

# Current Concerns

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## Switzerland is neutral – or it won't be Switzerland any longer

by Erika Vögeli

For more than 30 years, certain circles have been trying to realign Switzerland politically. Without neither a mandate from the people nor prior discussion, we see an incessant tinkering around at changing our understanding of the state. Just read the Federal Council's foreign policy report from 1988 and compare it with policy from the beginning of the 1990s on. The discrepancy could hardly be greater. As late as 1988 we find a clear commitment to direct-democratic Switzerland and its neutrality. Furthermore, an integration into EU or a rapprochement with NATO or other international organisations is only considered as possible at the price of self-abandonment. Since the 1990s however, Switzerland has been constantly bombarded with defeatist accusations like "cherry-picking", "lack of solidarity", references to "outdated ideas" and "entrenchment in myths". The slogan for the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Swiss Confederation in 1991, "700 years is enough", shows the agenda.

### Where from and what for?

This medial and political barrage against Swiss identity intensified with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the end of the USSR and the exultant intoxication of the US power elites regarding the "victory" in the Cold War, the "end of history" and the dawn of a "golden" US age. *George H. W. Bush* proclaimed a "new world order". A "new American century" was planned in which the USA aimed to achieve military superiority in all spheres around the globe.

These developments had an impact in Switzerland as well. Some influential exponents in politics, business and the media in Switzerland seem to have been so impressed by this that they did not want to miss the "connection to history" under any circumstances. Under the slogan "rethinking the state", as a major event in Bern at the time put it, a reform doctrine was imposed on Switzerland from administrative circles which was not oriented towards our needs, but towards the requirements of international institutions such as the OECD and the EU, among others.

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"In the course of history, Swiss neutrality has not just been a result of the conforming application of rights and obligations laid down in international law. In fact, it is more than a guiding principle of foreign policy circumscribed by international law, it is more than a principle recognised in 1815 by the European powers of the time. It is much more: it is a principle that has grown organically in accordance with the historical development and the essence of our federal state, i. e., with all its factors."

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Now history was rewritten, everything previous was attacked and slandered, often solely with the argument that what had been tried and tested was not a re-invention or that Switzerland stuck in a "reform backlog" – without questioning whether there was really anything in need of reform, and without drawing on experience to weigh up even tentatively the consequences of all these "innovations" and blessings of a "new world order".

The state and all areas of *public service*, committed to the common good – and functioning quite well – had to become economically profitable and "efficient". Under the slogan "slimming down the state", the transformation of the state into an executive office of globally networked companies (keyword privatisation of the public sector) began – with the administration actually fattening up. Increasingly, reforms took place by way of administrative acts and campaigns such as "future workshops" and the like, instead of relying on the well-established direct-democratic processes.

The health system – until then considered as one of the best in the world – was turned upside down. The schools were reformed, under the pretext of tuning them to "economics", thus ruining our excellent basic primary and secondary school to a shadow of its former self. This will result in Switzerland soon be running out of the only resource it has been building on for decades, its solid education system, be-

cause a few super-pupils cannot compensate for what a broad and good education means for a healthy economy and a vital democracy. The family silver was being flogged off at the stock exchange, American management methods were adopted. And people were surprised when big foreign investors showed little interest in the small national economy. Even against the will of the people, for example in the field of electricity supply, there were attempts to curtail *public service*. There was a craving for centralised power taking hold of various political parties. (The appetite for centralised power took hold in various parties.)

### Rapprochement with NATO and the "debate" on neutrality

Step by step, Switzerland was being brought closer to NATO and there were attempts to discredit neutrality within the Swiss population. However, these attempts haven't succeeded at all – quite clearly the population has repeatedly spoken out in favour of maintaining neutrality, which in Swiss feeling and thinking is deeply connected with the entire conception of the state and the existence of Switzerland. So, this strategy of dismantlement was sold as being compatible with neutrality. Instead of honestly discussing on the basis of facts, PR methods and psychological warfare with denigration and disparagement took hold.

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**"Switzerland is neutral ..."**

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The demand for solidarity is put forward – and conceals more badly than it should the willing compliance with demands and threats in the face of the presumptuous transatlantic attacks.

Apart from bringing out the biggest guns, the discussion has shifted to a pseudo-intellectual debate about aspects of neutrality law. Politics and the media are busying themselves with how to interpret the principle of neutrality laid down in the international law. Not only is this a poor justification for the embarrassing subordination to the demands of a would-be world hegemon in decline and its satellite in Brussels. Moreover, such a discussion turns the mind in a completely wrong direction by ignoring the very essence, the very substance of Swiss neutrality.

**Swiss neutrality –  
more than rights and obligations  
laid down in international law**

In the course of history, neutrality has not just been a result of the conforming application of rights and obligations

laid down in international law. In fact, it is more than a guiding principle of foreign policy circumscribed by international law, it is more than a principle recognised in 1815 by the European powers of the time. It is much more: it is a principle that has grown organically in accordance with the historical development and the essence of our federal state, i.e., with all its factors. In a way, history has "taught" us neutrality – for without neutrality, the Swiss Confederacy would never have been able to survive over the centuries and it would never have become the federal state we are looking back on 175 years of existence this year.

Actually, it was not so much "wise foresight" that led our ancestors to neutrality, but rather historical necessities and often enough hard lessons they had been learned. What guided them – often quite intuitively – was the never abandoned and timeless, yet essentially human purpose: to preserve the freedom of the small unit, which has also been preserved in the form of the Swiss federal state. Having emerged from the intentional federation with the other cantons developed by con-

tract, the Federal Constitution of 1848 preserved communal freedom and, with federalism, the far-reaching autonomy of the cantons. These have more sovereign rights than many an autonomy status in other countries. Furthermore, in addition to direct democracy at the communal level in the form of direct referendums and initiatives, direct democratic participation has been developed at the cantonal and federal levels, too.

**Will to freedom as the driving force**

This federal structure, which has *grown* from the bottom up, has enabled us – in all modesty – to enjoy the highest degree of freedom and participation, and to deal with differences of interest and conflicts in a civilised manner. It could not have developed without the principle of neutrality, which has asserted itself time and again – and on the other hand, this neutrality is also the expression of a history in which, in the end, the will to preserve the greatest possible freedom has always found a way.

Thus, Swiss neutrality has emerged in the course of a history in which the natu-

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**"A great opportunity – for Switzerland as well as for this world"**

"Precisely because we have declared our neutrality to be perpetual and therefore do not change our foreign policy position in the flowing changeabilities of international circumstances, we are protected from the accusation to float with the tide for the sake of advantage. We bear the heavy burdens of our armed neutrality without any intention of exploiting changed political constellations to gain power, very much in contrast to the merely occasional neutral or 'non-belligerent'". (Edgar Bonjour. *Die schweizerische Neutralität. Ihre geschichtliche Wurzel und gegenwärtige Funktion* (English version: *Swiss Neutrality. Its History and Meaning*). Bern 1943. p. 28)

"Neutrality, then, does not merely serve to preserve Switzerland's external existence; it serves to preserve its nature. – But also to the rest of the world, Switzerland can mean more if it remains true to its tradition as if it was abandoning it in favour of some other principle. The fact that Switzerland is not burdened with any power politics gives it an international prestige to it that it would never have gained as a power. It has always used this prestige in the interest of humanity. In numerous cases, from China to France, Swiss people mediated between hostile parties during the last war, with or without a mandate from the state. Only the international confidence

and reputation for impartiality enjoyed by Switzerland made the effectiveness of the International Red Cross possible. It has done immeasurable things to alleviate the misery of war." (Wolfgang von Wartburg. *Geschichte der Schweiz*. (History of Switzerland). p. 250f.)

"After the terrible wars of the 20th century, bellicose great power politics can only be enforced where democratic control mechanisms do not exist or can be suspended. Peace can flourish where renunciation of size and violence is taken for granted and where the state is built up from bottom up in manageable units by direct popular decision. Switzerland, too, is at a turning point. It can join the Atlantic superpowers, whose compass is still set on war, betray its origins and thereby perish. Or it can courageously fulfil its historical task within Europe, live up to its principle of law before force, as laid down in the neutrality maxim, and therewith pursue the best peace policy possible today!" (Peter Mattmann-Allamand. "Der eigentliche Zweck der Militärgesetzrevision: Das Tabu 'Neutralität' brechen" ("The real purpose of the military law revision: breaking the taboo 'neutrality'"); in: *Zeit-Fragen. Special issue on the vote of 20 June 2001*. April 2001. p. 6)

"Saying good bye to the empire would be the most important learning step. No

country in the world should have the right to expand its economic and political power by force at the expense of other countries. Law before force instead of force before law (as NATO proclaims today)! In this context, the basic maxims that the Swiss Confederation has been trying to live up to for centuries are not outdated relics of a selfish nationalism, but state-of-the-art and forward-looking foreign policy concepts." (Peter Mattmann-Allamand. "Der eigentliche Zweck der Militärgesetzrevision: Das Tabu 'Neutralität' brechen" ("The real purpose of the military law revision: breaking the taboo 'neutrality'"); in: *Zeit-Fragen. Special issue on the vote of 20 June 2001*. April 2001. p. 6)

"Finally, neutrality: a word in which one finds all the letters of the word nature. Neutrality is our nature. It shapes the tone of life in our country. Switzerland does not like conflicts. And simultaneously, it takes courage to remain a constant force of peace for humanity, as our constitution wants. It is certainly not easy to conduct a foreign policy in an unstable and multipolar world that is at the same time independent, specific, impartial. But this is also a great opportunity, for Switzerland as well as for this world." (Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter. "Excerpt from the speech on 1 August 2017"; quoted in: *Current Concerns* of 27 August 2017).

**“Switzerland is neutral ...”**

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ral desire of all human beings for freedom and self-determination was a driving force – but not in terms of its modern-day variant of a completely (pseudo-)independent individual striving for mere self-performance, without any obligation to the fellow human beings. First and foremost, man has always been and still is a member of a community without which human life is inconceivable. Freedom doesn't mean to be free to do whatever you want without regard for everything and everyone. It means to fully develop my human abilities and possibilities within the framework of this community, to contribute to the shaping of life together – to help shaping it where it concerns me, because that is what constitutes my dignity, the dignity of men.

The cooperative principle of self-help, self-responsibility and self-administration – which, by the way, can be observed in history and currently throughout the world and could certainly be described as an anthropological constant – is, to a certain extent, the pre-state form of human coexistence, which doesn't have to serve power, but all members of the community and their lives, i.e., the individuals as they are – long before any democratic constitutions. Preserving this freedom within the own framework was an essential motivation of the voluntary Swiss Confederacy, which basically consisted of numerous and different treaties of alliance and which had been expanding over the centuries. There were historical lessons to be learned: the experience that this freedom was always at risk and that preserving it required compromise and renunciation of all far too one-sided interest-driven politics.

An awareness had to develop that such a diverse, loose structure as the Confederation had been for centuries could only be maintained if the self-determination of the other confederates was respected: You couldn't have freedom unless you refrained from disregarding excessively the other's freedom. Neutrality in the interior, so to speak.

