalienable right to live in a decent and dignified manner in an accountable and civilised society." (Conclusions)

A permanent crisis, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018

www.micro-tax.ch

“A new beginning, a new chapter in the history of relations between Switzerland and the EU”

And what is simmering around it

by Dr. iur. Marianne Wüthrich

The Federal Council's decision to break off negotiations with Brussels has made the Swiss EU turbos get going. Ever since it was foreseeable that the balloon of the Framework Treaty as a precursor to EU accession would burst, they come forward loudly with bizarre demands and actions.

Unimpressed by this, the Federal Council convincingly justified its decision to break off the negotiations in its media release and at the media conference on 26 May and faced upright and calmly the provocative questions of the journalists.

It is always the same few people and organisations who would like to see Switzerland become an EU member state long ago. These include some university lecturers such as *Thomas Cottier*, who obviously does not like the Swiss understanding of the state: “In Switzerland, from the left to the right, there is a very conservative, national understanding of sovereignty, which is directed towards self-determination, autonomy and partly even autarky. Any international obligation is seen as a loss of sovereignty [...]”¹ How else should one define sovereignty? Only the last sentence must be vehemently contradicted: we Swiss are not that selfish! Switzerland's commitment to the ICRC and the Geneva Conventions, development cooperation and the provision of good offices – to name a few of the most important areas of Swiss foreign policy – are precisely part of Swiss sovereignty.

Federal Council: Continuation of the proven bilateral cooperation is in the interest of both sides.

Because most Swiss still know what sovereignty means, there is relief in broad circles of the population at the Federal Council's decision to end the Framework Agreement experiment. Meanwhile, supporters of closer integration into the EU claim that the termination is a sign of weakness, that the Federal Council has no plan on how to “save the bilateral agreements”, and the like.

Anyone who has read the Federal Council's media release of 26 May and listened to the one-and-a-half-hour media conference on the same day will get a very different impression: standing up as a national government and stating that the years of negotiations have not succeeded in achieving a treaty that is not only beneficial for Brussels but also for Switzerland is not without its difficulties.

In its media release, the Federal Council states that Switzerland can certain-

ly put itself on an equal footing with the EU: “From the Federal Council's point of view, it is in the common interest of Switzerland and the EU to continue the proven bilateral cooperation despite the failure of the InstA. This cooperation is based, among other things, on over 100 bilateral treaties. With its 27 member states, the European Union is Switzerland's most important partner. Conversely, Switzerland is one of the most important trading partners for the EU: number 4 in trade in goods, number 3 in services and number 2 in investments. In addition, the EU has a trade surplus in the double-digit billions. 1.4 million EU citizens live in Switzerland. In addition, there are about 340,000 cross-border commuters from the EU [...]”²

After these and other generally understandable explanations, also at the media conference on 26 May, President *Guy Parmelin*, Federal Councillor *Karin Keller-Sutter* and Federal Councillor *Ignazio Cassis* faced the mostly provocative questions of the journalists with composure.³

No, today was not a “mercredi noir”, President Parmelin replied to a journalist: “We are at a new beginning, a new chapter in the history of our relations between Switzerland and the EU.” He said the Federal Council would work to update the existing agreements in the interests of both sides. “To cushion negative consequences, the Federal Council has for some time begun to plan and partially implement reception measures.” In the area of medical devices, for example, the Federal Council “has already decided on unilateral measures to ensure security of supply and market surveillance in the event that the corresponding chapter of the MRA [Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade] is not updated.”

Cost estimates are one thing – the Swiss model can withstand even more severe storms

More generally, Federal Councillor Cassis remarked on the enormous economic damage that the business association *economiesuisse* in particular has been operating with for years in case the framework agreement fails: “The past has shown us that cost estimates are often a mere token exercise, and the Federal Council has been wrong very often.” Guy Parmelin pointed to the forecasts on immigration before the conclusion of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (Bilaterals I) as an example: “According to the estimates of various experts, there were a maximum of eight to ten thousand net annual immi-

grants to Switzerland. Today we see where we actually stand.” [up to ten times more per year]. – A journalist insisted that *Seco* (the Federal Office for Economic Affairs) had once “calculated a range of around 400 to 600 billion francs by 2035” if the Bilateral Agreements were to be abolished. President Parmelin commented: “It is extremely difficult to estimate the costs to which Switzerland would be subjected. One example: the non-recognition of stock market equivalence, where we had to find pragmatic solutions and found them. At the time, the consequences were dramatised.”

And how! When the gloomy forecasts are in the newspapers every day, it brands itself in the brain cells – unless we don't let it stop us from thinking. A phenomenal experience that has stuck in the memory of most Swiss people is the disastrous prophecies made before the 1992 vote on EEA membership in the event of a No vote by the sovereign. None of this came true, and the Swiss economy continued to develop splendidly.

The most important factors for the good state of our economy are in fact based on the strengths of the Swiss model, namely direct democracy, federalism and the principle of subsidiarity, a small-scale economy (company locations also in the rural and mountain cantons), dual vocational training, the militia principle and the commitment of citizens to the common good. If we citizens cultivate these strengths, our economy, together with the authorities in the communes, cantons and federal government, can also find flexible solutions. The prerequisite for this is that Switzerland remains as independent as possible.

Bustling actions of some EU turbos

– *EU accession with Swiss wage protection, public service and the Swiss franc?*

A few SP parliamentarians apparently want to be hell-bent on getting their own way. For example, Co-Party President *Cédric Wermuth* proclaims: “The Framework Agreement is actually the worst of all variants for a secure relationship with the EU. The opening of accession negotiations would solve Switzerland's sovereignty problem.”⁴ True, EU accession would indeed solve the question of Swiss sovereignty – if one considers its abolition as a “solution”. And the Swiss wage protection, which Wermuth rightly defends, would then be swallowed by the EU?

National Councillor *Fabian Molina* (SP, ZH), for his part, has tabled a motion to in-

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After the breakdown of negotiations with Brussels: What next?

Panel discussion at the 51st conference of the "Progress Foundation" on 31 May 2021 at the Zunfthaus zur Meisen in Zurich (excerpts)

mw. In the mainstream media, it is – not surprisingly – mainly the critics of the Federal Council's decision who have their say. But this does not silence the mostly democratic and liberal sentiment among the people. Coincidentally, a few days after the decision of 26 May, the Progress Foundation held a conference in Zurich on "Sovereignty from below. Switzerland in the International Environment", with presentations by Dr h.c. Beat Kappeler and Professor Oliver Zimmer. It goes without saying that part of the subsequent panel discussion was devoted to the failed Framework Agreement and the question: "What next?" The panellists (the two speakers as well as Foundation President Dr Gerhard Schwarz and NZZ domestic editor Katharina Fontana) were all on firm footing.

Discussion leader Mark Dittli began the discussion on the conference topic ("Sovereignty from bottom up. Switzerland in the international environment") with the Federal Council's decision on 26 May to break off negotiations on the Framework Agreement, due to current events. His question to the panellists: "What next?"

Talk to each other again and find out where there are possibilities for cooperation

Katharina Fontana was relieved about the decision: "I don't share this lamentation in the media. [...] I cannot imagine the EU going against its own interests, so to speak, for a long time. [...] I am optimistic."

Gerhard Schwarz: "In a liberal state, saying no is often more important than always saying what you should do. [...] From my point of view, the mistake was not to break off now, but the mistake was to have negotiated for seven years without having thought about what exactly one wanted. This brings me to our topic, namely what kind of understanding of the state we have in Switzerland and to what extent this is compatible with the understanding of the state of the neighbouring states and with the understanding of the state of the EU, which always claims to be a sui generis entity, but is actually permanently on its way to becoming its own superstate. What now? means: Calm down a bit, don't hyperventilate and, above all, talk to each other again and find out where there are possibilities for cooperation and agreements and where there just aren't."



Guildhall zur Meisen in Zurich (next to it the Fraumünster Church). The 51st Progress Foundation conference was held here on 31 May 2021 on the topic "Sovereignty from the bottom up. Switzerland in the International Environment". (picture Wikimedia commons)

Don't lose your nerve and sit out the situation – after all, nothing happened!

Beat Kappeler: "I think it is one of the hardest things for politicians to sit out a hanging situation. The media and politicians are always asking for handles to be pulled and something to be instigated again. I think this is something that has to be sat out for once. I would go even further and say: Nothing has happened. For the time being, the bilaterals are probably on track for the long term. The free trade agreement [of 1972] does not have to be renegotiated, as the framework agreement would have required. [...] What will happen now if the Swiss and *economiesuisse* don't lose their nerve and signal: We definitely, definitely want something, then the EU will probably come forward either with small pinpricks or with quite fundamental concerns: Something should be regulated here, something should be regulated there. Then one can insist on it. [...]"

So: Don't lose your nerve and insist on the promises we have made with the EU over 40 or 50 years and continue to build. And continue to strongly expand the share of our foreign relations outside Europe, be it with free trade agreements or with actual export activities. We have doubled the share of exports to America in the last twenty years, we have incredibly strengthened foreign trade with Asia [...]. We can still make further gains there."

Experiences with Brexit: Endure Deviation from the European norm

Oliver Zimmer: "In politics, at some point you come to a decision where you say no or yes. Every scientist knows: saying no is something completely natural, it is not a negative force. Getting that across is important. The idea that Switzerland will unite and suddenly have a consensus is, I think, an illusion. I think this division will remain to some extent. What I think is important is that we endure it, that we communicate this deviation – it is a deviation in Europe, Switzerland and Great Britain, there are no other communities that have set themselves apart in this way – within the country and towards the outside: There is no negativity associated with it."

