

In the shadow of liberalisation

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In the shadow of liberalisation

Structural change is sweeping through public monopolies as well as the private sector, and Swiss Federal Railways (SBB), Swisscom and Swiss Post are being forced to contend with domestic and foreign competitors. Consumers welcome the fact that profitability and efficiency drives are now a daily strategy among public service organisations. But the other side of the coin should not be ignored: is the state capable of coping with the negative aspects of competition?

Switzerland's public utilities are unique in comparison with the rest of the world, and the country is justifiably proud of them. What other country can claim that even the most remote corner of its territory is easily reached by public transport? Nevertheless this achievement comes at a price.



Lukas M. Schneider

"The public is keeping an eagle eye on the restructuring of public services"

As the relentless trend towards liberalisation advances to engulf such cherished assets, this raises the question of whether public services will continue to be upheld in remote regions.

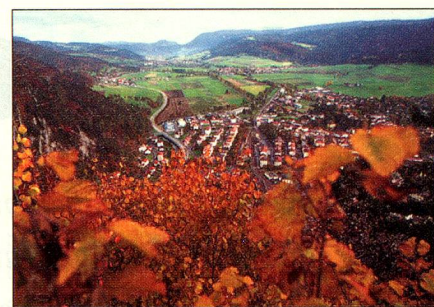
The increased pace of competition is forcing monopolies to streamline their operations and network of branch offices. Such cost-cutting drives affect remote regions much more than agglomerations, where new entrants tend to focus their expansion efforts. It will therefore take a political balancing act of some skill to increase the competitiveness of public organisations while retaining the basic platform of rural services which is so important for the country's social cohesion.

As the national government is well aware, infrastructure policy is a particularly sensitive area. Only recently, as part of its 2001 budget proposals to parliament, it decided to recommend a credit of CHF 80 million to cushion regional measures in cantons which are particularly affected by the restructuring strategies pursued by the SBB, Swisscom and Swiss Post.

Like the AHV, public services are a fundamental element of the common good which is valued by broad sectors of the population. The public is keeping an eagle eye on measures to restructure public services. The Federal Council's recent decision to ask the electorate to vote on the planned residual privatisation of Swisscom as well as the foundation of a post office bank was therefore well advised. A referendum on these two constitutional articles is scheduled for 2002.

The success of efforts to reconcile major infrastructure organisations on the one hand and the sustainable provision of basic services to remote regions on the other will largely depend on whether all the political actors share the same objective. Not for the first time is Switzerland, a nation shaped by the resolve of its citizens, faced with major regional-political challenges.

Lukas M. Schneider



FOCUS

Peripheral regions **4**

TOURISM

A cultural canton with a difference **8**

OFFICIAL NEWS

9

OSA NEWS

11

MAILBAG

13

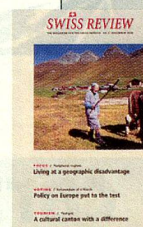
VOTING

Results of the referendum of 24 November 2000 **15**

Preview of the referendum of 4 March 2001 **16**

MOSAIC

18



Who will now do her work? The restructuring of public services is also impacting remote villages like Juf (GR), and forcing the younger generation to seek work in the cities – leaving behind an ageing population. Cover and Focus photos by Bernese photographer Peter Mosimann.

SWISS REVIEW

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