**Freedom needs  
the principle of “right before might”**

But it was only possible to preserve the freedom of this federation and with it the possibility of self-determination for its members throughout all this time, if one knew how to prevent the individual confederates from being taken over by the surrounding great powers. The loose confederation resulting from the will to the greatest possible self-determination, always had to beware of the efforts of the surrounding great powers to absorb it. Its continued existence depended to a large extent on resolving the certainly existing inner conflicts by means of legal provi-

sions, negotiations, treaties or arbitration. It was not by chance that arbitration as a mechanism for settling disputes among the confederates as well as the rejection of foreign jurisdiction were anchored in the Federal Charter from the very beginning – the recognition of the principle of law before might and force proved to be a compelling element of self-preservation. It imposed restraint on the members of the Confederation in the way of dealing with their conflicts of interests, if they wanted to maintain the common confederation to defend themselves against the great power politics ambitions of their neighbours.

With this also developed the prohibition that prevented the individual “Stände” or “Orte”, as the single states of the confederation, today the cantons, were called at the time, to make pacts with foreign powers without the consent of all others. The “Do not meddle in other people's quarrels.” of *Niklaus von Flüe* was existential for cohesion, because the foreign quarrels would inevitably have led to internal discord and strife due to differing partisanship. Only the subordination of foreign policy to domestic policy has allowed us to develop and maintain all the liberal institutions that we value so much.

In other words, the “historical education” in resolving conflicts of interest by compromise and contracts shaped domestic policy – and put foreign policy at the service of domestic policy. It made the state the custodian of the freedom of the individual and the community in which we live and thereby set it the necessary limits. From this developed – in a sense as empirical value and concomitant phenomenon of the lessons history taught us, a certain attitude towards the state, which is, however, far too little reasoned out and reflected up to day. *Wolfgang von Wartburg* called it a basic attitude which he described as “political humanism”<sup>1</sup>. This basic attitude denies any self-purpose of the state, but refers it to the ultimate task of every community building and organisation: the creation of conditions for the free development of all people living in it. Power politics, even great power politics, domination of others, interference in their conditions and ways of life are definitely not part of it.

One expression of this is the form of direct democracy as it has been able to develop in Switzerland – the only form that is actually thinkable under the premise of the responsible citizen. Of course, this does not guarantee a perfect social coexistence at all: The fact that the real existing form of this state has never fully corresponded to the ideal in history, nor does it fully correspond to it at the present time, lies in the nature of human, human-historical development.

**Neutrality creates freedom  
for the citizens and solidarity**

This “subordination of foreign policy to domestic policy”, however, has nothing to do with isolation or disinterest in the fate of others. First of all, there is no other foreign policy for an actual constitutional state that adheres to the principles of international law. The preservation of peace and of the freedom of its citizens, the promotion of their common welfare – this and only this gives the state its justification. In Switzerland, state neutrality – as many have pointed out many times – has nothing to do with neutrality of opinion for the citizens anyway. On the contrary, as Federal Councillor *Max Petitpierre* pointed out 1948, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Swiss Confederation: “Switzerland has always rejected moral neutrality. It has always held the view that there is only a neutrality of the state, the limits of which are determined by law and which, in a democracy, does not extend to the individuals, whose personal judgement remains untouched.”<sup>2</sup> It is precisely the state's obligation to neutrality in foreign policy what sets the necessary domestic political limits against pretension of power and arbitrariness. Great power ambitions and alignment with a great power, on the other hand, will sooner or later lead to the attempt of influencing and governing the opinions and the freedom of thought and speech of the citizens in the sense of the interests of the hegemon.

State neutrality, which demands strict impartiality vis-à-vis all belligerents, does not restrict the feelings and thoughts of its citizens. As a free man, he can express his solidarity with whomever he wishes. The Swiss international law expert *Emer de Vattel* (1714–1767), who, as *Pirmin Meier* points out, “came forward long before *Pictet de Rochemont* as a theorist of the integral neutrality of the Swiss Confederation”<sup>3</sup>, described this inter-relationship as follows: “I was born in a country whose soul, wealth and fundamental law is freedom. By my birth I can be the friend of all nations.”<sup>4</sup>

Genuine solidarity requires this freedom. Subordination to a great power, an integration into a military bloc inevitably strangles it. It was neutrality that Switzerland became a “diplomatic superpower” in the Second World War<sup>5</sup>. The confidence in the unconditional integral and armed neutrality made it possible for the Swiss diplomats and the representatives of the ICRC to act discreetly but effectively humanitarian on behalf of countless people in many different countries which were hostile against each other. Such missions are genuine peace policy: even if they cannot influence the war, they leave behind traces

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# Snuggling up to NATO will lead Switzerland into the next possible war!

by Gotthard Frick



Gotthard Frick  
(picture ma)

At present, our country is considering a more or less close snuggling up to NATO. But one important point is missing from the debate: That if this is done, we will automatically be involved in a possible next big war in Europe.

Do we really want this we? Unfortunately, such a conflict between the major powers – initially the USA and, as its appendages, NATO on the one hand, Russia, China on the other, with possible extensions up to a third world war – is no longer impossible in view of the renewed increase in tensions.

As the author learned time and again during his professional activities around the world, Switzerland was positively perceived everywhere, even by ordinary people, as a neutral country with a strong, innovative economy and an impressive army. When he was asked by the taxi driver in Kenya, the Indian business partner in Bombay, a high Chinese officer in Beijing, a minister of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro or a high UN official in New

York where he was from, he always heard, analogously, initially in the following conversation, the same opinion that a Chinese bank neighbour had exclaimed aloud to the astonishment of his fellow passengers in the Beijing underground (in English): “Ah, the Swiss, the most defensive and peaceful people in the world!” Of course, the media around the world also wrote this every now and then when they published articles about our country, and of course, neutrality was also part of the bright picture and was seen as exemplary. This positive image also contributed to the fact that we were never seen as a potential partner of any party in a future war, but as a mediator and helper of the people concerned. Many even thought that Switzerland was a model for their own countries.

Only in recent years – as a result of the dismantling of our army – has this perception been reversed. For example, at the last friendly dinner in Beijing, a senior member of one of the largest Chinese corporations asked quite abruptly why Switzerland had abolished its army. The international media have also reported on the dismantling of our army and judged it very negatively. Here are two examples from very many around the world: “Making fun of Switzerland is so easy that it is almost unспорт-

ing [...]. Every newspaper in the world has published a gloating article about Switzerland.” (*Business Standard*, India, 21 February 2014, about the once so strong Swiss army, which according to the article had 26,000 bunkers). «Switzerland’s reputation as an impregnable fortress suffered a setback these weeks» (*Press of Atlantic City*, USA, 23 February 2014).

In a war in Europe, a neutral Switzerland would be strategically extremely disruptive, especially for the Western powers. Their armies would be around us, and we would block their direct transport routes to each other, including airspace. The danger is great that we would therefore be attacked by the Western powers in a major war or that they would at least disregard the neutrality of our airspace and use it intensively. Just like the warring parties in the Second World War.

However, not snuggling up to NATO would only prevent us from becoming involved in a war in Europe if we ourselves maintained a “war-preventing” army according to Art. 58 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, which would make an attack on our country appear futile or too costly for the aggressor – as in the Second World War.

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

## “Switzerland is neutral ...”

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of humanity that point beyond war by reminding all those who experience them of the better side of being human, of what really makes human beings human.

Instead of belittling Switzerland and its neutrality and to defame it in a defeatist manner, we would do better to rethink it anew – in terms of its content and its potential for a more humane, more peaceful world.

### Without neutrality no direct democracy

Above all, however, we must realise that Switzerland, as a country of direct democracy, in which we have comparatively materialised the highest degree of possibilities of political participation and co-determination, cannot continue to exist without neutrality. The abandonment of our own identity – and that would be the surrender of neutrality, if we were to eye it in the light of the entire development from the beginnings to the present day – would mean the end of the Switzerland

as we know it. Of course, it could continue to exist by name as part of a power bloc, e. g., as a territorial area or an administrative unit of an EU or as German, French or Italian region.<sup>6</sup> But as a country that has historically grown from the bottom up and as an independent model which held its ground for centuries as defence against great power ambitions, it is inconceivable without its neutrality. Neutrality is a central element that gave the Swiss state structure that “measure of the human” which, in its federalist, bottom-up, subsidiarity-based direct democracy, is best suited to human nature among the forms of state organisation that have existed up to now. To preserve this model “as an unrelenting sting against money-grubbing great power politics”<sup>7</sup> would be true solidarity with the maltreated peoples of this world and the most meaningful contribution to peace.

<sup>1</sup> von Wartburg, Wolfgang. *Geschichte der Schweiz* (History of Switzerland), p. 247

<sup>2</sup> Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre. “Betrachtungen über die Neutralität” (Reflections on Neutral-

ity). In: *Schweizerische Demokratie 1848–1948. Hundert Jahre Schweizer Bundesstaat* (Swiss Democracy 1848–1948. One Hundred Years of the Swiss Federal State), p.168f. (emphasis in the original).

<sup>3</sup> Meier, Pirmin. “Ein Plädoyer für Schweizer Philosophen” (A Plea for Swiss Philosophers). In: Hirt, Walter; Nef, Robert; Ritter, Richard C. (ed.) *Eigenständig. Die Schweiz – ein Sonderfall*. (Independent. Switzerland – a special case). Zurich 2002. p. 308

<sup>4</sup> quoted from Meier, Pirmin. op. cit. p. 308. (For de Vattel’s considerations on international law, see: *Le droit des gens ou principes de la loi naturelle*. 1758. German translation: Walter Schätzel. (Ed.) In: *Die Klassiker des Völkerrechts*. (The Classics of International Law.) Volume III. Emer de Vattel: *Das Völkerrecht oder Grundsätze des Naturrechts* (The Law of Nations or Principles of Natural Law). Tübingen 1959.

<sup>5</sup> Rings, Werner. *Advokaten des Feindes. Das Abenteuer der politischen Neutralität* (Advocates of the Enemy. The Adventure of Political Neutrality). Wien und Düsseldorf 1966. p. 9

<sup>6</sup> cf. Mattmann–Allamand, Peter. “Der eigentliche Zweck der Militärgesetzrevision: Das Tabu ‘Neutralität’ brechen”. (The actual Purpose of the Revision of the Military Law: Breaking the Taboo of ‘Neutrality’). In: *Zeit–Fragen. Special Edition on the vote from 20 June 2001*. April 2001. p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Vögeli, Erika. “Friedenspolitik – welche Aufgabe hat die Schweiz” (Peace policy – what is the task of Switzerland). In: *Zeit–Fragen. Special Edition on the vote from 20 June 2001*. April 2001 p. 3

# Our neutrality is being violated!

## Protest against Zelensky's video propaganda in parliament

by Dr iur. Marianne Wüthrich

*The Offices of the National Council and the Council of States have approved a request by Ukraine to broadcast a video presentation by President Zelensky in the Swiss Parliament during the summer session. This invitation of a warring party is a blatant violation of neutrality, all the more so as another decision on the re-export of Swiss weapons to the Ukrainian battlefield is pending in this session.*

What a crime to shower the bleeding Ukrainian people with more and more tons and tons of weapons! Neutral Switzerland must not participate in this. Our representatives should beware of driving our country deeper into the vortex into which Washington, London and Brussels want to drag us. Let us return to the Swiss values associated with the maxim of neutrality: Humanitarian aid, Good Offices, unconditional human and finan-

cial support for the ICRC, which is anchored in Switzerland. In order to be able to provide its indispensable assistance to the suffering people on both sides of the front in all wars of this world, the Red Cross depends on the protection of Swiss neutrality.