Becoming more robust against the media culture war

Oliver Zimmer: "I experienced the media coverage during the Brexit years. From A to Z, for years, Great Britain was ridiculed, especially in the German-language media, in a way I would never have expected from quality newspapers. I think you have to be able to take that, as a citizen or as a politician. It needs more robustness. The media campaign alone that I followed – if there had been any instability on the part of the British government, then the decision would have had to be changed immediately. It was a media culture war. 80 per cent of the opinions were

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struct the Federal Council to enter into accession negotiations with the EU. In addition to wage protection, his list of demands to Brussels also includes maintaining the high quality of the Swiss public service and the Swiss franc.⁵ After the failed negotiations with Brussels, everyone should have understood that the EU is not very fond of independent positions from contractual partners.

Now Molina’s motion to leave the EU has been thrown out by his own parliamentary group. On 8 June, Swiss television reported: “It remains to be seen whether the SP as a party will ultimately follow the demand for accession. The SP will clarify its European policy goals by next spring[!]. Critics of the framework agreement will also be involved in this process.”⁶

This does not sound like much enthusiasm for accession on the part of the comrades – who knows whether they want to delete the EU accession goal from their party programme?

– *Markwalder, “Operation Libero” & Co indignantly call for a referendum*

Of all people, those who want to sink direct-democratic Switzerland into the undemocratic EU construct are now scream

blue murder because the Federal Council, by breaking off negotiations, is allegedly overriding the people’s right of co-determination. The EU turbos *Christa Markwalder* (FDP, BE), *Tiana Moser* (GLP, ZH) and other members of the National Council’s APK demanded in a letter of 18 May that the Federal Council submit the framework agreement to parliament and then only subject it to an optional referendum.⁷

Meanwhile, the think tank “Operation Libero” senses “great unease in civil society” and is therefore planning a popular initiative of still undetermined content to bring closer ties between Switzerland and the EU into the Federal Constitution. Incidentally, the “civil society” supporting the project consists mainly of the *New European Movement* (of which Markwalder was formerly president; today’s president: *Eric Nussbaumer*, also an SP National Councillor and APK member) and the *Foreign Policy Society* (of which Markwalder is now president).⁸

Again, it’s always the same few people who don’t like the Swiss model. Fortunately, most voters refuse to let their common sense be switched off. •

¹ Tribelhorn, Marc; Gafafer, Tobias. “Ich würde Ihnen widersprechen: Die Schweiz ist ein Mitglied der EU” (I would disagree with you: Switzerland is a partial member of the EU.) Interview with Thomas Cottier and André Hohenstein. In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 26 May 2021.

² “Das Institutionelle Abkommen Schweiz-EU wird nicht abgeschlossen.” (The Switzerland-EU Institutional Agreement will not be concluded.) *Federal Council media release* of 26 May 2021.

³ Federal Councillors *Parmelin, Cassis* and *Keller-Sutter* on: Institutionelles Abkommen Schweiz-EU. (Switzerland-EU Institutional Agreement.) *Media conference* on 26.5.2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzL_cScGsOY

⁴ Neuhaus, Christa. “Das Rahmenabkommen ist ja eigentlich die schlechteste aller Varianten für ein gesichertes Verhältnis mit der EU.” (The Framework Agreement is actually the worst of all options for a secure relationship with the EU.) Interview with Cédric Wermuth. In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 22 May 2021

⁵ Vögeli, Dorothee. “SP-Nationalrat Fabian Molina findet den EU-Beitritt die beste Option – nun möchte er im Parlament Druck aufsetzen.” (SP National Councillor Fabian Molina thinks EU accession is the best option – now he wants to put pressure on Parliament.) In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 6 June 2021

⁶ Washington, Oliver. “Neue Ideen zur Europapolitik kursieren im Bundeshaus.” (New ideas on European policy are circulating in the Federal Parliament.) In: *SRF News* of 8 June 2021

⁷ Feusi, Dominik. “Die Rettungsversuche für das Rahmenabkommen (2): Der Plan von Christa Markwalder und den EU-Diplomaten.” (The rescue attempts for the Framework Agreement (2): The plan of Christa Markwalder and the EU diplomats.) In: *Nebelspalter* of 21 May 2021

⁸ Washington, Oliver. “Rahmenabkommen: Volksinitiative soll Druck auf Bundesrat erhöhen.” (Framework Agreement: Popular initiative to increase pressure on Federal Council.) In: *SRF News* of 18 May 2021

Breaking off negotiations is a decision matured over years

*Interview with Dr Gerhard Schwarz**

On the fringes of the 51st Economic Conference of the “Progress Foundation”, which took place on 31 May in Zurich and was dedicated to the topic of “Sovereignty from Below”, the opportunity arose to ask Dr Gerhard Schwarz, President of the Foundation Board and head of the conference, questions that had developed in the course of the panel discussion.

Current Concerns: Switzerland is a weighty economic partner for the EU, and it is also highly attractive financially. So why shouldn’t Switzerland propose that

the EU allow the Bilateral Agreements to be adapted to developments in EU regulations to the extent that they are adequate for us? In return, we could contribute, for example, CHF 500 million annually for selected projects under the Cohesion Fund. If the EU resorted to arbitrary pinpricks again, we would suspend payments (as Parliament did some time ago). How do you see that?

Gerhard Schwarz: The question fails to recognise that the Single Market was never just an economic project, but always a political one as well. That is why the EU has trouble with such à-la-carte approaches, which it interprets as cherry-picking. The guillotine clause, which is supposed to prevent only individual treaties of the entire package from being terminated, is an outgrowth of this mindset. I rather plead for a unilateral application of the so-called “Cassis de Dijon” principle with regard to technical norms and standards: products that are approved in the EU should also be approved in our country without further ado, since we can assume that the EU does not protect its citizens less and worse than we do. I would certainly not want to understand the cohesion payments as a price for any specific counter-performance by the EU, otherwise this will arouse covetousness. Every time we want something from the EU, it then demands an increase in

these payments. I consider these payments to be a kind of compensation for the general benefit we get from the EU, from its cooperation, from its stabilisation function in Europe, etc.

At the moment, many Swiss are not primarily concerned about the expected reaction of the EU, but about the massive counter-campaign against the termination of negotiations at home. Do you have a perspective here?

Yes, the insulted and defiant reaction does not exactly correspond to Swiss customs after decisions of this scope. The same people who are complaining – rightly, in my opinion – about the grotesquely long negotiations are acting as if this decision was a hasty gut decision. On the contrary, it is a decision that has matured over years. And five federal councillors from three parties are said to have been in favour of the break-off. In view of this breadth, I therefore hope for a certain sovereignty on the part of the “losers” and for their constructive cooperation in a broad-based fitness programme for Switzerland. •

* Dr. Gerhard Schwarz was a member of the business editorial team of the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” from 1981, and its head from 1994–2010. From 2010–2016 he was director of the think tank *Avenir Suisse*, Zurich, and from 1989–2014 he was a lecturer at the University of Zurich.

“After the breakdown ...”

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that the British are impossible islanders. I think that’s where you have to be a bit more robust.” •

Panellists:

Prof. *Oliver Zimmer*, Oxford University;

Dr. h. c. *Beat Kappeler*, long-time General Secretary of the *Swiss Federation of Trade Unions SGB*;

Dr. *Katharina Fontana*, domestic editor of the “*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*”;

Dr. *Gerhard Schwarz*, President of the Board of Trustees of the “*Progress Foundation*”;

Chair: *Mark Dittli*, Editor-in-Chief of *The Market*

Source: Video recording of the panel discussion at https://www.progress-foundation.ch/de/economic_conference/61

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

Framework agreement did not fit Switzerland's practice of neutrality

Letter to a friend, a senior EU official

by Ivo Rens, Honorary Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Geneva



Ivo Rens
(Picture ma)

Dear friend,

I have received your letter of 3 June in which you express your surprise at Switzerland's abandonment of the draft Framework Agreement that had been negotiated for years between

Switzerland and the European Union. As a faithful reader of the Swiss newspaper "Le Temps", you are inclined to think, with it, that the Federal Council has made a huge blunder by de facto disavowing its negotiators since 2013 and by disavowing itself for the same period.

No doubt there were mistakes made by the Swiss negotiators during these negotiations and, one day, light will have to be shed on the real culprits, probably among

the successive Federal Councillors in charge of foreign affairs in Bern. But there are also, it seems to me, mistakes made by the EU negotiators who, through a legal trick, have obtained that the Court of Justice of the European Union becomes the ultimate arbiter of disputes that may arise between the parties. In doing so, the draft Framework Agreement was a trap door for Swiss sovereignty.

The EU negotiators do not seem to have measured all the consequences of this disappearance. I am not only thinking of the programmed marginalisation of the institutions of semi-direct democracy practised in Switzerland, but above all of the international consequences of the disappearance of a practice of neutrality, unique in international law, which meant that Switzerland was chosen by *Joe Biden* and *Vladimir Putin* to meet on its soil on 16 June, as so many other representatives of states in conflict or in delicacy have done since the Second World War. The international status of this neutrality is linked to the sovereignty of the Swiss Confederation.

There is one consequence of this project that has hardly ever been brought to public attention, namely the gradual dismemberment of international Geneva that will eventually lead to the programmed disappearance of Swiss neutrality, which is dependent on Swiss sovereignty. Of course, not all international institutions

would disappear from Geneva overnight and perhaps some, such as the ICRC, are still there. But other cities around the world would soon assert their international claims and even advantages, for example Singapore.

Singapore has the advantage of being located in a region of the world that is booming economically and politically, in cultural osmosis with the Chinese giant to which it is not subservient. Even if it is in the cultural and geopolitical order, is it indifferent to the European Union that Singapore, for example, replaces International Geneva? It seems to me that the question deserves at the very least to be asked and debated by the European Union's governing bodies, which, as far as I know, has not been the case.

