

News in brief

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **33 (2006)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **01.09.2024**

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Wind of change for the blue giant

Should Swisscom be fully privatised? That was the proposal put forward by Finance Minister Hans-Rudolf Merz at the end of November. As majority shareholder of the Swiss telecoms operator, the Swiss government owns 66% of the capital and could therefore use the CHF 17 billion from the sale of this stake to reduce the federal debt. These plans caused a furore in the left-wing press and parties of similar slant. The Universal Service Obligation plays an important role in the minds of the Swiss. The Federal Council has now laid down clear guidelines for the "blue giant". Whereas shortly before Swisscom had been in takeover talks with Irish telco Eircom, the Federal Council has now forbidden the company to acquire stakes in foreign telecoms companies. The maximum new debt for corporate expansion (Internet, TV services) has been set at CHF 5 billion for 2006 to 2009. The Federal Council also proposes revising the relevant law to permit the government stake to be reduced to below 50%. Among the variants being considered is the proposal by Hans-Rudolf Merz for a blocking minority of 33%. The government hopes that parliament will be able to pass the revised law in the summer of 2006. Jens Alder stood down as Swisscom CEO on 20 January.

2006 World Cup

Following its impressive qualification for football's World Cup, the Swiss National Team's opponents for the final stage have now been decided. Once more the Swiss squad is up against France: the two national teams will play against each other in Stuttgart on 13 June. On 19 June the team meets Togo in Dortmund: a total unknown. And on 23 June Köbi Kuhn's team battle it out in Hanover against South Korea, who made it to the semi-finals in the last championship. The national squad have not exactly

drawn an ideal group (G), but they have every chance of making it to the last sixteen. If they get through, they will meet a Group H team, which could be either Spain or Ukraine. At the 2005 Swiss Sports Awards the national team was voted Team of the Year and Köbi Kuhn Trainer of the Year.

Fear of poverty

In the latest Credit Suisse worry barometer, unemployment still heads the list of what is troubling the Swiss (71% of respondents). Worries about unemployment have ranked uppermost on the list for four straight years, followed by health, pensions and the issue of asylum seekers. This year, however, poverty made it to the top five for the first time, ending fifth on the list (29% as opposed to 22% in 2004). The results are less flattering for politicians and businessmen. 48% of Swiss voters are of the opinion that politicians let them down, and 46% believe that captains of industry are no better.

Gold for the AHV

While the cantons have already received CHF 14 billion of the National Bank's surplus gold reserves, the National Council has also arrived at a consensus on the allocation of the CHF 7 billion earmarked for the government, voting unanimously to transfer this amount to the AHV compensation fund. The National Council's solution is an indirect counterproposal to the initiative launched by the SP party, which wants to assign the proceeds from the Swiss National Bank to the AHV and in all probability will put this to the public vote in a referendum on 21 May. The solution would only be implemented if this initiative is rejected.

Comeback for Martina Hingis

The former Number One in the world tennis rankings has fought her way back to the tennis circuit through a combination of iron will and tough training. Having



recovered from the knee injuries that brought her career to a premature end in 2002, the 25-year-old from St. Gallen announced: "I didn't want to have to accuse myself of not having tried to return to tennis while there was still a chance." In January Martina Hingis celebrated her comeback in Australia.

New banknotes in the offing

The subject of the new banknotes scheduled to go into circulation in 2010 is "Cosmopolitan Switzerland". Zurich graphic artist Manuel Krebs emerged as the controversial winner of the competition for ideas launched by the Swiss National Bank (SNB). The result is perplexing, since the jury voted in favour of banknotes which show a skull, an embryo, a skinless human body and the AIDS virus. The press expressed astonishment and in many cases also outrage. In spring the SNB is expected to select a winner from sketches by artists who took part in the competition.

Second presidency

Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger takes over from Samuel Schmid, who was Federal President for 2005. This is the second time round for the Minister for Environment, Transport, Energy and Communication, who first held the premier's post in 2001. His aim is to work closely with all the sectors of the population, including young people. In his address he said "I want to encourage young people in particular to help shape our society in cultural, social and politi-

cal terms. Direct democracy requires that everyone takes a part in public affairs."

Sportswoman of the Year

And the winner is: Simone Niggli-Luder, six-time world orienteering champion. As in 2003, she was head and shoulders above her fellow nominees for the "Swiss Sports Awards". The 27-year-old biologist from Berne won the gold medal in three separate disciplines at the World Orienteering Championships in Aichi, Japan, as well as in the relay, where she made up more than two minutes' lag and clinched the victory for the Swiss team. In 2005 she also won the overall World Cup. Since 2001, therefore, Simone Niggli-Luder has been setting the pace in women's orienteering. World champion motor cyclist Tom Lüthi was voted Sportsman of the Year.

buureradio.ch

The online radio buureradio.ch was launched on 28 December 2005. Due to extensive media attention and the interest shown by the target group, the network became overloaded only a few minutes into the broadcast, with the result that additional capacity had to be freed up. According to editor-in-chief Toni Brunner, this initial success has continued unabated. Day after day, up to 20,000 listeners tune in and the 400 or more entries in the visitor book to date indicate that buureradio.ch has already found fans in North and South America, Asia, Australia and South Africa.