### Objection against act of parliament contrary to neutrality

From the media release of the Offices of the National Council and Council of States of 5 May 2023: "Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will address the Swiss Parliament in a video message during the summer session. The Offices of the National Council and Council of States have approved a corresponding request from Ukraine."<sup>1</sup>

National Councillor *Thomas Aeschi*, who as President of the SVP parliamentary group is also a member of the Office, objected to this act, which is contra-

ry to neutrality. He published his protest in a tweet: "I object to the Ukrainian president giving a video address in the National Council chamber (I made this request in the Office). Ukraine is trying to directly influence the parliamentary decision regarding arms/ammunition deliveries. Our neutrality is being violated!" (*Thomas Aeschi@thomas\_aeschi*) National Councillor Aeschi is a member of the initiative committee of the "neutrality initiative" for which signatures are currently being collected in Switzerland.

The Russian news agency TASS picked up on the parliamentary decision and the objection by National Councillor Thomas Aeschi on 6 May under the title "Zelensky's speech in the Swiss parliament violates the country's neutrality". It is good that Russian TV viewers are learning that

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## "A neutral country must not make a warring party better off"

Interview with National Councillor Thomas Aeschi (SVP ZG) on 10 May 2023



Thomas Aeschi  
(picture ma)

*Current Concerns: At the request of Ukraine, the parliamentary Offices have decided that President Zelensky will get the opportunity to speak in parliament by video. Are the Offices allowed to invite people who influence the parliament one-sided?*

*Thomas Aeschi:* What Zelensky will say is another issue, we don't know yet. In the last 50 years it has happened 16 times that foreign state guests or other guest speakers have addressed the United Federal Assembly. There are two categories: one during a parliamentary session, the other outside the formal session. The Office has decided that President Zelensky will speak when the formal session is not being held, for example during a lunch break or in the evening, after the session ends at 7 pm. The participation of the National Councillors and the Councillors of States is therefore voluntary. I opposed this video address by President Zelensky to the Swiss Parliament, but the majority felt that such a request by Zelensky could not be refused.

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**"The perpetual and comprehensive armed neutrality has protected Switzerland from war and great suffering in the past."**

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*No doubt he will talk about the arms shipments?*

I am sure he will say something about it. In the summer session, the topic "Indirect delivery of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine" is on the agenda. From the point of view of state policy, it is highly problematic that we invite Zelensky at the same time, as he will try to influence our Parliament directly.

*You have made a motion for rejection. Additionally, you have written that our neutrality will be violated. How do you justify this?*

There is a war going on between Russia and Ukraine, and the law of neutrality stipulates that a neutral country may not privilege a war party. By supplying arms and ammunition, even indirectly [via third countries that bought the armaments in Switzerland], you are giving an advantage to one of the two warring states. The same argument applies when one invites one of the two belligerent states to present its position and its concerns to Switzerland at the Federal Assembly. However, the majority of the representatives in the councils' Offices are of different opinion, they believe,

neutrality would not be violated by such an address. Personally, however, I consider the symbolism of the joint appearance of Foreign Minister *Cassis* together with Zelensky in March 2022 as well as actually the address in the Swiss parliament as very problematic.

*If the text of the neutrality initiative will be once be inserted in the Federal Constitution, do we then have the means against such one-sidedness?*

Yes, if the neutrality initiative will be adopted, the Federal Council and Parliament must not again be as negligent in abandoning neutrality in any armed conflict in future as they are today.

*What do you tell citizens why they should sign the neutrality initiative?*

The perpetual and comprehensive armed neutrality has protected Switzerland from war and great suffering in the past. This must be maintained in any case – to protect the Swiss people and the territorial integrity of the Confederation!

*Thank you very much for the interview, National Councillor Aeschi.*



**“Our neutrality is being violated!”**

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not all Swiss want to deviate from the path of neutrality.

**“We are losing the last fragile remnants of our already trampled neutrality”**

Another member of the initiative committee who protested against the Office decision is *Stefan Millius*, journalist and author from Appenzell. On his blog he writes: “[...] it contradicts everything that should be sacred to Switzerland. A video call by Ukrainian President Zelensky directly into the National Council chamber is an absolute outrage. And parliamentarians who allow or watch this are out of place.”

Millius continues, “We all think war is terrible. We all want it to stop. [...] But this is not about Russia or Ukraine. This is about Switzerland. About its values, about its position. If you broadcast the speech of a president of a country that is a war party – under whatever conditions – in the Parliament Building in front of our parliamentarians, we too become a war party. We lose the last fragile remnants of our neutrality, which has already been trampled underfoot. It is as simple as that. It’s child’s play to understand.”<sup>2</sup>

**SPC of the Council of States****wants to give Swiss neutrality the rest**

Meanwhile, the Security Policy Committee of the Council of States (SPC-S) is preparing the ground for the final abandonment of our neutrality. At its meeting on 11 May, it approved by a majority the most adventurous variants of legislative amendments. In a nutshell, the Committee is proposing several initiatives to the Council of States in the coming summer session (from 30 May) to wave through the transfer of weapons purchased in Switzerland by NATO member states.<sup>3</sup> All of them violate neutrality! Moreover, some of them blatantly violate the principles of the rule of law (prohibition of retroactivity<sup>4</sup>) or simply rewrite the UN Charter: According to the SPC-S, a veto in the Security Council can be overruled by a two-thirds majority of the UN General Assembly. It is particularly disturbing that the Committee simply ignores the resolution of the UN Human Rights Council of 3 April 2023. By 33 votes to 13 with one abstention, this resolution calls for the lifting of unilateral coercive measures that violate international law, i.e., all sanctions without a UN Security Council resolution.<sup>5</sup>

With its drafts that are contrary to international law and neutrality, the Committee is taking kowtowing to Washington and Brussels to the extreme. It is already clear that the small state of Switzerland is in a difficult position when the hyenas from all sides are baring their teeth to save the hegemon’s “rules-based order” from ruin. The situation of our ancestors during the Second World War was even more precarious, but they were determined to preserve neutrality as best they could. And they did so. Today, too, the Swiss people are challenged: We must “a d’Säck” (get to work)! •

<sup>1</sup> The Offices of the National Council and the Council of States consist of the presidium, the tellers and representatives of the parties (parliamentary groups) of the respective councils. They are responsible for organising the work of parliament and draw up the programme of the session.

<sup>2</sup> <https://stefanmillius.ch/warum-selenskyj-in-unserem-parlament-nichts-verloren-hat/>

<sup>3</sup> Security Policy Committee of the Council of States (SPC-S). *Point de Presse* of 11 May 2023

<sup>4</sup> “Non-re-export declarations shall be deemed to be cancelled if they have been signed more than five years before the entry into force of this amendment by countries of Annex 2 [EU-Nato states plus associated countries] of the War Material Ordinance and fulfil the above conditions.”

<sup>5</sup> see *Current Concerns* of 9 May 2023 (<https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/archives/2023/nr-9/10-2-mai-2023/un-menschenrechtsrat-fordert-abschaffung-einseitiger-sanktionen>)

Letter to  the Editor**Conformity or Resistance – a book by Alice Meyer**

It is a personal matter to me, following the articles by *Gotthard Frick*, to hint at a book by *Alice Meyer* called “Conformity or Resistance, Switzerland during German National Socialism”. *Current Concerns* already printed a review of this exceedingly readable book in 2013.

Since Switzerland is facing attacks against its sovereignty, its neutrality, its tried and tested values for a long period of time, a look at history might prove interesting. Upon reading the book, one can find parallels at every step of the way.

Before National Socialist Germany threatened Switzerland militarily, Alice Meyer writes, since 1933 it was also threatened primarily intellectually-politically, specifically through the “extended strategy”, what is now called propaganda or manipulation. Much of what Alice Meyer describes in detail from that time sounds very familiar to today’s readers: The *Gleichschaltung* (forcible-coordination) of the press was one of the first measures of the National Socialist regime. Immediately after the National Socialists came to power, the German newspapers were placed under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda.

At the time, however, the Swiss did not allow themselves to be deprived of objective, free reporting for the independent formation of opinion in a democracy. It is

exciting to read how, thanks to the wisdom of National Councillor *Feldmann* and others, we were spared a press agreement with Germany in 1937. But the question remains why the Swiss press today voluntarily gives itself up to writing a “one-size-fits-all” pulp.

An example out of the political party landscape: On 31 January 1937 – we can read – the Socialist Party (SP) empowered the confession to Swiss democracy, to neutrality and the absolute will to defence in case of war. “Realising that her fate was inextricably linked to Switzerland, it put the country’s overall interests above her party interests in perilous times.” Thus, the SP took a step towards cooperation, which in turn made it possible for the Liberals to take a step towards working together. And this important political step towards reconciliation also created the precondition for the peace agreement between employers and trade unions in the summer of 1937. Using Austria as an example, Alice Meyer shows that the failure to reach an understanding opened the door to *Hitler’s* plans. Then, on 21 March, there was an “unprecedented demonstration of national unity” in the Federal Assembly. How we would like to have united parties today that recognise the seriousness of the situation and put the overall interests of the country first!

An interesting example on the subject of sanctions: Even then, Switzerland was urged to support foreign sanctions. This contradicts Swiss neutrality. On 29 April 1938, Federal Councillor *Motta* submitted a memorandum to the League of Nations in which he pointed out that “the conditions under which Switzerland entered the League of Nations had changed thoroughly” and he asked the Council, “supported by the powerful determination of the Federal Councillors and the people, to declare the comprehensive neutrality handed down to it compatible with the provisions of the League of Nations Covenant”. In its resolution of 14 May, the Council of the League of Nations then declared its willingness to no longer invite Switzerland to join in sanctions on the basis of its perpetual neutrality.

What was possible then can happen again today in a similar way. We need “intellectual national defence”! It is very exciting what was achieved in the thirties and forties! Many things that we take for granted today – book guilds, Adult Education Centres, women’s education, etc. – were created back then to strengthen the will to defend ourselves. It is important that we gratefully preserve and cultivate these treasures.

*Ursula Richner, Sirmach*

# Nothing is straightened out – the banking and debt crisis continues to smoulder

by Christian Kreiß\*



Christian Kreiß  
(picture ma)

On 1 May it was announced that First Republic Bank had been taken over by the US regulator FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) and immediately sold to the largest US bank JPMorgan.<sup>1</sup> JPMorgan will take over all assets and the

84 branches. The US regulator FDIC expects that it will have to take over losses of about 13 billion US dollars. In terms of total assets, this bankruptcy of First Republic Bank is the second largest bank failure in US history. In view of this development, the question arises as to what will happen to the banking sector now.