These, my dear friend, are some of my thoughts on Berne's wise decision to abandon the draft Framework Agreement with the European Union. Of course, it is important for Switzerland and the European Union to safeguard their countless economic and social relations by finding a new, mutually acceptable *modus vivendi*, and therefore free of any trickery (*sans escobarderie*)!

Best wishes,

Ivo Rens

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

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Will there be an EFTA renaissance?

What happens now that negotiations on the Framework Agreement have been abandoned?

by Dr rer. publ. Werner Wüthrich

History does not repeat itself. But there are parallels, the knowledge of which is helpful and which today can provide suggestions and answers to the question "What next?".

In the second half of the 1950s, two very different economic organisations were founded in Europe. In 1957, the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg founded the European Economic Community (EEC). The preamble to its statutes already contained the political goal of forming an "ever closer union" in the longer term. In 1960, Great Britain, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Portugal and Switzerland joined together to form

EFTA (European Free Trade Association). These countries set themselves the goal of reducing customs duties in the industrial sector and cooperating with each other in a liberal way – in contrast to the EEC without a political superstructure. Western Europe was divided. The chances were good, however, that the two different organisations would dismantle customs duties in step and form a large, common free trade area. – Things turned out differently.

The USA sets the tariff

Soon after its foundation, Great Britain informed its contracting parties that it wanted to leave EFTA in order to join the EEC. What prompted the govern-

ment in London to change its political course so fundamentally? There are documents that shed light on the background. For example: On 14 July 1961, the US Secretary of State *George Ball* visited the Federal Council. Minister *Albert Weitnauer* was present at the conversation and summarised it in a memo that can be accessed today via *dodis.ch* (historical document collection). From it the following passage: "The Americans consider negotiations between the EEC and EFTA as a group with a view to a purely economic agreement to be undesirable and, moreover, hopeless from the outset. For them, it is primarily a question of Great Britain and the

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Federal Councillor Hans Schaffner (left) and Federal Councillor Willy Spühler at an EFTA meeting in London in December 1966. With good negotiating skills and a great sense of responsibility, the best was achieved for Switzerland. (Picture keystone)

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other NATO allies in EFTA subscribing to its political objective by joining the EEC" (*dodis.ch/30116*, p. 2) [Translation of all dodis-documents: Current Concerns]. The political union should largely coincide with Nato. The neutral countries in EFTA, Switzerland, Austria and Sweden, would conclude an association treaty with the EEC. Preparations began in the Federal Parliament with numerous working groups (*dodis.ch/30134*, 34186). That would probably have been the end of EFTA.

Veto from Charles de Gaulle

It did not come to pass. France's President *Charles de Gaulle* vetoed the accession of Great Britain in January 1963, and the project initiated by the USA was put on hold. What prompted de Gaulle to take this step? He sought a closer relationship with Germany. On 22 January 1963, France concluded the *Elysée Treaty* (Agreement on Franco-German Cooperation) with the Federal Republic of Germany. This treaty was to determine the policy of the two countries until today. De Gaulle feared that with the accession of Great Britain, Anglo-American influence in the EEC/NATO would become even more dominant and Europe even more dependent. A little later – in July

1963 – Minister *Paul Jolles*, the head of the Integration Office, reported to the Federal Council on his conversation with the head of the *Policy Planning Board* in the American State Department: "My interlocutor unreservedly holds the well-known American view that nation-statehood in Europe is historically obsolete and that political unification seems inevitable if Europe wants to continue to play a role in world politics. The French President de Gaulle is seen as an isolated phenomenon. [...] The conversation left me with the impression that one has lost one's footing in the braintrust of the State Department with regard to Europe." (*dodis.ch/30356*)

Federal Councillor *Schaffner* later commented: De Gaulle favoured an equal partnership between Europe and the United States – and not "une Europe intégrée, donc diminué" [an integrated and therefore weakened Europe] (*dodis.ch/30358*).

EFTA continues to exist

For EFTA, de Gaulle was a stroke of luck. His veto gave it breathing space and the necessary calm to build itself up – and always with an eye on the EEC. The EEC countries dismantled customs duties in several steps – and the EFTA countries followed in step, so that after a few years

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Current Concerns

The international journal for independent thought, ethical standards, moral responsibility, and for the promotion and respect of public international law, human rights and humanitarian law

Publisher: Zeit-Fragen Cooperative

Editor: Erika Vögel, Eva-Maria Föllmer-Müller

Address: Current Concerns,
P.O. Box, CH-8044 Zurich

Phone: +41 (0)44 350 65 50

Fax: +41 (0)44 350 65 51

E-Mail: CurrentConcerns@zeit-fragen.ch

Subscription details:

published regularly electronically as PDF file

Annual subscription rate of

SFr. 40,-, € 30,-, £ 25,-, \$ 40,-

for the following countries:

Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hongkong, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Qatar, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, USA

Annual subscription rate of

SFr. 20,-, € 15,-, £ 12,50, \$ 20,-

for all other countries.

Account: Postscheck-Konto: PC 87-644472-4

The editors reserve the right to shorten letters to the editor. Letters to the editor do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of *Current Concerns*.

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Tax justice for the small and medium-sized business sector

by Professor Dr Eberhard Hamer, *Mittelstandsinstitut Niedersachsen e. V.*

In Germany, the corporate income tax for corporate enterprises is 15 %, whereas a medium-sized entrepreneur has to pay income tax of 42 %. The difference was previously justified by the fact that capital shareholders (shareholders, GmbH shareholders) had to pay additional taxes on their profits, insofar as there was a compensation. In reality, however, this corporate argument is wrong: 70 % of our corporations are owned by foreigners who do not pay taxes on their profits here, but abroad. And the international corporations - especially Big data - have their tax domicile in tax havens, so they pay no taxes at all. Example: *Amazon*, with 100 billion in profits in 2019, only had to pay 3 billion in local taxes.

So, in practical terms, the middle class is often taxed at 70 % with 42 % income tax plus business tax plus indirect tax plus propaganda tax (GEZ) plus local real taxes, while corporations can escape most of these levies. An earlier study showed that the middle class pays more than 80 % of our taxes and social security contributions on net, while the corporations receive more subsidies than they pay in corporate income tax.¹

So, there is a blatant injustice in our tax system: corporations are coddled, spared, subsidised. In the biggest state redistribu-

tion in our history (more than 50 % GDP), the lower class receives more social benefits than it pays itself. The middle class is the only loser and the dominant payer (61 % of all that the recipients of social benefits receive and the state incurs in costs²).

For decades, SME research and SME associations have been demanding that the government return to the tax policy of *Ludwig Erhard*, who managed to build up the German economy through self-financing, namely through a different concept of profit: in the 1950s, only distributions were taxed as profit, the same for all types of companies. In this way, companies were able to keep fictitious profits and investment costs in the company, grow, create jobs and achieve healthy finances.

This infuriated the international banks at the time, who also wanted to earn from the economic upswing and urged *Adenauer* to provide debt financing for companies as in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Thus, the concept of taxation was changed from distributions to complicated theoretical internal surplus calculations in the company, fictitious profits and investments have to be taxed and the tax system has become so complicated that no one can see through it any more.

This has hit above all the medium-sized companies, which cannot emigrate for tax

purposes, do not have to transfer their profits abroad, but keep them at home and are thus at the mercy of the most meticulous tax bureaucracy in the world.

The *Mittelstandsinstitut Niedersachsen* is therefore calling on the federal government not only to introduce loss carrybacks for a few years, but to take the whole step, namely to tax only distributions, as under *Ludwig Erhard*.

No time is more favourable for this step than now, when profits are not being made anyway, companies are fighting for their existence and need more equity capital to survive at all.

The *Mittelstandsinstitut* calls on the SME associations and chambers to join this demand for a change in the concept of profit and thus to give the economic sector that is most important for our prosperity – the SME sector – a chance to survive.

The basic law of the market economy is equality of opportunities. Small and medium-sized enterprises are also entitled to equal treatment with corporations in tax law. Changing the definition of profit to distributions would finally create tax justice. •

¹ cf. Hamer, Eberhard. *Wer finanziert den Staat?* (Who finances the state?), Hannover 1982

² cf. Ibid.

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it was relatively easy to conclude a joint free trade agreement, initially in the industrial sector, between the countries of the EEC and EFTA – a project that the Americans had prevented ten years earlier.

Free Trade Agreement of 1972

The President of the Swiss Confederation *Brugger* gave an impressive speech at the signing of the Free Trade Agreement on 22 July 1972, in which he set out Switzerland's fundamental values and the guidelines for Switzerland's future relationship with the Community:

“The agreement between Switzerland and the European Community, which on behalf of the Federal Council I have the honour to sign today, represents a decisive step in our traditional endeavour to cooperate in the integration of our continent, insofar as we are able to do so while respecting direct democracy, parliamentary powers and neutral foreign policy.” (*dodis.ch/36209*)

In 1974 – after the death of Charles de Gaulle – Great Britain joined the EC, and later other EFTA members followed.

The Swiss parliament submitted the free trade treaty to the sovereign on 3 December 1972, and it was approved by a majority of 72.5 percent and by all cantons. Switzerland was united. In the years that followed, EFTA concluded over a hundred additional treaties with the EC and later the EU. The exchange of goods and later also the exchange of services multiplied. In the meantime, EFTA has concluded around 40 tailor-made free trade agreements with many countries around the world. These include countries such as China, Japan and recently, following a referendum, Indonesia. In addition, there are numerous trade agreements. It is a success story. This would not have been possible with the association treaty with the EEC demanded by the USA, as it was debated in the 1960s.