The “Wall Street Journal” has been focusing on the banking issue since the first bank riots in March, when *Signature Bank* and *Silicon Valley Bank* went bankrupt, and spoke of a “banking crisis in slow motion”.<sup>2</sup> On 27 April 2023, shortly before the closure of *First Republic Bank*, an article appeared there with the title: “The Bank Riots Are Just the Tip of the Debt Iceberg”.<sup>3</sup> Bank stocks within the [stock index] S&P 1500 were valued lower in mid-April 2023 than almost ever before this century. The P/E [price-earnings] ratio was only 8.<sup>4</sup> In Europe, too, the banking crisis is anything but over.

## What has caused the banking problems?

At the core of the recent banking problems is the fact that the Western central banks

“For decades, the inequality of distribution has been increasing in the Western world. Through lobbying, the big corporations and the billionaires are exerting more and more influence on politics, especially through the few big media corporations. The billionaires and corporate leaders have never been democratically elected by the citizens in any political election.”

have dramatically expanded the monetary base over the last 15 years and kept interest rates close to zero for a long time.

In view of the money glut, especially during the lockdown period, banks in the USA, but also in Europe, then issued a lot of long-term loans with very low interest rates and, since they could not accommodate all the deposit money in the form of loans, bought a lot of long-dated bonds with very low interest rates.

Triggered by inflation and the subsequent sharp interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve<sup>5</sup>, both short- and long-term interest rates have increased sharply – by about 3 percentage points – since the beginning of 2022, so banks now have an earnings problem: they now have to refinance at sharply higher deposit rates, i.e. they have to pay relatively high interest rates to their depositors and therefore their interest expense has increased drastically. However, they continue to receive only relatively low interest income from their borrowers or their bond holdings from long-term financial investments.

It will take years for this earnings squeeze on the banks to slowly ease as their low-yielding long-term loans gradually run out and their bonds mature. According to the “Wall Street Journal”, this earnings squeeze is likely to continue for years.<sup>6</sup> Hence the current secularly low valuation of US bank stocks.

In addition, the high levels of commercial real estate lending in the US in particular – some 5.400 billion US-Dollar, or about one-fifth of US GDP – are currently problematic for banks, as many commercial properties are struggling with high vacancy rates and collapsing property prices.<sup>7</sup> With the economy expected to weaken during 2023, banks are likely to face quite some loan defaults,<sup>8</sup> both in the US and Europe.

## What are the consequences?

In short, according to the “Wall Street Journal”, the banking crisis is far from over. Weak banks cause weak lending. Weak lending causes weak economic growth.

But it is not only this general development that is unpleasant. What is particularly interesting is that large and small banks are being and are likely to continue to be affected to very different degrees. The bank turbulences in March 2023 have led to many investors being uncertain whether they will get their deposits back in full from smaller banks in the event of loan defaults. As a result, there has been a strong flight of capital from small to large banks in the US in recent weeks: regional banks lost 212 billion US-Dollar in deposits last month, while the 25 largest banks gained \$18 billion.<sup>9</sup> Following the motto “too big to fail”, many investors assume that their investments are safer with the big banks as opposed to smaller credit institutions.

The assumption is that the big banks will be rescued by the government in any case. But this does not necessarily apply to small and medium-sized banks, which are not considered systemically important, i.e., which can be allowed to go insolvent without triggering a domino effect leading to a crash of the financial markets.

As a result, small and medium-sized banks in the US are currently coming under pressure – unlike the big banks. They have to offer significantly higher deposit rates than the big banks in order to keep customers and therefore also have to raise their lending rates. This puts them at a severe competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis the big banks. What does this mean for a country?

## The great advantages of small regional banks

The financial crisis of 2008 has shown that large, supra-regional banks act much less responsibly than small or medium-sized banks with regional roots. Before 2008, especially in the USA, real estate loans were taken out some of which were hardly repayable, as the bankers well knew. These problem loans were converted into securities (so-called asset backed securities) and sold via the stock exchanges to distant in-

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### “Nothing is straightened out ...”

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investors, especially in Europe, so that the buck was passed to them, and they then had to carry the loan default losses. In this way, the US real estate crisis was exported directly to Europe. In the years before 2008, the profits ended up with US investment banks and loan originators, who earned lucrative commissions. The risks and later the losses were largely shifted abroad.

Such irresponsible behaviour cannot be afforded by small regional banks, such as *Raiffeisen banks* or *savings banks* which have strong local roots and know their customers, in both the deposit and lending business, personally. What we could learn from the financial crisis is this: the more distant the bankers are from their customers, the more irresponsible their business behaviour will be. Conversely, the more regionally rooted a bank, the more responsibly it will usually act. From an ethical point of view, smaller regional banks are a real ray of hope.

In addition, regional banks are particularly important for the regional economy. US companies with less than 100 employees get 70 per cent of their loans from small and medium-sized banks.<sup>10</sup> In rural regions, the figure is as high as 90 per cent. If the small regional banks get into trouble, the regional economy will also have problems. And that is exactly what is happening in the USA at the moment.<sup>11</sup>

The current slow-motion banking crisis represents a systematic and, according to the “Wall Street Journal”,<sup>12</sup> prolonged shift of funds away from small and medium-sized regional banks to the big banks, funds and corporations.

### Increasing concentration in banking

The increasing concentration in US banking has been in existence for several decades:<sup>13</sup> In 1983, the US had 14,469 independent banks, which was the highest number ever. By 2022, there were 4,135, i.e., there was a decline of 71 per cent over the past 40 years. In 2009 bank branches peaked in the USA, with 85,834 branches. In 2022, there were 71,190 of these. That is a decline of 17 per cent in the last 13 years. If you take the number of independent banking institutions and the number of branches together, the result is a strong concentration process in the last decades. According to the “Wall Street Journal”, this leads to a weakening of small and medium-sized enterprises – in favour of big banks and holders of large capital.<sup>14</sup>

The same trends are also at work in Europe. In the EU, the number of banks declined by 23 per cent to 6,596 banks alone in the wake of the financial crisis, i.e., between 2008 and 2016.<sup>15</sup>

In Germany, according to the most recent *Bankstellenbericht* (report on the development of the banking network) of the *Deutsche Bundesbank*<sup>16</sup>, there were still more than 4,700 independent credit institutions in 1991, but by 2021 there were only 1,519. This corresponds to a decline of more than two thirds, i.e., two out of three banks have closed down in our country over the last two decades. The number of branches was 21,712 in 2021, compared to 54,089 in 1991. According to the *Bundesbank*, this corresponds to a decline “to only two-fifths”.<sup>17</sup> So in Germany, too, we see an extreme development of concentration in the banking sector.

### What is behind this?

This trend in banking reflects well the developments of the last 40 to 50 years.<sup>18</sup> In industrialised countries, there has been an increasing concentration of wealth, capital and power among ever larger corporations and the multi-billionaires behind them<sup>19</sup>. In the US, the highest concentration of wealth in US history was reported in 2021: 0.01 per cent of the population then owned 10 per cent of all US wealth. This is a higher concentration than even in 1913, in the days of Rockefeller and JPMorgan.<sup>20</sup> The banking crisis of March 2023 is a kind of amplifier of this long-observed trend towards less and less competition<sup>21</sup> and more and more concentration of power.

For decades, the inequality of distribution has been increasing in the Western world.<sup>22</sup> Through lobbying, the big corporations and the billionaires are exerting more and more influence on politics,<sup>23</sup> especially through the few big media corporations. The billionaires and corporate leaders have never been democratically elected by the citizens in any political election.

### Concentration of power, abuse of power and countermeasures

For decades, we have seen an increasing concentration of power, an ever-greater concentration of economic power in the hands of relatively few people who have never been democratically elected, an economic power that increasingly translates into political power. In my estimation, our democracy is being increasingly undermined by this circumstance. If we are not careful, we could soon wake up to find ourselves in an oligarchy or aristocracy. However, we can become aware of this and change it:

A first simple countermeasure would be a progressive land levy after an allowance of perhaps two million euros per capita, in order to abolish large-scale private land ownership in the long term, for which there is neither economic nor ethical legitimacy. Among other things, this would lead to a building boom and could be used for

a massive tax cut for low-income earners. Secondly, we could ban industrial lobbyists from the Bundestag; here the keyword is a ban mile around the Bundestag. Thirdly, we could ensure a plural, decentralised, free and independent media landscape, among other things through a progressive, size-dependent tax on media groups, in order to scale down their size and influence in the long term and to limit opinion power according to the motto “small is beautiful”. Further measures can be found in my book “Das Mephisto-Prinzip in unserer Wirtschaft” (The Mephisto Principle in Our Economy), which can be downloaded free of charge in its entirety.<sup>24</sup> ●

<sup>1</sup> [nytimes.com/2023/05/01/business/first-republic-bank-jpmorgan.html?campaign\\_id=190&emc=edit\\_ufrn\\_20230501&instance\\_id=91475&nl=from-the-times&regi\\_id=106400176&segment\\_id=131795&te=1&user\\_id=2d4af86ab3b9023648e49aa38e005d93](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/business/first-republic-bank-jpmorgan.html?campaign_id=190&emc=edit_ufrn_20230501&instance_id=91475&nl=from-the-times&regi_id=106400176&segment_id=131795&te=1&user_id=2d4af86ab3b9023648e49aa38e005d93)

<sup>2</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 30 March 2023: “Threat of a Slow-Boil Bank Crisis Endures”

<sup>3</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 27 April 2023: “Banking Turmoil Is Tip of Debt Iceberg”

<sup>4</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 13 April 2023: “For regional banks, surviving won’t be the same as thriving”

<sup>5</sup> The US FED rate hike cycle started on 16 March 2022; [tradingeconomics.com/united-states/interest-rate](https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/interest-rate)

<sup>6</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 13 April 2023: “For Regional Banks, Surviving Won’t Be The Same As Thriving”

<sup>7</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 7 April 2023: “Office Vacancies, High Rates Press Property Bonds”

<sup>8</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 14 April 2023: “Junk-Rated Companies Struggle With Debt” and 27 April 2023: “Banking Turmoil Is Tip of Debt Iceberg”

<sup>9</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 17 April 2023: “Banks Are Pressured To Raise Rates on Deposits”

<sup>10</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 24 April 2023: “Lending Squeeze Is Risk From Bank Fallout”

<sup>11</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 31 March 2023: “Bank Fears Hit Small Lenders, Clients”

<sup>12</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 30 March 2023: “Threat of a Slow-Boil Bank Crisis Endures”

<sup>13</sup> [banks.data.fdic.gov/explore/historical?displayFields=STNAME%2CTOTAL%2CBRANCHES%2CNew\\_Char&selectedEndDate=2022&selectedReport=CBS&selectedStartDate=1934&selectedStates=0&sortField=YEAR&sortOrder=desc](https://banks.data.fdic.gov/explore/historical?displayFields=STNAME%2CTOTAL%2CBRANCHES%2CNew_Char&selectedEndDate=2022&selectedReport=CBS&selectedStartDate=1934&selectedStates=0&sortField=YEAR&sortOrder=desc)