What can we learn from this?

Cooperation and talks with the EU on an equal footing within the framework of the existing treaties are a matter of course. Switzerland and the EU belong to Europe. Both are dependent on each other for many reasons and can cooperate in a tried and tested way. What can Switzerland do today without, as expressed by Federal

Councillor *Brugger*, putting the country's characteristics at risk?

Much like in the 1960s, Swiss laws and trade regulations can be harmonised with today's EU – to the extent that it is necessary and makes sense – even autonomously without negotiations. This approach also proved its worth in the years following the popular “no” to the EEA in 1992. The cohesion billion as a contribution to the economic and social development of poorer countries is part of this. Should the Free Trade Agreement ever be “modernized”, the conditions as formulated by Federal Councillor *Brugger* in his 1972 speech would have to be observed: Cooperation yes, “insofar as we are able to do so while preserving direct democracy, parliamentary powers and neutral foreign policy.” It is possible that the UK, a founding member of EFTA, which has since left the EU, will rejoin, and that there will be a renaissance of the soon to be fifty-year-old treaty. •

Detailed presentation of the events in: *Wüthrich, Werner. Wirtschaft und direkte Demokratie in der Schweiz; Geschichte der freiheitlich-demokratischen Wirtschaftsverfassung der Schweiz* (Economy and direct democracy in Switzerland; history of the liberal-democratic economic constitution of Switzerland), Zürich 2020, cf. chapter 24, pp. 293–318

Enemy images outside ... and also inside the country

Germany before the federal elections

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

The results of the state elections of 6 June in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt – the last state elections before the federal elections at the end of September 2021 – and the public debates before and after these elections once again shed light on the state of political culture in Germany: The issues really at stake are to be hidden behind questions of good or evil. A clarification of terms and political contexts can help not to fall for superficial phenomena.

Before and after the state elections, one topic was dominating the media commentaries and analyses: the AfD (Alternative for Germany). Before the state elections, the spectre of the AfD becoming the strongest faction in the new state parliament was invoked. After the elections, nearly everyone agrees on one thing: the spectre has been banished for the time being. The CDU – which in this state is considered more “conservative” than the federal CDU – won almost 37% of the votes (it even managed to increase its share), which was significantly more than the AfD, which still won more than 20% of the voters and will be the second strongest parliamentary group in the new state parliament, but also suffered slight losses. *Die Linke*, SPD and *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* fell short of their expectations, the latter two parties with less than 10%. The FDP achieved a little more than 5% and re-entered the parliament after 10 years.

The spectre of the threat from the extreme right-wing

The spectre of the threat from the extreme right-wing has a long history in Germany and, after 1990, has gradually replaced the spectre of the threat from the extreme left-wing as the main threat from the official side. Particularly in Western Germany, many believe they can recognise this spectre in the flesh. The most recent example of this are the statements made by *Marco Wanderwitz*, a CDU politician and the German government’s representative to the East, in the “FAZ Podcast for Germany” on 28 May, according to which there was a stronger tendency to vote for right-wing extremist parties in East Germany than in the West: “We’re dealing with people who have partly been socialised by a dictatorship in such a way that they haven’t yet arrived in democracy even 30 years later.”

Some people in Eastern Germany, he said “just haven’t properly grasped democracy yet”.

Clarifying the terms

Too rarely, there are factual reaction to such statements in Germany. In other words, there is a lack of clarification of what terms like “radical right-wing”, “non-democratic” etc. mean. Unfortunately, even the Federal Office and the State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution, from which clear statements on these questions should be expected, unfortunately do not always help today. The “definitions” of these state offices have meanwhile adapted quite well to the zeitgeist.

The author of these lines grew up in Germany at a time when the term “radical right-wing” was always associated with the ideology and rule of the NSDAP. Characteristics of National Socialist ideology and rule were a leader principle rejecting democracy; an inhuman racial doctrine with the delusion that there were inferior and superior “races” and that the inferior ones were to be destroyed; an aggressive foreign policy based on war and conquest (in the East, especially in the Soviet Union).

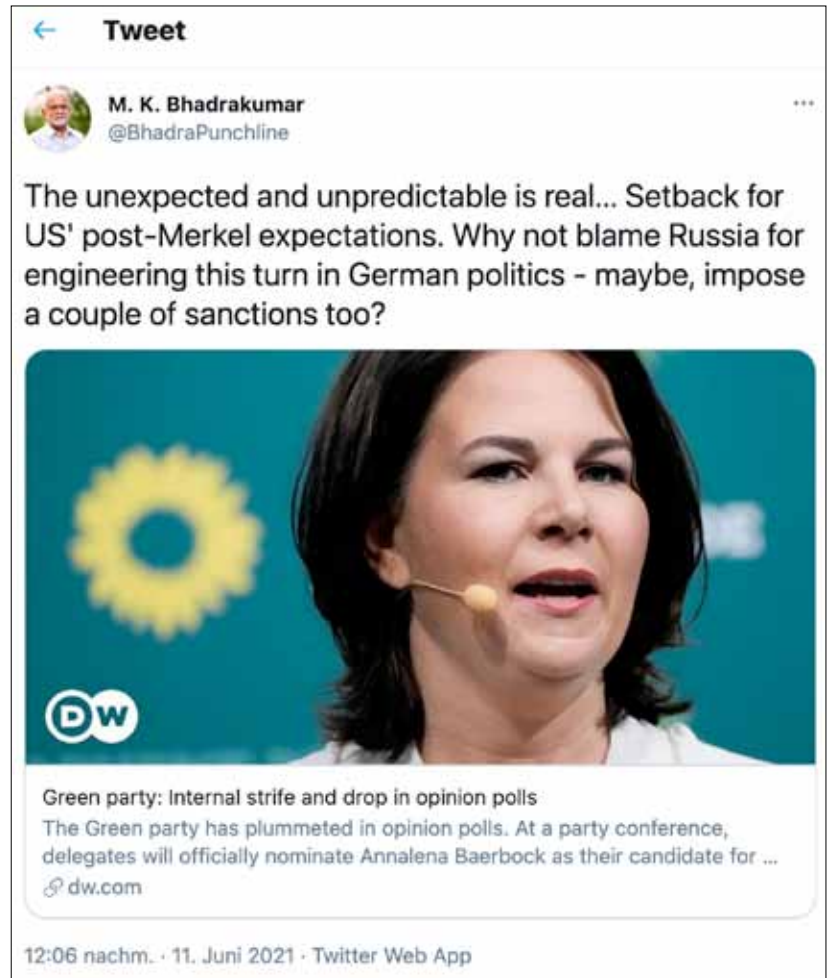
Experiences from the Weimar Republic

During the years of the Weimar Republic, Germany had made the painful experience that since the summer of 1932 – i.e., still in the times of the Republic – the NSDAP (together with the communist KPD) had won a majority of deputies in the Reichstag, the parliament of the Republic, and that proper parliamentary work was no longer possible. The National Socialists had openly declared that they wanted to win seats in parliament in order to destroy it. Finally, and under pressure from influential forces at home and abroad, *Hindenburg*, the President of the Reich – also no friend of democracy, but not a National Socialist – appointed *Adolf Hitler* as Chancellor on 30 January 1933 – in accordance with the rules of the constitution.

After 1945: defensive democracy

Such a turn was to be made impossible in Germany after the Second World War. The

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“Recourse to the traditional colonial strategy”

With the manoeuvre “African Lion 21”, the USA is reaching out to Africa again

by Manlio Dinucci, Italy

The *African Lion*, the largest military exercise on the African Continent planned and led by the US Army, has begun. It includes land, air, and naval manoeuvres in Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, and adjacent seas – from North Africa to West Africa, from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. 8,000 soldiers are taking part in it, half of them is American with about 200 tanks, self-propelled guns, planes, and warships. *African Lion 21* is expected to cost USD 24 million and has implications that make it particularly important.

This political move was fundamentally decided in Washington: the African exercise is taking place for the first time in Western Sahara i.e., this year in the territory of the Sahrawi Republic, recognised by over 80 UN States, whose existence Morocco denied and fought against by any means. Rabat declared that in this way “Washington recognises Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara” and invites Algeria and Spain to abandon “their hostility towards the territorial integrity of Morocco”. Spain, who was accused by Morocco of supporting Polisario (Western Sahara Liberation Front), is not participating in the *African Lion* this year. Washington reaffirmed its full support to Morocco, calling it “major non-NATO ally and partner of the United States”.

The African exercise takes place this year for the first time within the frame-

work of a new US Command structure. Last November, the US Army Europe and the US Army Africa were consolidated into a single command: the US Army Europe and Africa. General Chris Cavoli, who heads it, explained the reason for this decision: “The regional security issues of Europe and Africa are inextricably linked and can quickly spread from one area to another if left unchecked.” Hence the decision of the US Army to consolidate the European Command and the African Command, so as to “dynamically move forces from one theater to another, from one continent to another, improving our regional contingency response times”.

In this context, *African Lion 21* was consolidated with *Defender-Europe 21*, which employs 28,000 soldiers and over 2,000 heavy vehicles. It is basically a single series of coordinated military manoeuvres that are taking place from Northern Europe to West Africa, planned and commanded by the US Army Europe and Africa. The official purpose is to counter an unspecified “malign activity in North Africa and Southern Europe and to defend the theatre from adversary military aggression”, with clear reference to Russia and China.

Italy participates in *African Lion 21*, as well as in *Defender-Europe 21*, not only with its own forces but as a strategic base.

The exercise in Africa is directed from Vicenza by the US Army’s *Southern Europe Task Force* and the participating forces are supplied through the Port of Livorno with war materials coming from Camp Darby, the neighbouring US Army logistics base. The participation in *African Lion 21* is part of the growing Italian military commitment in Africa.