<sup>14</sup> *Wall Street Journal* of 17 April 2023: “Banks Are Pressured To Raise Rates on Deposits”

<sup>15</sup> [service.destatis.de/DE/Wirtschaft/Jahrause-ndwendeEuropa/bloc-3d.html](https://service.destatis.de/DE/Wirtschaft/Jahrause-ndwendeEuropa/bloc-3d.html)

<sup>16</sup> *Bankstellenbericht* (report on the development of the banking network) 2021 of the *Deutsche Bundesbank* of 8 July 2022: [bundesbank.de/resource/blob/894918/e4f32b6ca4130522d8db47352d32cd-bf/mL/bankstelle\\_nbericht-2021-data.pdf](https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/894918/e4f32b6ca4130522d8db47352d32cd-bf/mL/bankstelle_nbericht-2021-data.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> *Bankstellenbericht* (report on the development of the banking network) 2021 of the *Deutsche Bundesbank*, p.9

<sup>18</sup> *Forbes* of 17 July 2017, [forbes.com/sites/gradsoflife/2018/11/06/salute-to-skills-workshops-for-warriors-and-hire-heroes-usa/#343e37385a11](https://www.forbes.com/sites/gradsoflife/2018/11/06/salute-to-skills-workshops-for-warriors-and-hire-heroes-usa/#343e37385a11)

<sup>19</sup> [oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621341/bp-inequality-kills-170122-de.pdf](https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621341/bp-inequality-kills-170122-de.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [inequality.org](https://inequality.org) of 9 August 2021

<sup>21</sup> *Wall Street Journal*, “Dion Rabouin: Why Big Companies Love Inflation:” [youtube.com/watch?v=E3i7TqW42g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3i7TqW42g)

<sup>22</sup> [menschengerechtere-wirtschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Buch-Mephisto-30.4.20-mit-Bild-1.pdf](https://www.menschengerechtere-wirtschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Buch-Mephisto-30.4.20-mit-Bild-1.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> [inequality.org](https://inequality.org) of 3 November 2020

<sup>24</sup> [menschengerechtere-wirtschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Buch-Mephisto-30.4.20-mit-Bild-1.pdf](https://www.menschengerechtere-wirtschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Buch-Mephisto-30.4.20-mit-Bild-1.pdf)



# We are losing our youth

## People in Aleppo, Syria, suffer from the war, the sanctions and the consequences of the earthquake

by Karin Leukefeld, Bonn and Damascus

More than 8,000 people lost their lives in the great earthquake at the beginning of February in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama and along the Mediterranean coast between Latakia and Tartus. 45,000 families, 225,000 people were left homeless. In Aleppo city, 54 houses completely collapsed, according to official figures. Most of them had already been severely damaged by the war. In one house in the Aziziyeh district, eleven doctors and their families were torn from their lives.

According to official figures, 16 houses each in Aleppo and Latakia could be repaired so that families could return. The willingness to help is great, those who have a lot gave a lot, those who have little gave less. Clothes and hygiene articles were donated, some cooked, others gave food. The Aleppo Chamber of Industry collected donations that provided 9,000 families – about 49,000 people – with enough money to rent a new flat for 1.5 years. Syrian businessmen abroad donated for powdered milk, which is until today distributed free of charge to those in need outside the office in the centre of the city. Syrian industrialists in Egypt sent dialysis machines for the hospitals. But the need is still great, and not all of those affected have been able to find new accommodation.

### The Al Beyrouni School

The *Al Beyrouni School* is located on the western outskirts of Aleppo. The primary school is part of a new building district that has been waiting for completion for more than ten years. The massive blocks of flats built of limestone survived the severe earthquake in early February, but because of the war, unilateral punitive economic measures (sanctions) by the European Union and the USA, and because of the severe economic crisis, many of the houses are still under construction.

The children of the families who had already moved there before the war attended the *Al Beyrouni primary school*. Since the earthquake, however, families who lost their homes have been living there. “Most of those who became homeless have since been able to stay with relatives or in other homes,” says *Abdul Nasser M.*, a volunteer at the facility. “Today, 49 families are still living here, a total of 293 people. Of them, 76 are children older than 12.” The families have come to them at Beyrouni School from ten other schools because one could not yet find a new place for them, he said.



*Aleppo, Al Beyrouni School. Dancing and singing against the trauma of war and earthquake. (picture Karin Leukefeld)*

There are daily school lessons for the children, which are supported by *Unicef*, among others. The Syrian organisation *Amal* (Hope) provides medical care for the people and has also set up the containers in the courtyard. One container has showers and toilets for men, a second container has showers and toilets for women. A third, slightly smaller container is for people with disabilities.

### Medical and psychosocial help

Psychologists also come to the school every day to provide psychological and social care to affected children and adults, he says. “All the people went through the war, then there was Covid-19 and now the earthquake,” says the serious young man who wears glasses and a full beard. “People are completely overwhelmed by all of this.” He and his colleagues work and play with the children, he says, and are the contact persons for all questions.

26-year-old *Abdul Nasser* and his colleague *Mohammed N.* wear dark blue waistcoats with the letters C.C.S. on the back. Above there is a laurel crown with two children in the middle. C.C.S. stands for “Syrian Society for the Health of Children with Cancer”, *Abdul Nasser* explains. The aid organisation was founded in 2012 and now has branches all over the country, he says.

Then he introduces *Mozna Olabi*, a slender, youthful-looking woman. *Mozna Olabi* is the founder and director of the aid organisation. She is a resolute woman with a strong voice. She wears a long coat and her headscarf is tightly tied. Before the war, she studied fashion design in London, she says, laughing. Then she returned to Aleppo and helped. C.C.S. was born out of this help. “We receive donations from Syrian foundations and aid organisations,” she explains. The organisation is also allowed to accept donations from abroad. “We submit applications to the UN organisations,” which are often, but not always, approved, she says. The Norwegian Refugee Council also helps, she says. “I never doubted that we would win the war, she says. “But the destruction is just too great. We lost the well-educated people, now the earthquake.” She often wonders how Syria can overcome all this. Asked how foreign countries could help, she says after a short pause, “Just let us be. Then we’ll find a way.” “Let us be” also means lifting sanctions and economic warfare against Syria. But that is not what Ms Olabi says.

On her mobile phone, Ms Olabi opens pictures from the past Eid festival, the celebration at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, also called Sugar Feast. “Here we have celebrated with children in Ha-

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## “Opponents become partners”

### Syria back in Arab League

by Karin Leukefeld, Damascus

After twelve years, Syria will return to the *Arab League*. This was decided by the foreign ministers of the 22 member states of the alliance in Cairo on Sunday [7 May 2023]. Syria's membership had been put on hold in 2011 when protests turned into an armed conflict and proxy war between regional and international actors on Syrian territory. Now Damascus is being readmitted to the “Arab community” That is good news.

Since 2017, Arab states have been trying to normalise relations with the country. Syrian President *Assad* had stabilised his position with the support of allies Russia and Iran as well as Lebanese *Hizbullah*. Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and, one after the other, other Arab Gulf states resumed relations or sought ways to enable the return of Syrian refugees and establish trade relations. Many people would have found work, houses could have been repaired and displaced persons could have returned.

But the rapprochement did not move forward because the EU and the USA refused to fund a return programme within the framework of the UN. Instead, they put an iron ring of “unilateral punitive economic measures” (sanctions) around Syria, which also threatened states and companies that wanted to resume economic and political relations with Syria. The current Assistant Secretary of Defence for the Middle East in the US Pentagon, *Dana Stroul* – then still with the neoconservative *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* – set the tone and the EU followed: The US “has” the most important resources in one third of the country (northeast), *Stroul* said, “the rest of Syria lies in ruins”. *Assad* had to be isolated, economic sanctions remained in place. In cooperation with the EU, the international financial institutions are in control and can prevent reconstruction aid and technical expertise from reaching Syria. The EU – with Germany leading the way – went along with all of this.

The consequences of the earthquake of 6 February 2023 in the Turkish-Syrian border region finally worked like a dam burst. The aid from the Arab states was followed by meetings of diplomats and foreign ministers. In early March, China brokered a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which restored diplomatic relations. Adversaries become partners.

The USA and the EU have gambled away all trust in the region. The continuing support for Israel, the pressure on sovereign states, the unilateral Western sanctions policy, paternalism and arrogance – enough is enough. With Russia and China, there are great powers that want political, military and trade relations on an equal footing and respect the national interests and sovereignty of others. The wind has changed.

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(Translation Current Concerns)

### “We are losing our youth”

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sakeh,” she says happily. It was a double celebration, she says, because two of the children who had cancer were released as healthy.

In the hallway outside the meeting room becomes noisy. Music resounds, children shout loudly all over the place. “We have prepared a little competition for the children,” says Ms Olabi. Many children and other C.C.S. volunteers have gathered in the schoolyard. They perform dances. Then the children have to imitate different exercises to music, which are demonstrated by a C.C.S. staff member. At the end of the event, small gifts are distributed and the joy of the children conjures a smile on the serious faces of even the parents who watch the spectacle from the school steps.

Ms Olabi says goodbye to keep the next appointment, there is still time to exchange a few sentences with Abdul Nasser. For him and his friends, helping is a matter of course, he says. First during the war, now after the earthquake. “But we have lost our own lives. We lost our childhood to the war. Now we are living in an economic crisis and losing our youth.” He is studying law, he says, but whether he will ever have a “normal life” he does



Aleppo Aziziyeh. In this house, 11 doctors and their families lost their lives. Torn from life by the earthquake. (picture Karin Leukefeld)

not know. “I help the children with cancer and now these families who lost everything with the earthquake. But when I work with the children with cancer, learn

and play with them, and then they beam at me and rejoice, I forget everything else.”•

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# Many Germans think different from the power elites

## West German elites react with citizen bashing – especially against East Germans

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

After 2019, the SPD-related German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, published a second comprehensive study (84 pages, <https://www.fes.de/studie-vertrauen-in-demokratie>) on democracy in Germany in April 2023. The title of the study is: “Democracy Trust in Times of Crisis”. It is based on many surveys. The authors of the study are trying to gloss over the results, attaching labels like “longing for simplicity” or “conspiracy thinking” to unwelcome opinions. For example, the strong desire for referendums is said to be an expression of such a “longing for simplicity”. Or the statement that the Western world has “conspired against Russia and Putin to expand its own power”, “conspiracy thinking”. And with 55.9% of respondents, the “conspiracy believers” also still favour having “citizens vote in regular referendums” – much more than the “non-conspiracy believers”, of whom only 20.8% want regular referendums. Nevertheless, it is worth taking a thor-

ough look at the poll results. Once again it becomes clear: the difference between published (power elite) opinion and the public opinion of the citizens is big, very big. Especially in eastern Germany. Only a few results can be reproduced here.

The study is based on a telephone and online survey of Germans aged 18 and over who are eligible to vote. The representative random sample comprises 2536 respondents (1658 telephone interviews and 878 online interviews). The survey period was from 11 July to 9 August 2022. The survey was conducted by the opinion research institute *Infratest dimap*.