The mission in Niger is emblematic, formally “as part of a joint European and US effort to stabilise the area and to combat illegal trafficking and threats to security”, actually for the control of one of the richest areas in strategic raw materials (oil, uranium, coltan, and others) exploited by US and European multinationals, whose oligopoly is endangered by the Chinese economic presence and other factors.

Hence the recourse to the traditional colonial strategy: guaranteeing one’s interests by military means, including support for local elites who base their power on their armed forces behind the smokescreen of opposing jihadist militias. In reality, military interventions aggravate the living conditions of populations, reinforcing the mechanisms of exploitation and subjugation, with the result that forced migrations and consequent human tragedies increase.

Source: *il manifesto* of 8 June 2021

(Translated by Jeannie Toschi Marazzani Visconti)

“Enemy images outside ...”

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[East German] German Democratic Republic declared a communist-defined Anti-Fascism as a constitutional principle. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany not only declared the liberal, constitutional and democratic foundations of the state to be unchangeable, but also declared the new state to be a “defensive democracy” where individuals can forfeit basic rights in the most extreme case (if these are “abused to combat the free democratic basic order”, Article 18) and in which parties can, if necessary, be banned as unconstitutional if they (“by reason of their aims or the behaviour of their adherents, seek to undermine or abolish the free democratic basic order or to endanger the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany”, Article 21). It was probably already known at that time that the term “enemy of the constitution” or “unconstitutional” could be abused in political competition. Hence, only the Federal Constitutional Court has the power to determine the unconstitutionality of a party and thus to ban it. The court has only done this twice, in the

1950s, namely towards the *Socialist Reich Party* (SRP), which was classified as extreme right-wing, and the *Communist Party of Germany* (KPD), which was classified as extreme left-wing, the latter also in connection with the Cold War.

AfD and other targets

Whether the AfD in its current constellation is “extreme right-wing”, “radical right-wing”, “anti-constitutional” or “unconstitutional” is a matter of debate. But that is not really the point because, in present-day Germany, all these terms are used primarily in political competition – and they are aimed not only towards a party, but also towards a certain way of thinking and acting. Above all, to discourage opposition. For example: Opposition to a family policy that is determined by gender ideology; opposition to a migration policy that pleads for “open borders” and against “Deutschland”; opposition to a supranationalism that wants to break with the principle of democratically legitimised state sovereignty; opposition to a globalisation that

primarily serves the financial industry; opposition to a “Westernisation” whose bitter fruit is arrogance and aggressiveness towards other cultures, peoples and states.

Why is the East annoying?

The fact that abuse of terms is mainly used against people in the east of the country is violating German unity, polarising, and ultimately harming the whole country. Perhaps the East Germans are to be disciplined: because the zeitgeist is examined more critically there; because the idea of direct democracy (“We are the people”, but honestly meant) is more alive among them than in the West of the country; because the critical distance to the authorities and to the top-down politics prevailing in Germany is greater than in the West of the country; because political paternalism is perceived less agreeably than in the West of the country. These East German virtues have absolutely nothing to do with “radical right-wing”; that is what makes this political lie so particularly inappropriate.

After US withdrawal: Will Afghanistan become Vietnam 2.0?

by Dr Matin Baraki*, Marburg



Matin Baraki
(Picture ma)

Prehistory

After the end of the real existing socialism, the “end of history”¹ was proclaimed by a writing mercenary of the capitalist system, which emerged victorious from the Cold War, and the New World Order was announced by the highest representative of the USA, *George Bush senior*, at the end of the US-led war against Iraq in early 1991. Within the framework of the *Greater Middle East Strategy* (GME) of the neo-conservatives around *George W. Bush*, *Dick Cheney*, *Paul Wolfowitz* and *Donald Rumsfeld*, the entire region of the Middle East, from the Caucasus to North Africa and from there to Bangladesh and the Hindu Kush, was to be brought under the control of the United States. The attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York thus provided just the right occasion to implement the GME strategy.

With the Taliban regime isolated nationally, regionally and internationally, US fighter jets began bombing Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. After sweeping away the Taliban regime in four weeks, US units moved on to Iraq as early as the beginning of 2003. There, the war was still in full swing when the Taliban, strengthened again, returned.

The USA and its NATO allies, however, did not succeed in defeating the Taliban, even with the deployment of up to 150,000 soldiers. At its peak, in the years between 2001 and 2014, the war cost USD 1.5 billion every week. Apart from 2500 fallen US soldiers, it was no longer financially viable in the long run. According to a publication by *Statista Research Department* on 22 March 2021, a total of 3,596 soldiers of the Western alliance lost their lives in Afghanistan between the years 2001 and 2020.² The USA had to recognise the limits of its military capabilities and accept defeat.

This also shattered the GME strategy on the mountains of the Hindu Kush. Only then did they negotiate secretly for years and officially for two years with the Taliban in Doha, the capital of the Emirate

of Qatar, and sign an agreement in February 2020. Therein, they committed to withdraw their soldiers from Afghanistan by the end of April 2021. With this, the Taliban literally diplomatically pulled the USA over the table and their surrender was contractually sealed. As a consolation, the Taliban [promised] “in a secret annex to the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020 to protect foreign military bases from attacks by other militant groups”³, which they are hardly in a position to do. Nevertheless, in January 2021, the Taliban negotiator *Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai* wanted to give the impression of “giving safe passage to a foreign invasion force”⁴.

Joe Biden’s manoeuvre

The new US President *Joe Biden* had initially questioned the withdrawal until the end of April 2021 set by former US President *Donald Trump* and ordered a review of the agreement shortly after taking office. The idea was to talk to the Taliban about postponing the date in order to be allowed to stay in the Hindu Kush “a little longer”⁵. “You can’t somehow withdraw more than 10,000 soldiers in six weeks”⁶, stated *Adam Smith*, chairman of the Security Forces Committee of the US House of Representatives, on 24 March 2021. At the end of a meeting of NATO foreign ministers, NATO Secretary General *Jens Stoltenberg* announced: “No final decision has been taken [...]. For the time being, all options remain open”⁷. Moreover, a withdrawal by the end of April, as the previous US administration had agreed with the Taliban, could not be guaranteed even for logistical reasons. We will “decide together”⁸ to leave Afghanistan “when the time is right”⁹, said a representative of the US NATO ambassador in Brussels. On 29 March 2021, President Biden stressed that he did not want to put himself under pressure because of the agreed deadline. Yet, he could not imagine having US soldiers stationed in the Hindu Kush next year either. “We will go. The question is when we go,” Biden emphasised.¹⁰

The Taliban, however, insist that the USA must abide by the agreement of February 2020. The Islamists’ spokesperson reported via *Twitter* that if the Biden administration did not abide by the concluded agreement, “the problems would certainly be intensified as a result, and those who did not abide by the agreement will be held accountable for it”¹¹. As every year, the Taliban have announced their spring offensive in order to force the USA

and NATO to withdraw this year. This would be a de facto expulsion of the world power from the Hindu Kush, and an orderly withdrawal of US and NATO units from Afghanistan would hardly be possible. It threatens to “look more like an escape”, said FDP defence politician *Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann*.¹² This is precisely the scenario the US wants to avoid at all costs. There must not be a second Saigon.

US President Biden had to realise, *nolens volens*, that the USA no longer had any prospects in Afghanistan and on 13 April 2021 ordered the withdrawal of his soldiers for September 2021, as reported by the “Washington Post”. By 11 September, all US units must be unconditionally withdrawn from the Hindu Kush without any consideration from the Taliban.¹³ “It is time to end America’s longest war. It’s time for American soldiers to come home,” President Biden emphasised.¹⁴ He pointed out that he was the fourth president to have US units at war in Afghanistan during their term in office. “I will not hand over this responsibility to a fifth.”¹⁵ It is hardly possible, Biden stressed, to drag out the war effort “in the hope that at some point the circumstances will be right for an ideal withdrawal”¹⁶. There will never be “ideal conditions”¹⁷ for this.

This is how even a loser can articulate his defeat in a comforting way. “The defeat of the West is so comprehensive that the Taliban do not even have to participate in peace talks for appearances’ sake. The foreign forces are now leaving almost head over heels.”¹⁸ There are no plans for a farewell ceremony for the 10,000 NATO and 1,100 Bundeswehr soldiers (German army).¹⁹ The withdrawal of NATO units from Afghanistan officially began on 1 May 2021.

What happens to the foreign mercenaries operating in Afghanistan on behalf of the US *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) and other NATO intelligence services? *Asadullah Walwalgi*, an expert on military affairs in Kabul, estimates that there are about 40,000 mercenaries under contract to about 50 different, mostly US military companies,²⁰ who “do the dirty work”²¹. There is no mention of their departure or withdrawal anywhere.

“Together in, together out”?

This slogan of the Federal Minister of Defence *Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer* is more than an untruth. “Truth is something so precious that politicians use it only very sparingly.”²² For since the incorporation of

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"After US withdrawal ..."

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the former *German Democratic Republic* (GDR), Germany's political and military class has once again harboured great power ambitions. This is clearly evident from the *Defence Policy Guidelines* for the Portfolio of the Federal Minister of Defence of 26 November 1992, 21 March 2003 and 18 May 2011, as well as from the 2004 and 2006 White Papers on Germany's Security Policy and on the Situation and Future of the Bundeswehr. The border of Germany's defence is no longer the one prescribed by the Constitution (Art. 87a) – the operational area is the whole world.