### Little optimism for the future

41.6% of the respondents said that most people could not be trusted at all or not at all. 84% said that future generations in Germany would fare somewhat (48.9%) or even much worse (35.1%). Further on in the study, it is also revealed that 75.3% of those surveyed tended to agree or fully agreed with the statement that cohesion in society had declined.

How do Germans perceive the political and social conditions in which they live, so that so many have a rather poor view of humanity, so many see social cohesion at risk and so many are no longer optimistic about the future of coming generations?

The five most frequently mentioned concerns of the respondents are climate change (80.1% great or very great concern), hatred and hostility (80% great or very great concern), war (76.3% great or very great concern), loss of social security (73.5% great or very great concern) and inflation (73.3% great or very great concern).

### Not satisfied with

#### how democracy works in Germany

Most respondents (51.3%) are not very or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Germany. This dissatisfaction is most evident in the lower classes where the rate is 67.2% and in the eastern part of the country where it is 66%. For more than half of the respondents (50.5%), the state of democracy in Germany has deteriorated somewhat or even significantly in recent years. 68.2% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that there were not enough opportunities for citizens to participate beyond elections. 50.9% agree or strongly agree with the statement that it no longer made a difference whether the SPD, the Greens, the FDP or the CDU/CSU are in government.

For only 24.5% of respondents, representative democracy is the best model of government, 33.4% favour rule by experts (“expertocracy”), 41.1% direct democracy. Here, too, it is the lower classes who expect the most from direct democracy (more than 50%). This is not surprising, since the members of the lower class are the biggest losers in current politics and have had virtually no influence on the political decisions that affect them.

The following picture emerges for the parties and their supporters: supporters of the Greens favour expertocracy by more than 40% over representative democracy (only 35.9%), and the values for direct democracy are lowest here: only 22.6%. In terms of scepticism towards direct democracy, FDP and SPD supporters follow those of the Greens more closely than supporters of other parties in the German Bundestag. And, even more than those of the Greens, the supporters of the FDP, at 45.4%, prefer expertocracy to representative democracy (only 23.3%). So much for the confidence of the supporters of the red-green-yellow coalition in the citizens and in democracy.

### Majority without trust in important institutions

Leaving aside the Federal Constitutional Court, most respondents today have little or no trust in important political institutions, be it the federal government (57.6%), the Bundestag (57.7%), the European Commission (68.5%), the trade unions (52.4%) or the employers’ associations (64.9%). Most respondents also lack trust in the media. 58.2% have little or no confidence in the public media, and 68.3% in the private media such as television and newspapers.

When asked specifically about the problems of German democracy, the statement “Central campaign pledges are often not implemented” received the most mentions. 81.7% of respondents consider this to be a major or very major problem.

### Citizen bashing: “conspiracy beliefs”

What the study calls “conspiracy beliefs” was manipulatively formulated in five exaggerated statements: “the Western world has conspired against Russia and Putin to expand its own power”, “the ruling elites are pursuing the goal of replacing the German people with immigrants”, “the government has terrified the population in the Corona crisis in order to impose massive restrictions on fun-

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### The right and the wrong Other



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“It is true that it is part of the liberal, cosmopolitan self-image of most West Germans to celebrate the foreign and the other, to travel all over the world and admire distant cultures, to mark divergence, difference and alterity as particularly valuable. But it has to be the *right Other*, not the *false Other* that the East embodies, that one fears, that one excludes, ridicules, scorns and belittles. There is zero tolerance towards this *false other*. In this way, the West makes the East a stranger in its own country.”

from: Oschmann, Dirk.  
*Der Osten: eine westdeutsche Erfindung.* (The East: A West German Invention); Berlin 2023, p. 134f.



**"Many Germans think different ..."**

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damental rights", "the Corona virus is a bioweapon that was deliberately developed to harm people" and "scientists deliberately exaggerate the risks of climate change in order to gain more money and recognition for their research". Thus, it is also not surprising that most respondents rather disagree or disagree at all with these statements. However: The share of those respondents who tend to agree or agree completely still ranges between 18.1 and 36.3 %.

The statement that "the Western world has conspired against Russia and Putin to expand its own power" is assessed very differently depending on party preference. The approval ratings among supporters of the Greens are – unsurprisingly – the lowest, at only 11.9%. The picture is different among supporters of other parties in the German Bundestag: 36.7% of FDP voters, 57.1% of AfD voters, 34.2% of Die Linke voters and 34.9% of supporters of Freie Wähler think there is some truth in this statement about the West and its relationship with Russia. And among non-voters it is also 35.6%. Respondents from

East Germany agree most with this statement: 44.8%.

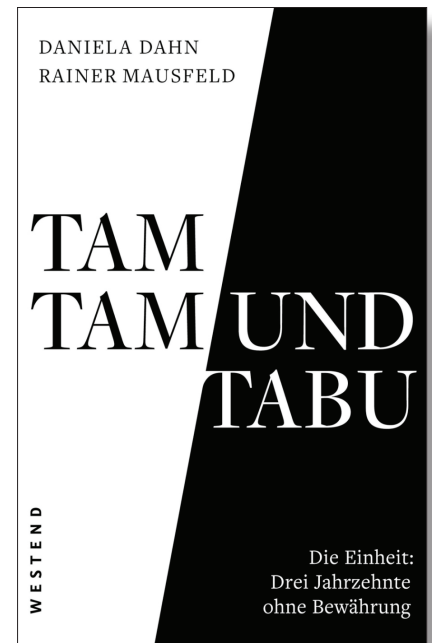
**The citizen insult is mainly directed against East Germans**

After 17 June 1953, when a popular uprising in the GDR was violently quelled, Bertolt Brecht, who lived in the GDR, wrote his famous poem:

**The Solution**

*After the uprising of the 17<sup>th</sup> June  
The Secretary of the Writer's Union  
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee  
Stating that the people  
Had forfeited the confidence of the government  
And could win it back only  
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier  
In that case for the government  
To dissolve the people  
And elect another?*

This is how Brecht characterised an attitude of power elites almost 70 years ago that we are reliving in a new colour today – when it comes to the people of East Germany. A few weeks ago, it made headlines for a short time when it was revealed that the chairman of the board of *Axel Springer publishing house*, *Mathias Döpfner*,



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had said about East Germans: "The Ossis [East Germans] are either communists or fascists. From Kaiser *Wilhelm* to *Hitler* to *Honecker*, without having enjoyed US re-education in between." Döpfner had to apologise – but he remained chairman of the board of one of Germany's biggest media groups. The CEO of the *Axel Springer publishing house* is not an isolated case. In a book published in February 2023, "Der Osten: eine westdeutsche Erfindung" [The East: A West German invention], the Leipzig professor of modern German literature *Dirk Oschmann* pointedly summarised: West Germans still occupy almost all leading positions in state, economy and society in West and East Germany. What is particularly perfidious about this is that the East Germans themselves are blamed for this. West German elites have been treating East Germans in a disparaging and degrading manner for more than 30 years, since 3 October 1990. They try to impose an East German "identity" on them that has little to do with reality. East Germans are labelled with stereotypes like populism, lack of understanding of democracy, racism, and conspiracy myths. More than 30 years after the fall of the Wall, the West still defines itself as the standard and the East as a deviation.

Indeed, if what the West German power elites want and what they do is supposed to be the "standard", then a great many East Germans deviate from it. Thank God, I can only say. •

**Letter to  the Editor****Needlework lessons**

Thank you for the interesting article by *Marianne Bürkli* in *Current Concerns* No. 8 of 25 April, highlighting many important aspects about needlework lessons. I myself had the pleasure of good needlework lessons at a Bavarian primary school, the lessons always took place in the afternoons, and there was an atmosphere without competition between the pupils, because we all worked on a different design, we were allowed to choose the colours of the wool, and I was very proud of my orange cap with the white-orange pom-pom I knitted, even with a pattern. Third grade!

I also very much enjoyed embroidering a cushion cover in special yellow woven fabric, also in a relatively complicated pattern, and delighting my parents with little embroidery pictures. I have very fond memories of that – also of the large wall pictures with the crochet methods drawn on them, which the teacher used to explain crochet. It was quite easy when you looked at the pictures.

Needlework at school is a good preparation for later hobbies, and for me it still

has meaning today. I like to knit a jumper, a scarf, and a very young relative was delighted with the jacket for her child – she had hardly ever seen anything so pretty ...

Whoever eliminates handicraft lessons from the school curriculum is talking about a throwaway society, because today's and future mothers are not capable of plugging a hole or threading a yarn. They then always have to buy new things, and this serves the consumer society, which offers ever more impermanent, flimsy clothing with the intention that as soon as possible the jacket may get holes in it until it disintegrates and one has to buy a new one. With ever new clothes, ever new money is earned – in the long run, this serves no one – except the traders! The fact that dumping wages are paid in developing and Eastern European countries in production is coolly taken into account, and it is also an offence against nature with its valuable resources!

*Susanne Wiesinger,  
Freiburg im Breisgau*

# We East Germans are used to even worse things

by Daniela Dahn



Daniela Dahn  
(picture Wikipedia)

km. A few weeks ago, it made headlines for some time when through leaked chat, email and text messages obtained by German publication *Die Zeit*, it was revealed that the CEO of the Axel

Springer Publishing House, Mathias Döpfner, had said about East Germans: "The Ossis [East Germans] are either communists or fascists. From Kaiser Wilhelm to Hitler to Honecker, without having enjoyed US re-education in between." Döpfner had to apologise – but he remains CEO of one of Germany's biggest media groups.

Daniela Dahn, born in 1949 in the GDR, is a journalist, writer, and publicist. She was a civil rights activist and co-founder of the GDR opposition group *Demokratischer Aufbruch* (Democratic Beginning). In the following article, she exposes the hypocrisy of the public apology of Mathias Döpfner, for his outbursts against East Germans, but also the hypocrisy of the short-lived media clamour against Mathias Döpfner. West German elites have been slandering and discriminating against East Germans for more than 30 years.

It would not be worth reacting to this abysmal SMS chatter if the debate were not one of great hypocrisy.

All the outrage arises from the fact that this is about one of the most influential media bosses in the country, head and owner not only of the *Springer Group*, but also long-time president of the *Federal Association of Digital Publishers and Newspaper Publishers*.

Mathias Döpfner is now being pilloried by the media outlets of the competing *Holtzbrinck Publishing Group* [e.g. *Die Zeit*] through selective publication of more or less private communications. Not that one does not begrudge this denouncer of duty the torment. But the revelations about the mindset of the leadership in this trendy medium cannot really surprise.

Ultimately, it is precisely this content that has determined not only the internal messages at the *Springer company*, but often also the published ones, for decades without any major contradiction. And not only there. The debate is hypocritical because both the excitement about the accusations and the apology are implausible. To pick out only the slander I know

"But why was and is the very capacity for democracy of those socialised in the GDR such a provocative subject? As long as they forced their government to resign in 1989, they were praised for their nonviolence and humour even by the Springer press. But as soon as their ideas of democratisation ran the risk of also calling into question the status quo of the Federal Republic, the fun stopped."

best: that East Germans are all mentally deformed and therefore unfit for democracy was a prominent indoctrination for years.