Remarkable is the Berlin speech of the then Federal President *Roman Herzog* at the Hotel *Adlon* on 26 April 1997, in which he emphatically referred to Germany's great power ambitions: "A great global race has begun: World markets are being redistributed, as are the chances for prosperity in the 21st century. We must now start a race to catch up."²³

Afghanistan was also once again, now for the third time, included as a chessboard for Germany's global ambitions. However, a suitable occasion was awaited. 11 September 2001 was an excellent opportunity for this. If it had not existed, it would have had to be invented. Chancellor *Gerhard Schröder* (SPD) announced Germany's unrestricted solidarity with the United States of America. Against this background, the "case of alliance" was declared for the first time, in accordance with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. "We must also not forget: It was not least Germany that pushed the NATO to make Afghanistan a NATO operation in 2002. That was the Schröder/*Fischer* government," explained the former Inspector General of the Bundeswehr, *Klaus Naumann*.²⁴ This opened up the possibility for Germany's political and military class to participate in the war against Afghanistan.²⁵

The militarisation of German foreign policy created the preconditions for the pithy formulation of the Social Democratic Federal Minister of Defense, *Peter Struck*, after the adoption of the Defense Policy Guidelines in the spring of 2003: "German security is being defended in the Hindu Kush",²⁶ a sentence that has been quoted again and again. "The sentence is one of the most foolish sentences in German postwar history,"²⁷ remarked *Heribert Prantl*, then head of the domestic policy department of the "Süddeutsche Zeitung". Struck's statement is also wrong because the Taliban have only a regional agenda. They are not international terrorists and "do not want to attack Hamburg and New York".²⁸ Germany's military "engagement" in the Hindu Kush, on the one hand, militarised German foreign policy and, on the other, opened the door for

future worldwide operations of the Bundeswehr.

In its 20-year military "engagement" in the Hindu Kush, the Federal Republic of Germany has had a total of 160,000 soldiers in combat, most recently 1,100. 59 soldiers have paid for this with their lives.²⁹ This Bundeswehr mission has cost more than 12 billion euros since 2001. This was reported by the Federal Foreign Office in response to a question from the *Die Linke* parliamentary group in the Bundestag.³⁰ Even if one were to assume that this sum has doubled, one would not be wrong. This is because the German government does not specify all expenditures.

Despite the financial and human losses, the current German Foreign Minister *Heiko Maas* (SPD) believes that "it has not been in vain"³¹ and announced further German political and financial involvement in the Hindu Kush. "The peace process needs a new diplomatic push," Maas said.³² For the current year, the FRG has promised 430 million euros "and the same amount for the years until 2024".³³ But the disbursement is made dependent on how the "peace process" between representatives of the Kabul administration and the Taliban will develop. Whether the federal government would also cooperate with a Taliban government is not clearly stated. This is because "as early as January [2021], American considerations had become public about forming a transitional government for Afghanistan that included the Taliban."³⁴

Pakistani Foreign Minister *Shah Mahmood Qureshi* was also cautiously optimistic about the Taliban's future strategy. He said that they "have understood that Afghanistan has changed. And that they have to accept this change."³⁵ Since the Taliban leadership always coordinates its strategy with the Pakistani government, it may be that it would consider this reality in addition to its military strength.

Women's rights as an alibi

In Afghanistan, the US imperial power has from the beginning been concerned neither with women's rights nor with human rights, let alone with Afghanistan itself, but only for their strategic interests in the region, for the encirclement of the Russian Federation and regime change in Iran. The country in the Hindu Kush was turned into an unsinkable aircraft carrier by the USA. Now, however, the framework conditions have changed and with it the priorities of US strategy. In the foreseeable future, the People's Republic of China will be able to catch up with the USA, if not overtake it economically, but also militarily.

At the end of 2017, the US "National Security Strategy" classified the People's Republic of China as a "strategic rival".

The USA will now also try to militarily surround the People's Republic of China under President Biden and to, if not prevent, at least delay the country's rise to a future world power. Former US President *Barack Obama* and his Vice President Joe Biden had already called for a US-led Pacific Century in November 2011. This strategy is clearly directed against the People's Republic of China. To realise this option, the USA has already forged regional military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the nuclear power India. The regional conflict over the South China Sea, of which the People's Republic of China claims 80% for itself and has even occupied individual islands, citing "historical arguments going back as far as two thousand years", could be instrumentalised by the USA as leverage for a larger conflict against China.

Afghanistan has been written off for the time being. The USA wants to concentrate its forces on what will be an important geostrategic region. An Asian century is beginning. The place where supremacy is being fought for is the Pacific Ocean region. The forces in and around Afghanistan are being withdrawn precisely to build a bulwark against China on the Pacific.

Balance Sheet of a Disaster

Twenty years of US and NATO war have caused "devastation"³⁶ in Afghanistan. "The noble claims of the past, the stabilisation and democratisation of the country, have been forgotten. And the balance sheet is a disgrace for the superpower that will certainly reverberate: More than 2,000 Americans have lost their lives in the Hindu Kush. In addition, there are at least 100,000 dead Afghan civilians."³⁷ According to a report by the news channel *TOLO-TV* on 18 April 2021, 160,000 people are believed to have died since 2001, according to counts by the Afghan and US governments and the UN.³⁸ In addition, "66,000 Afghan security forces, four thousand international soldiers and 80,000 Islamists" have been killed.³⁹ In addition to this, corruption, nepotism, ethnic fragmentation, drug cultivation and trafficking, demonstration of power and even kidnappings (there was talk of a kidnapping industry by 1st Vice President Marshal *Mohammed Qasim Fahim* under the US-imposed President *Hamid Karzai*) were the order of the day due to the cooperation and direct support of the warlords by the NATO countries. The entire state apparatus, both the judiciary and the executive and the legislature, as well as the security agencies, are completely contaminated with the virus of corruption.

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"After US withdrawal ..."

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Forced prostitution to get posts is commonplace at the highest levels. Posts are traded like at a bazaar. The posts with the highest corruption potential pay the most. Ambassadorial posts are offered for up to 40,000 US dollars.

Of course, girls can attend school, but the graduates hardly find jobs. The elite have long since transferred their dollars to banks in Dubai and are now sitting on packed suitcases. Those who can, are leaving the country. Already in 2020, "more than three hundred women journalists have given up their jobs or left the country altogether".⁴⁰ These women have the most enemies: the government, the warlords, the Taliban and also NATO. "There is a great risk that the Taliban will want to seize power in Afghanistan again after the withdrawal of the USA. This is also indicated by the increase in violence. The population will suffer the most, not least women and girls. The USA bears a great responsibility for this development. The invasion 20 years ago was based on false expectations. Moreover, in all these years, it has not succeeded in providing stability and rebuilding the country. A stable and democratic Afghanistan will probably remain a utopia", stated the Swedish newspaper "Skånska Dagbladet".⁴¹

What will become of Afghanistan?

At the beginning of 2021, experts from the *Afghanistan Study Group*, appointed by the US Congress, warned that "an ill-considered withdrawal could lead to a 'collapse' in Afghanistan."⁴² Such a "perspective is a disaster for the USA and its allies in Berlin, London and Paris".⁴³ The withdrawal date of the US and NATO units is now fixed. Why should the Taliban negotiate with the Kabul side at all? They "only have to wait a few months before they blow the whistle on Kabul".⁴⁴ This is factual proof of "the failure of the West in this war" in the Hindu Kush.⁴⁵

"Only when one knows all the factors is a scientific prediction in the true sense possible."⁴⁶ We know much, but not everything, about US strategy in and around Afghanistan. Nevertheless, one could assume the following options:

1. immediately after the withdrawal of NATO units, the Afghan political and military elite could take flight, preferring a quiet and nice life in exile rather than getting involved in another war with the Taliban; then the Taliban would be the sole rulers of the country, as they were from 1996 onwards.
2. If the US administration succeeded in winning the Taliban over to a coalition government with the Kabul administration by making a variety of financial

and developmental offers, a relatively smooth transformation by Afghan standards could take place.

3. If this does not succeed, it is very likely that there will be a civil war like the one in 1992, when Kabul was largely destroyed and more than 50,000 people lost their lives.
4. After us, the deluge. The USA does not seem to have a plan B for Afghanistan. At least they have not revealed one so far. In my opinion, it would be absolutely necessary to deploy a UN blue-helmet force, consisting of the non-aligned states and the Organisation of Islamic States, which should replace the NATO units and, for once, be equipped with a robust mandate, in order to ensure peace for a transitional phase until the inner-Afghan conditions have stabilised. •

¹ The term *End of History* was put into the world by the political scientist Francis Fukuyama in an article published in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989 and in a book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992.

² As of March 2021, cf. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/2006/umfrage/gefollene-oder-verunglueckte-soldaten-der-westlichen-koalition-in-afghanistan/>

³ "Die Nato zieht ab, die Taliban greifen an" (Nato withdraws, the Taliban attack), In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 3 May 2021, p. 5

⁴ Meier, Christian. "Was wollen die Taliban?" (What do the Taliban want?), In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 30 April 2021, p. 3

⁵ USA bitten um Aufschub (USA asks for postponement). Reuters, 25 March 2021

⁶ "USA bitten um Aufschub" (USA asks for postponement). Reuters of 25 March 2021

⁷ "Nato: Alle Optionen offen in Afghanistan" (All options open in Afghanistan). In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 23 March 2021, p. 5

⁸ "Nato: Alle Optionen offen in Afghanistan" (All options open in Afghanistan). In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 23 March 2021, p. 5

⁹ "Nato: Alle Optionen offen in Afghanistan" (All options open in Afghanistan). In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 23 March 2021, p. 5

¹⁰ Matern, Tobias. "In der Defensive" (On the defensive). In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 30 March 2021, p. 7

¹¹ "Nato beginnt mit Abzug aus Afghanistan" (Nato begins withdrawal from Afghanistan) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 1

¹² "Früherer Afghanistan-Abzug?" (Earlier withdrawal from Afghanistan?) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 22 April 2021, p. 5

¹³ Cf. Gutschker, Thomas. "Bedingungsloser Abzug" (Unconditional withdrawal) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 16 April 2021, p. 1.

¹⁴ "Nato beginnt mit Abzug aus Afghanistan" (Nato begins withdrawal from Afghanistan) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 1.

¹⁵ Brössler, Daniel/Kolb, Matthias. "Wenn einer geht, gehen alle" (If one goes, they all go) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 7

¹⁶ Brössler, Daniel/Kolb, Matthias. "Wenn einer geht, gehen alle" (If one goes, they all go) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 7

¹⁷ Gutschker, Thomas. "Bedingungsloser Abzug" (Unconditional withdrawal) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 16 April 2021, p. 1.

¹⁸ Carstens, Peter. "Eine Abschiedsfeier ist nicht geplant" (A farewell party is not planned) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 24 April 2021, p. 8 The USA had invited the Taliban to a peace conference in Istanbul on 24 April 2021. The Islamists had no interest in this and refused to participate.

¹⁹ cf. Carstens, Peter. "Eine Abschiedsfeier ist nicht geplant" (A farewell party is not planned) In: *Frank-*

furter Allgemeine Zeitung of 24 April 2021, p. 8; "Return in July instead of September" In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 22 April 2021, p. 5.

²⁰ cf. Gerner, Martin. "Das Geschäft mit der Sicherheit" (The business with security) In: *Der Tagesspiegel* of 28 October 2010; Michelis, Helmut. "Afghanistan – Krieg der Söldner" (Afghanistan – War of the Mercenaries). In: *Rheinische Post* of 18 November 2010.: https://rp-online.de/politik/afghanistan-krieg-der-soeldner_aid-12561151

²¹ Heilig, René. "Von Lügen getragen" (Carried by Lies). In: *Neues Deutschland* of 17/18 April 2021, p. 4.

²² This was once aptly said by the US writer Mark Twain.

²³ Bissinger, Manfred (ed.). *Stimmen gegen den Stillstand – Roman Herzogs "Berliner Rede" und 33 Antworten* (Voices against standstill – Roman Herzog's "Berlin speech" and 33 responses) 2nd ed. Hamburg 1997, p. 28; www.bundespraesident.de. (as typescript in the author's archive).

²⁴ Naumann, Klaus. In: *Deutschlandfunk* interview of 2 July 2009 (typescript).

²⁵ Cf. Struck, Peter. "Mögliches Einsatzgebiet ist die ganze Welt" (Possible area of operation is the whole world). In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 14 January 2004, p. 1.

²⁶ O-Ton Peter Struck, Federal Minister of Defence: Topics of the Day, HR 1, 18 December 2003, 22:07; O-Ton Peter Struck: *Midday Echo*, WDR 5 of 13 January 2004, 13:35

²⁷ Prantl, Heribert. "Krieg und Wahlkampf" (War and election campaign) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 8 September 2009, p. 4.

²⁸ Schwennicke, Christoph. "Die Qual der alten Krieger" (The agony of the old warriors) In: *Der Spiegel*, No. 24/2010 of 14 June 2010, p. 91

²⁹ Cf. Brössler, Daniel. "Es ist nicht umsonst gewesen" (It has not been in vain), In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 30 April–2 May 2021, p. 10.

³⁰ Cf. Afghanistan-Einsatz kostete 12 Milliarden Euro (Afghanistan mission cost 12 billion euros), *dpa* of 18 April 2021.

³¹ Brössler, Daniel. "Es ist nicht umsonst gewesen" (It has not been in vain) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 30 April–2 May 2021, p. 10.

³² "Maas sichert Afghanistan weitere Hilfe zu" (Maas assures Afghanistan of further aid) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 30 April 2021, p. 1.

³³ Brössler, Daniel. "Es ist nicht umsonst gewesen" (It has not been in vain) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 30 April–2 May 2021, p. 10.

³⁴ Gutschker, Thomas. et al. "Augen zu und raus" (Eyes closed and out) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 3

³⁵ Meier, Christian. "Was wollen die Taliban?" (What do the Taliban want?) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 30 April 2021, p. 3

³⁶ Wetzel, Hubert. "Verwundete Seele" (Wounded soul) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 19 April 2021, p. 4

³⁷ Gutschker, Thomas. et al. "Augen zu und raus" (Eyes closed and out) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 3

³⁸ Cf. Matern, Tobias. "Die Truppen gehen, die Angst bleibt" (The troops leave, the fear remains) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 19 April 2021, p. 7.

³⁹ Viele, Jan. "Ein Trauerfall" (A case of mourning) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 17 April 2021, p. 11

⁴⁰ Viele, Jan. Ein Trauerfall. (A case of mourning). In: "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" of 17 April 2021, p. 11

⁴¹ Skånska Dagbladet, Malmö, Sweden of 10 May 2021.

⁴² Brössler, Daniel. "Wenn einer geht, gehen alle" (When one goes, they all go). In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 7.

⁴³ Matern, Tobias. "Der Krieg bleibt" (The war remains) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Frankenberger, Klaus-Dieter. "Nach zwanzig Jahren" (After twenty years) In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 April 2021, p. 1

⁴⁵ Matern, Tobias. "Schadensbegrenzung" (Damage limitation) In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 30 March 2021, p. 4

⁴⁶ Bernal, John Desmond. *Die soziale Funktion der Wissenschaft* (The Social Function of Science). Cologne 1986, p. 408

Geneva call to free Assange

ef. On 4 June 2021, numerous well-known personalities, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer and the Mayor of Geneva, Frédérique Perler launched the “Geneva Call to Free Assange”. They did so “in the name of the humanitarian values rooted in Geneva, the City of Peace and Human Rights”.

The day after, the “AnythingToSay” statue from the Italian artist Davide Dormino was inaugurated on Pâquis-Pier in front of Geneva’s Jet d’eau. It is dedicated to the whistle-blowers Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange.

At the inauguration, Nils Melzer said: “I am standing here, next to Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. The truth is: all of them are being persecuted, mistreated and demonised for one thing and one thing only; for having told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the misconduct of Western democracies.

They are the skeletons in the closet of the West. Their persecution and mistreatment is what destroys the credibility of the West. When Western governments today protest against the per-

secution of Alexei Navalny and of Roman Protasevich, those other governments only laugh and ask, ‘Well, what about Edward Snowden who is being protected in Russia? What about Julian Assange, who is in solitary confinement without having committed a crime except telling the truth? What about Chelsea Manning, who has been persecuted to the point of almost dying in an attempted suicide? [...] It is now in the hands of the public to react.’”

To date, the Geneva appeal has 4,515 supporters (17 June 2021). Another aim is to draw US President Joe Biden’s attention to the demands made so far, when he will arrive in Geneva on 16 June for his meeting with the Russian President Vladimir Putin. So many citizens and organisations around the world have been campaigning for the release of Julian Assange for so many years – when will their voices finally be heard? Last not least: On 9 June 2021, Julian Assange was awarded the Sacco and Vanzetti Prize in Boston (USA) in absentia. He was represented by his father John Shipton and his brother Gabriel Shipton.

* * *

We, the citizens of Geneva and beyond, launch the “Geneva Call” to request the immediate release of Julian Assange. In severe isolation at the Belmarsh high security prison in London, the founder of WikiLeaks is threatened with extradition to the United States where he faces a prison sentence of 175 years. His only crime is to have told the truth!

In the name of respect for inalienable human rights and the values promoted by Geneva-based human rights organizations, we request:

- the British authorities to refuse the extradition of Julian Assange and to give him his freedom
- the U.S. government to drop the charges against Julian Assange without any further delay
- all democratic states, including Switzerland, to provide Julian Assange with a safe haven from further prosecution for the WikiLeaks publications
- International organizations and non-governmental organizations in Geneva to use their skills and authorities to help free Julian Assange.
- the media to continue to report courageously, independently and impartially on the Assange case and its implications for freedom of expression and freedom to investigate and publish.
- the people of Geneva, Switzerland and the world to support the Geneva Call for the immediate release of Julian Assange.

On January 4, the British judiciary refused to extradite Julian Assange on the grounds that his life would be at risk in the U.S. prison system. Arguments about transparency and Julian Assange’s right to publish, however, were dismissed. An appeal by the U.S. Department of Justice is pending and the risk of extradition remains, as does the threat of unprecedented restrictions on press freedom.

Julian Assange has been arbitrarily detained for more than ten years in conditions that, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, fall under “psychological torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment”.

Julian Assange is being prosecuted in the United States on 17 charges (+ 1 other) under the *Espionage Act*, a law dating back more than 100 years, which can earn him 175 years in prison. His fault? To have published some 700,000 classified documents, in particular on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, often in collaboration with major media such as the New York Times, The Guardian, Le Monde or the ABC channel. In particular, he revealed a video of the American army showing the massacre of a dozen civilians including two journalists from a helicopter. The documents published by WikiLeaks revealed acts and methods of operation in violation of the Geneva Conventions and human rights. None of these violations and war crimes have been prosecuted, while the person who revealed them has been subjected to persecution for more than ten years. This is the ultimate paradox, a flagrant denial of justice, an insult to human dignity and a culpable disregard for the rule of law.

Julian Assange must be released immediately as there is no justification for holding him in near total isolation for so long. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has been denouncing the illegal imprisonment of Julian Assange for more than five years. Today, his physical and mental health is seriously deteriorating according to witnesses who have been able to visit him. In the name of respect for human rights and the traditions, norms and values promoted by Geneva-based humanitarian organizations, Julian Assange must be released without delay.