As early as February 1990, *Der Spiegel* published an eight-page diatribe about the GDR education system: "Education for drill and moral cowardice". Whereas in the autumn of 1989, as the Wall came down, the courageous political maturity of the East Germans fighting for their civil rights was praised everywhere, now one gained the impression that revolutions prefer to break out where the concentration of moral cowards is particularly high. They had all been "brainwashed", had gone through a "permanent act of mental rape".

## East Germans have "learned nothing that they could contribute to a free market economy"

The unsigned article repeatedly quoted the alleged education expert *Johannes Niermann*, who later also made an appearance in a public hearing of the German Bundestag. In his expert opinion, he accused "the entire Intellegentia" (do spelling weakness and denunciation belong together?) of having built up a "web of lies" and attests that this had led to a "quite primitive conditioning, like animal training".

He regrets that the GDR's torturers were not put behind bars and instead "they continue to run free". Niermann developed missionary zeal with an urgent recommendation: Abitur degrees (conferred by way of exams for general qualification for university entrance after 12 years of schooling) should be reduced to 10 per cent to 30 per cent of Abitur graduates in the new states of Germany. Instead, housekeeping as a compulsory subject for girls, as well as needlework, handicrafts, and other such subjects should be introduced at secondary schools. The "*Berliner Zeitung*" published a cartoon of *Helmut Kohl*, then the chancellor, in knight's armour in front

of the sign "German Federal Kohlony!" ("Kohl colony").

The historian *Arnulf Baring*, a popular talk show guest, also took palpable pleasure in disparaging GDR academics in his book *Deutschland*, was nun? (Germany, what next?) For almost half a century they had been "dwarfed" and "ruined" by the regime. Whether someone calls himself a doctor, an engineer, or a pedagogue, "it doesn't matter. His knowledge is completely useless over long stretches." The West Germans could "forgive these politically and character-wise burdened people their sins", but it would be of no use, because the East Germans "simply haven't learned anything they could contribute to a free market economy".

The *Adorno* sentence, "There is no true life in a false life" – completely decontextualised and used again and again – retroactively stamped all GDR lives as worthless. In the context of qualification for leadership positions, the interpretation was: worthless.

The narrative of good-vs.-evil and right-vs.-wrong blocked a two-way exchange. Yet the differences are only of a subtle nature; ultimately, there is probably nothing but true life in the wrong life. The molecular biologist and GDR oppositionist *Jens Reich* complained that in historian *Hans-Ulrich Wehler's* widely renowned "*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*" (German Social History), millions of East Germans "are not portrayed as actors, but as a kind of flock of sheep". According to this view, all the wrong choices would have to be corrected in a laborious process according to the Western model. "That is the burden of the new Federal Republic after 1990", says Wehler.

Is the burden not rather that the complete disregard of Eastern experience must undergo a correction that is still laborious today? The fact that crude defamations are now dared only in private

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### "We East Germans are used ..."

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tweets is progress, but at the same time it shows how alive and kicking they still are.

The poet *Wolfgang Hilbig* described the humiliations as "fornication with dependents". For a long time, people had to accept this. And the public opposition from Western celebrities also remained negligible. *Gaus, Grass, Bahr* – they were rebuked for it. Anyone in the East who even dared to attack the simplifiers, as I did in my books, was accused of "Osttrotz", eastern defiance. I filed half a dozen libel suits against the *Axel Springer Group* because I was sometimes put close to the Stasi, sometimes to the Nazis with adventurous speculations, in texts by the moralising house. They gladly paid the compensation to me, to which the corporation was sentenced, out of petty cash and then continued. The pleasure of attempted disciplining obviously prevailed. It was an experience of structural violence. For a long time there were no more denunciation-free spaces for East Germans. And no one ever had to apologise for it or was even asked to resign.

#### Nationalist sentiments fuelled – a setback for social movements

But why was and is the very capacity for democracy of those socialised in the GDR such a provocative subject? As long as they forced their government to resign in 1989, they were praised for their non-violence and humour even by the *Springer press*. But as soon as their ideas of democratisation ran the risk of also calling into question the status quo of the Federal Republic, the fun stopped.

In the liberal newspaper "taz", *Klaus Hartung* praised the *East German Round Table* [a series of meetings during the Peaceful Revolution in East Germany in late-1989 and early-1990, during which participants were on a par with each other] and the *Modrow* cabinet for their clear programme of democratisation:

*"In this respect, power really does emanate from the people and above all remains with them – to a degree that was and is never conceivable in the formerly free West. In the GDR democracy, the impunity of non-violent resistance is now already guaranteed, a process that will make our security laws even more embarrassing. Representative democracy, which is basically big-party rule, continues to fend off all approaches to direct democracy and control that comes from the bottom up. In the GDR, on the other hand, even the innermost sphere of*

*repression is now subjected to democratic control from the bottom up."*

At the time, I was a member of the first independent commission of enquiry; we had the mandate to question those responsible for the assaults on demonstrators by police and state security. Even if they were unwilling and blocked, they had to answer our questions. We achieved the resignation of the Berlin police chief.

"Not only your country, East and West are in a deep crisis", was the declaration of important voices such as *Inge Aicher-Scholl, Karl Bonhoeffer, Helmut Gollwitzer, Margarethe Mitscherlich, and Heinrich Albertz*. Nationalist sentiments would be deliberately fuelled to scuttle efforts for socialist democracy. Then the "social movements in our country would also suffer a severe setback". A cosignatory, the Austrian futurologist *Robert Jungk*, virtually pleaded: "For God's sake, don't be seduced by the concepts of capitalist states. If we continue to govern and produce in the way we have done so far, we will inevitably face serious, irreparable crises."

Had we carried along the West German Social Democrats, who adopted a new basic programme at their Berlin party congress in December 1989 in the middle of the *Wende*, (the historical period around German reunification)? "It is a basic historical experience that repairs to capitalism are not enough", read the new basic programme. "A new order of economy and society is necessary".

#### Invented quotations and fake luxuries

I always wanted to live in a democracy, but never in capitalism. For *Mathias Döpfner* and his friends in the FDP, the *Free Democratic Party*, this might already be a sufficiently nauseating suspicion of communism. Be that as it may, "The East Germans will never become democrats" – there is some truth in his prognosis, if one considers that many had a different idea of democracy: not just an empty phrase à la "Bild-Zeitung", but the very big promise that was supposed to be associated with a "democratic beginning". That was the "Streetcar Named Desire", the final destination of longing: prosperity through a democracy that would also encompass the economy, that would have many facets, that would be democratic in terms of councils or grassroots democracy, and in any case would not be reduced to capitalist democracy fixated on private property.

And this longing was contagious. At the Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen, a resolution was passed: "It is time for a fundamental critique of capitalism", it read. And the SPD proposed a Round Table for Bonn

as well. Six weeks before the People's Parliament election in the GDR in March 1990, polls there still predicted an absolute majority for it. *Anke Martini*, SPD comrade, thought that the East Germans were already closer to the necessary answers "than we Westerners, who are so little used to questioning our system". *Bündnis 90 (Alliance 90)* (a political alliance of citizens movements an oppositional groups in the GDR) takes up the biggest taboo, demanding a referendum on the preservation of the people's property.

This was a dicey situation for the ruling Christian Democrats. Here one began to ask systemic questions. The CDU could turn the tide only if it bangs the kettledrum loudly. The GDR media, which to everyone's amazement had quickly emancipated themselves from censorship and whose stations achieved higher viewing figures than those of the West, were nevertheless still no match for the fictitious cock-and-bull stories of the gutter press. For the first time, they being experienced how a manipulative apparatus nourished by private media can turn a majority opinion into its opposite in a very short time, as I have verified in detail in the book *Tamtam und Tabu* (Ballyhoo and taboo). One strategy was to stir up the people's anger by ac-

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**"We East Germans are used ..."**

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cusing GDR politicians, not only in "Bild" but also in *Der Spiegel* and elsewhere, of having amassed luxury goods at state expense, from diamonds to Jaguars – pure fake news. *Der Spiegel* rejoiced that these reports caused a furore in the GDR, were photocopied thousands of times, posted in companies and became "popular reading".

Even more effective, however, was the second strategy, which caused panic through the sudden assertion by Kohl's closest adviser in the Chancellery, *Horst Teltschik*, that the collapse of the GDR economy was imminent, meaning total insolvency in just a few days. For this nonsense to be believed, "Bild" claimed that the chairman of the East German CDU, *Lothar de Maizière*, had confirmed this. Western media do not mention de Maizière's denial that he is not aware of such a thing. Instead, *Der Spiegel* also puts freely invented verbatim quotations into the mouth of Minister President Hans Modrow: "We are at the end. Our money will last until the middle of the year". Only then did Kohl decide to prepare for monetary union immediately, "at any price". "Bild" sums it up populistically: The GDR's economy is on a drip feed; it needs the transfusion of the Deutschmark. The "Alliance for Germany", founded by the West Chancellor for the East German elections, goes to work.

Shocked and frightened, GDR voters accepted the promise of the D-mark as

a messiah. They only gradually realised that they had succumbed to a new "web of lies" and that any idea of reform could now be bought off. And most West Germans still believe the widespread reading that their once-brothers and sisters wanted nothing more than to live as quickly as possible like the Westerners live. Even though referenda could just barely be prevented, the first representative poll after the election proved something else: Virtually everyone was in favour of unity, but 83 per cent still rejected a quick and unconditional accession. They wanted to have an influence on how unity would be achieved as equal partners. Not only little traffic cops and sandmen were to be preserved from the GDR, but 68 per cent spoke out in favour of the core substance – the people's property.

**A meaningless apology,  
many open balance sheets**

Privatisation in the East became a public, billion-dollar grave that still burdens today's budget, while tax-free private wealth often doubled – a trillion-dollar grave. *Ludwig Ehrhard* knew the rule of his system: "Only property guarantees personal security and intellectual independence". Where there is no having, there is no saying.

Democracy means limiting power. But parliaments have largely ceded their power to the governance, the governance has ceded power to the EU Commission, which has ceded power to the *World*

*Bank* and the *World Trade Organisation*. And the voter is supposed to cast his vote and feel like *Hans in Luck*. He looks up in the air and asks himself what choice he actually has if no one limits the hidden ruling power, that of capital? Christian Führer, legendary pastor of Leipzig's *Nikolai Church*, wanted to revive the Monday demonstrations he founded: "Actually, the second part of the revolution is still to come. The market economy is basically violent. The dictatorship of the ideology has been replaced by the dictatorship of capital."

Today, East Germans have given up the habit of such subversive tones, also due to a largely fulfilled promise of consumption. The former left opposition party, *Die Linke*, no longer dismantles power relations, but rather itself. And it leaves the protest to the right. Press products such as those of Mathias Döpfner have contributed to flattening and depoliticisation. With a majority shaped by the mainstream, grassroots democracy is to be largely robbed of its meaning. So it is not difficult to apologise to the Easterners who have become tame and to pretend that they in the West now want to honour the Easterner's life time achievements.