Julian Assange must be released immediately because his revelations serve a basic and essential public interest. Citizens not only have a right to know, they must know. The very notion of espionage induced by the reference to the *Espionage Act* is absurd. By making public proven information of obvious public interest, the founder of WikiLeaks is performing a salutary act of transparency in the exact opposite of an act of espionage. Julian Assange exercised his freedom of speech, which is guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as well as in every democracy. The editor of WikiLeaks revealed information of fundamental public interest that the state itself should have made public because of its obligation to inform the citizenry. Julian Assange has made a unique and remarkable contribution to public interest journalism, transparency and government accountability. His courageous and tenacious contribution has been widely recognized by the media and freedom of expression community, which has honored Julian Assange with some of the most prestigious journalism awards.

Julian Assange must be released immediately because the case against him constitutes an intolerable threat and pressure on investigative journalists. The smear campaign against the Wikileaks founder and the heavy charges against him are a warning to any whistleblower or journalist about to publish classified material. It seriously hinders the search for the facts and the truth. A conviction of Julian Assange would be the ultimate validation of a long line of absolutely unprecedented abuses of power with devastating consequences for free speech and journalism. Any dissemination of secret documents by any journalist or whistleblower, in any country, would then be

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Democratic Republic of Congo

On the eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano on 22 May 2021

The population of Goma flees a volcano's menace as a major humanitarian crisis looms

by Alain Wandimoyi / ICRC

On 22 May 2021, the Nyiragongo, one of the world's most active and dangerous volcanoes, erupted again in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is located in the middle of the famous Virunga National Park, the oldest nature reserve (conservation area) in Africa (UNESCO World Heritage Site), and at its centre is the largest lava lake in the world (250 x 270m). About 1.5 million people live in its vicinity. 20 kilometres south of Nyiragongo is Goma, the capital of North Kivu province. The last eruption of the Nyiragongo in 2002 killed 250 people and left 120 000 homeless. Even though people are now slowly returning and several aid organisations are working there, the humanitarian crisis remains: 30 dead, 232 000 people displaced, sexual abuse and exploitation rampant, cholera broke out. 3000 homes were destroyed, 1000 houses damaged. According to the UN Relief and Works Agency, 15.6 million US dollars are needed, of which 5.2 million have been pledged so far (as of 4 June 2021). The ICRC media release is printed below.



"Oh my child!" A mother finds her son at the DRC Red Cross headquarters in Goma three days after losing him at the May 22 eruption.

(Picture © Trésor Boyongo Kaya/IKRK)

Fearing another eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), thousands of people are fleeing the city of Goma and its

surroundings. The *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) has temporarily relocated part of its teams to Bukavu and Minova, and with its partners in the Red Cross Movement, remains mobilised to meet the most urgent needs in Goma and the surrounding area.

The population could have been warned in time

As early as March 2021, researchers at the Goma Volcano Observatory (OVG) had warned that there could be another eruption, Reuters reported.

"If we don't take regular measurements and announce the eruption a few days in advance, the population will not have time to evacuate and people will die", Honore Ciraba, one of the volcanologists, had told Reuters.

Background

Until 2014, Switzerland and the EU had supported the observatory for many years with a total of 3.5 million euros.

In April 2020, the World Bank's four-year USD 2 million funding programme had not been renewed, on the grounds that the OVG "lacked experience and there were weaknesses in the implementation of such a grant". They added that it could not verify the allegations of bribery.

Since then, the volcanologists have had difficulty carrying out basic checks on a regular basis. Without support, they say, they are unable to pay for an internet connection to run remote sensors and for petrol to transport researchers to the volcano.

People flee danger once again

Even though the eruption of 22 May is over, the gasses released by the volcano are still a threat to Goma's residents. Earthquakes continue to rattle the region, exposing the population to further risk, and it is difficult to specify the extent of the humanitarian needs. "The threat of another eruption is still real and the fear palpable. Earthquakes are still felt every five

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"Geneva call to free Assange"

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criminalised. The U.S. Espionage Act is so broad that, for example, it could be a violation of the law to even read a news article that the U.S. believes is harmful to the country's interests.

We, the citizens of Geneva and elsewhere, launch this Appeal to free Julian Assange on this day, June 4, 2021, in Geneva, a city of peace and negotiations, the cradle of humanitarian law and human rights, and the seat of countless international and non-governmental organiza-

tions that work for the respect of our fundamental freedoms.

With the participation and support of:

Nils Melzer, UN special rapporteur on torture, Stella Morris, fiancée of Julian Assange, Frédérique Perler, Mayor of Geneva, Yves Daccord, former General Director of ICRC, Christophe Deloire, General Secretary of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) secrétaire général de Reporters Sans Frontières, Carlo Sommaruga, Swiss Parlia-

mentarian, Jean Rossiaud, Former Parliamentarian and Initiator of Humanitarian Visa for Assange, Blaise Lempen, président Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), Pierre Ruetschi, Executive Director of the Geneva Press Club/Club suisse de la presse, Antoine Vey, Julian Assange's Attorney, Davide Dormino, sculptor (anythingtosay), Joseph Farrell, Ambassador for WikiLeaks UK, Sarah Ducret, Association des Usagers des Bains des Pâquis

More information on www.pressclub.ch
Source: www.pressclub.ch of 4 June 2021

"On the eruption of the Nyiragongo ..."

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minutes in the city," said *Raphaël Tenaud*, ICRC operations manager in Goma.

On the night of Wednesday to Thursday (26/27 May), the exodus of thousands of people began towards the town of Sake in the west following the announcement of the evacuation of part of the city by the authorities due to the risks associated with seismic and volcanic movements.

Around 2 a.m., the families started heading for the port. The streets are full of people and there is a wave of panic, some with vivid memories of the eruptions and destruction of 2002. People are seeking safety, but some are also afraid to abandon their homes. Fearing another eruption, thousands of people are fleeing the disaster of Goma.

"The people of North Kivu have already struggled with socio-economic challenges and the consequences of armed conflict for decades. The region is one of the most food insecure places in Africa. This catastrophe is a double penalty. With each crisis, the capacity for resilience diminishes," says *Raphaël Tenaud*, ICRC operations manager in Goma.

Thousands of displaced people are seeking water, shelter, basic necessities,

hygiene items and food. With the main road running north from Goma now cut off and all the very fertile cultivated land in that part of the city destroyed, it is likely that the city's residents will suffer food shortages in the days to come.

Prevent family separation

In just 48 hours, nearly 550 children were separated from their families as people fled following the eruption of 22 May. It is essential to prevent thousands of displaced people from losing contact with their loved ones.

"We advise families to memorize the phone numbers of their loved ones as much as possible. If a person is traveling with a sufficiently grown child, they need to teach them their full name, their region of origin and the phone numbers of close people, in case they are separated from them," said *Rachel Bernhard*, head of the ICRC delegation in the DRC.

Homes destroyed and essential services disrupted

More than 900 houses have already been destroyed. The water and electricity supply are still in operation in some parts of the city, but it's not clear exactly what

coverage there is. The lava has seriously damaged the main reservoir in Goma city. It is estimated that nearly half a million inhabitants are without drinking water, and there is a high risk of waterborne diseases such as cholera. This precariousness is also to be taken into account for the thousands of people who had to leave Goma.

"We are doing everything we can to meet the many challenges associated with this constantly evolving situation, while respecting security measures. Some of our teams are moving with the population, others repair the reservoir or facilitate the supply of water by tanker truck to hospitals and Goma prison," says *Rachel Bernhard*.

In addition, medical structures require support to ensure continuity of care, particularly in primary health centers. At Ndosho hospital, the ICRC medical team is continuing to take care of gunshot victims from all over North Kivu province. Secondary health facilities received assistance to maintain the supply of electricity, water and medicines. ●

Source: *Media release of 28 May 2021*; <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/dr-congo-population-goma-flees-volcanos-menace-major-humanitarian-crisis-looms>

The ICRC and RCDRC activities

The *Red Cross Society of the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (RCDRC) and ICRC teams are adapting their response in order to continue restoring family links, to support health centers in the most remote areas and to distribute food and hygiene kits to the most vulnerable.

Sixty-four Red Cross volunteers from the Provincial Committee of North Kivu were mobilized on Saturday evening to carry out victim assistance activities (distribution of water, first aid) and to restore family links.

Protection

– With technical and logistical support from the ICRC, the RCDRC sends unaccompanied children to various reception centers and has set up three additional kiosks

to collect family reunification requests and guide families.

– The ICRC is supporting the Don Bosco center and the Margherite center, which since May 22 have accommodated hundreds of unaccompanied children.

Health

– The ICRC is maintaining surgical activities at Ndosho hospital. It provides support there to ensure access to electricity and water, and supplies war surgery equipment and drugs, including a war surgery kit for 50 patients. The ICRC also donated two tents to secure the placement of patients out of buildings that are in danger of collapsing at any time.

– The ICRC helped transfer the pharmacy from Virunga Hospital.

– The RCDRC continues its health activities, in particular in three additional tents provided by the ICRC.

Access to water and shelter

– The ICRC is strengthening the operation of pumping and water catchment stations in Goma with a fuel donation of nearly 12,000 liters over two weeks in support of the water company Regideso

– RCDRC and ICRC tankers supply water to the affected areas.

– The ICRC is boosting water and fuel supplies at Ndosho hospital for two weeks.

– It is also strengthening the water supply system at Goma central prison.

Source: *Media release of 28 May 2021*; <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/dr-congo-population-goma-flees-volcanos-menace-major-humanitarian-crisis-looms>

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