But which ones? Their merits in having tried out alternatives? Today, no one asks about this balance any more. But the balance remains open and not just between East and West. •

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# If the ship is on the wrong course

## On the Education Report Switzerland 2023

by Dr Eliane Perret, psychologist and curative teacher

At the beginning of March this year, the Education Report 2023 was published, written by the *Swiss Coordination Office for Research in Education SKBF*.<sup>1</sup> On more than 400 pages and almost one and a half kilograms of paper, its findings are presented on more than 500 topics concerning the Swiss education system from primary to tertiary level. Around 120 people were involved in the preparation of the report. Dr Stefan Wolter, Director of the Coordination Office, who has now published the report for the fourth time, had his say on Swiss radio's "Tagesgespräch".<sup>2</sup> The conversation was not very profound and avoided critical topics – as one has become accustomed to from chat shows. However, the report is a central basis for steering the Swiss education system and must be heeded accordingly. Even if those responsible describe it merely as a neutral report on the achievement of goals, it determines the course or strategy of the education policy of the cantons and the federal government.

### "Is the steamship on course?"

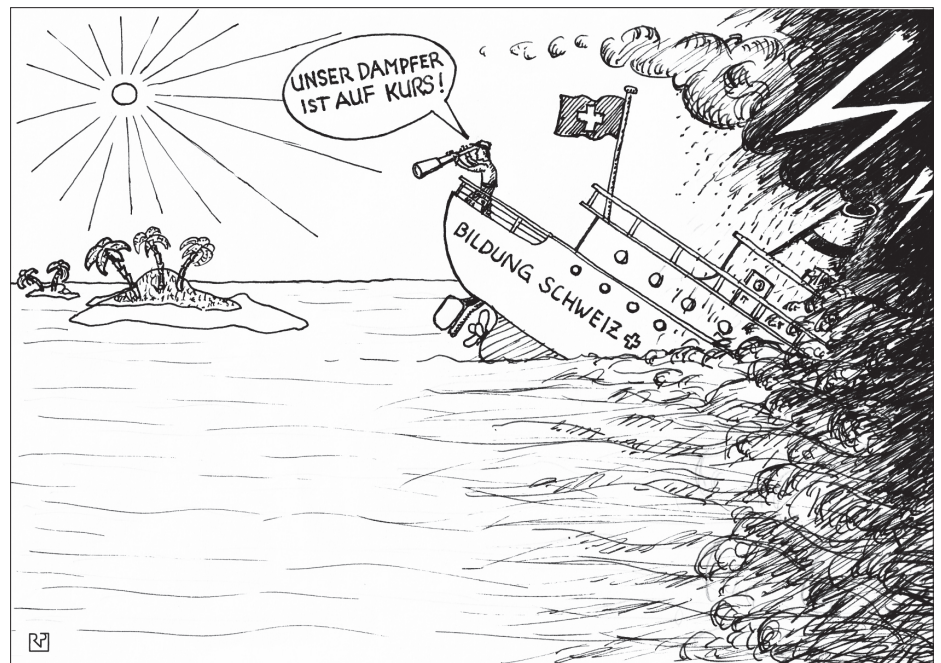
Ten years ago, as the moderator noted, Stefan Wolter compared Swiss education to a steamship, a steamship that was sluggish and needed a lot of energy if you wanted to change direction, and it took a long time to slow it down. "Is the steamship on course?" she now asked, to which Wolter replied, astonishingly, "Basically sure. The education system is in pretty good shape."

I paused and thought of all the problems that are currently being discussed: the glaring shortage of trained teachers; the constantly high turnover of teachers; the still inadequate German language skills of children and young people; the much-criticised *Curriculum 21*; the falling standards; the large number of unfortunate school leavers who leave compulsory school without sufficient literacy skills; the recurring question of the not really successful integration and promotion of children with special needs, etc.!

Is the steamship probably sailing far away from reality and alone on an ocean of wishful dreams? If the captain has a wrong map in front of him and the compass is not right, then the ship will definitely not reach its destination and in the worst case will be shipwrecked. Clear signs indicate this.

### Storm warning should be announced

The starting point for reporting is always measurements and studies, based on Pisa and the associated educational narrative.



The man on the steamship says: "Our steamship is on course."  
The name of the ship is "Education Switzerland".

"It is striking that in recent years there has been no change of course in education, despite criticism and negative experiences. Only icing on the cake! Discussions are kept flat, a little change here and there ..."

And they point to a storm warning and an urgent change of course! Since 2000, these Pisa measurements have repeatedly shown that between 15 and 20 % of pupils leave compulsory school with insufficient competences, Wolter said. "This is a cliff we have not yet avoided." In other words, almost one fifth of all school leavers are not prepared for their further education (be it an apprenticeship, a grammar school or a specialised secondary school) in such a way that they can then complete it. "So we are not quite on target there either. The target has been set since 2005, at 95 %. We oscillate around 90–91 %." In plain language, these young people still do not have a degree at the age of 25, Wolter noted. So, what now? Storm warning? On the contrary!

### If the steamship is no good?

It is striking that in recent years there has been no change of course in education, despite criticism and negative experiences. Only icing on the cake! Discussions are kept flat, a little change here and there: the shortage of teachers is solved with substitutes trained at record speed (who are certainly trying hard!), as is the need for re-

medial teachers. Adaptations to learning goals are supposed to solve the problem of children who do not keep up in class. Lack of German skills is blurred by early foreign language teaching, and headphones dampen the commotion in the classroom. For children and young people who can't cope with a lack of guidance, weekly schedules and self-organised learning, a booming tutoring industry jumps into the gap. But never is the question asked: Is the "steamship" we are putting on fit for education at all?

### The unfriendly takeover of the "educational fleet"

In order to undertake a ship's voyage, to stay with this image, appropriate preparation is needed. In the case of the school reforms that have been underway for at least 30 years, this consisted in a first step of talking down the Swiss school ship, which was sailing well on course, and accusing it of age-related weakness. Therefore, despite all objections, it should be released for scrapping in order to initiate the next step.

**“If the ship is on the ...”**

continued from page 16

*Pro Memoria:* Swiss schools were previously internationally known for their very high quality. They had not stood still, as was and is suddenly falsely claimed, but had faced the challenges of the time and integrated new findings from pedagogical, didactic and psychological research into the training of teachers and school practice. In keeping with the educational mandate of our direct-democratic country, the gap between high achieving and weaker children was small. The school provided them with the necessary knowledge to participate later as citizens in political debates. Valued as the “school of the people”, it was well anchored in the political system.

The unnecessary change of course of the “school steamer” happened under pressure from the USA, pushing UNESCO out of its leadership role in education in the 1990s and replacing it with the OECD (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*). What should one say about this? Well, sure, it was an “unfriendly takeover” of the “education fleet”, CEO now became the international education (industrial) complex with corresponding connections to the political and economic lobby! From then on, the indicators for the quality of schools were determined by this economic organisation. It designed the Pisa tests for this purpose.<sup>3</sup> The tasks set had no connection with the theory and culture of the European educational tradition and the different curricula of the individual countries. It was a comprehensive paradigm shift. Now they were looking to the Anglo-American guidelines. It is still astonishing today that this procedure was approved by the OECD countries, including Switzerland – without a referendum, mind you. Since then, the roadmaps and the course of the reforms have grown out of this: new output-oriented curricula with competences instead of learning objectives – without regard to national circumstances; forms of teaching that aimed at self-activity, were supposed to make the “human capital” of the children and young people transparent and turned the teachers into their servants or coal shippers on the school ship; Schools with corporate structures and a headmaster as CEO and finally regular “quality controls” through the *Pisa tests*, which were again the occasion for a new push for reform, always oriented towards the Anglo-American education system. This is reflected in the *Education Report 2023*: technocratic vocabulary, statistics and convoluted texts – no apparent interest in making oneself understood to the clients, namely the taxpayers and, of

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course, the population directly affected, the parents of children, teachers, apprenticeship trainers and those interested in education issues in general.

**A new education steamship is needed**

Why? The current system is a flawed construction from the ground up. This is shown by the *Education Report 2023*. An “education steamer” needs more than “evidence-based studies” with their often poor results in the form of charts and graphs, collected by observing, ticking, testing and counting. There are hundreds of them in the literature list of the education report, each following the same narrative: children and young people are seen as part of the “education steamer system”. If they do not work as desired, the system is given a push, or as Stefan Wolter puts it: “It takes a lot of patience, because you have to imagine that if you intervene somewhere in the system, depending on where, and depending on the goal, the consequences can range from 4–5 to 15 years apart. I’ll make an example: If, for example, you make an intervention in early childhood education in the hope that these people will later complete a super-mandatory education, then you practically have to wait 20 years to see whether the intervention has paid off.”<sup>4</sup>

The moderator went on to ask him about a measure taken 20 or 15 years ago of which one could say today: that was good, that made a difference. “Broadcasting break!” Wolter didn’t know any and once again talked himself out of it with the long-time horizons. One is speechless!

**Without tunnel vision develop new prospects**

The stocktaking shows that many things have gone wrong in recent decades. There are many analyses of the reasons.<sup>5</sup> Now it

takes courage to look without tunnel vision. It is worth it! Many serious researchers have honestly and carefully addressed the questions at hand in recent years and provided answers, taking an unbiased and independent view of the whole. And we cannot continue to overlook this: Any educational reform must be based on a developmental psychological foundation, which is based on the social nature of human beings.<sup>6</sup> This is what is missing in the failing “education steamer” as described in the *Education Report 2023*. It assumes a “technical” image of the child, a component of the system, where public spirit and other interpersonal “competences” are seen at best as a means to an end.

But this is not the way to grow up fellow human beings that our world would need, today more than ever! And here the school is asked to do its part as an educational institution that grants everyone the right to education – real education. Building on this, entirely new, contemporary prospects would arise for today’s problems in school practice and education. •

<sup>1</sup> skbf. (2023) *Bildungsbericht Schweiz 2023* (Education Report Switzerland 2023). Aarau: Swiss Coordination Office for Education Research.

<sup>2</sup> <https://swisscows.com/de/web?query=Tagessgespr%C3%A4ch+Stefan+Wolter> (retrieved 5 May 2023). The passages from the daily talk quoted below have been translated into written language by the author from the conversation conducted in dialect.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Langer, R. (ed.) “Warum tun die das?” *Governanceanalysen zum Steuerungshandeln in der Schulentwicklung*. (“Why are they doing that?” Governance analyses of steering action in school development.) Berlin, Heidelberg 2008, Springer

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Wolter in *Tagessgespräch SRF 1* of 5 May 2023

<sup>5</sup> cf. Bonfranchi, R./Perret, E. *Heilpädagogik im Dialog*. (Curative Education in Dialogue.) Oberhausen 2021, *Athena-wbv*

<sup>6</sup> cf. Kissling, B. *Sind Inklusion und Integration in der Schule gescheitert? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung*. (Are inclusion and integration in schools a failure? A critical examination.) Bern 2022, *Hogrefe*, p. 109–162