

# Trench Warfare of Mindsets in Switzerland's Approach to The COVID-19 Pandemic

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On 26 March 2020, the Federal Council declared an extraordinary situation in accordance with the Epidemic Act and issued a set of measures, including the closure of all the shops, restaurants, bars and other leisure facilities. Businesses at which the recommended distance cannot be maintained (e.g. hairdressing salons) are also affected. The government called on the elderly and people with previous illnesses, in particular, to remain at home (Swiss Confederation, 2020). Fundamental rights such as the right to privacy and family life were maintained (e.g. jogging, walking and having small gatherings at home are permitted) (Swiss Confederation 2020a). In order to protect the risk groups and slow the spread of the virus, many companies have closed down and are reliant upon state aid; other companies have been able to digitise their activities and/or have switched to working from home. Other companies are aiming increase or maintain their level productivity by asking their employees who do not belong to a risk group to keep attending work and only allowing those who are in a risk group or have childcare responsibilities to work from home. Some service providers are offering their services online at reduced rates to support the population. Further, neighbourhoods are creating local support groups to fetch groceries and complete tasks for older people and people in risk groups. In addition, landlords are being called upon to reduce or suspend rents for businesses that have had to cease operations as a result of the measures which have been introduced or for businesses which can no longer access their place of work. Schools, colleges, universities and psychosocial institutions also digitised their services between 26 March and 11 May, some of them providing these services free of charge.

On 16 April 2020, the Federal Council announced that the measures will be relaxed starting from 27 April for businesses for which there is only a low level of direct contact with customers, for which precautionary measures can be put in place easily and for which there will be no significant movements of people (e.g. hairdressing salons)(Bundesamt für Gesundheit 2020).

Furthermore, the Swiss government needs to take into account the realities of the cultural diversity of the country. Switzerland is divided into four linguistic regions (German, French, Italian, Romansch), which are strongly influenced culturally by European countries which speak Germanic or Romance languages, respectively. While the French-speaking area supports a more centralised political system (this is clearly linked to the political system in France), the German-speaking Swiss tend to favour a more federalist approach. This cultural difference between the German-speaking majority and the Francophone population is also known as "Röstigraben" (Kreis, 2012). Of course, these segmentations are way more complex nowadays and the current classifications are, in fact, simplified but applied while elections take place in particular. Meanwhile, the boundaries even seem to have shifted to cities and rural areas (Schneeberger, 2017).

But since the spread of COVID-19, old patterns are re-emerging. According to a survey carried out by the SRG (Swiss Broadcasting Corporation) the Swiss public broadcasting association,

the French-speaking population tends to support stricter regulations while the German-speaking population does not (Hostettler and Rehberg, 2020). As established by the same survey, 59% of the French-speaking population

thinks that the regulations are too lenient compared to just 38% of the German-speaking population. In addition, 55% of the people in the French-speaking area do not trust the Swiss government for this concern, while this matter is not discussed to such a great extent on the other side of the 'Röstigraben' (Bosshardt et al., 2020, 27-29).

The online newspaper Watson suggests three reasons for this:

- 1) The number of infected people is higher in the western part of Switzerland.
- 2) As a result of this, French-speaking citizens tend to have stricter views on government regulations in general.
- 3) Social policies and health care are more important to the French-speaking population, while the German-speaking Swiss are concerned about the economic situation to a greater extent (Watson, 2020).

The third point refers to a different approach to work and the economy. Even when matters are more complex than a distinction between 'bon vivants and worker bees' as mentioned in Gull's article (2011, 18-19), the French-speaking Swiss tend to have a different view on the state and the economy: they support policies which offer longer holidays, shorter working hours etc. (*ibid.*). According to the economist Zweimüller, this is linked to a more paternalistic understanding of the state, which is more common in France (*ibid.*). This understanding is at odds with the seemingly more work-oriented German-speaking Swiss people.

For politicians, it is difficult to reconcile such significant differences in terms of views on federalism and the strictness of rules. Therefore, Alain Berset, a member of the Federal Council and the Head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, and Daniel Koch, a Swiss physician and federal employee and the head of the Swiss federal section for 'Communicable Diseases' are key figures in the COVID-19 crisis. Not only do their opinions affect how the issue of COVID-19 is handled in Switzerland, but they also have the role of informing and reassuring the population. These individuals, and the Swiss Federal Council in general, have proposed a resolution that reflects both mindsets and have thus proven that they have an in-depth understanding of the different value systems:

By declaring an 'extraordinary situation' and implementing certain measures, such as restricting gatherings in public spaces to a maximum of 5 people and closing all public establishments (such as bars, clubs, cafés and restaurants) (Swissinfo, 2020), they are aiming to maintain the image of the active state<sup>1</sup> and the French-speaking population's desire for a centralised, hierarchical state with clear restrictions and limitations. Moreover, the cantons

<sup>1</sup> Continental European countries, such as Switzerland, is shaped by their understanding of the state, which is based on Hobbes' "Leviathan" (1651) and underlines the expectations and tasks of the state and its role. Continental European law assumes an active state that changes society and actively pursues social policy goals. Legal certainty is to be achieved by the creation of abstract norms that can be applied to concrete individual cases. This means that the continental European civil law system must ensure and enforce not only legal protection, but also the public interest and the will of the law (Hobbes, Thomas 1651).

will maintain their rights to adapt to their local situation provided that they do not violate federal laws. In addition, the Confederation emphasises that people will still have the right to hold private evening gatherings provided that the proper hygiene rules are followed and the same applies to the economic sector and businesses. This seems to be directed somewhat towards the German-speaking Swiss cantons, which prefer decentralised power and autonomy. By implementing this strategy, they are providing a policy which is acceptable to both sides: the German-speaking part can hold on to their belief in federalism and the French part is given reassurance that the state can introduce stricter rules at any time.

Conclusion: Eruption of old-fashioned rivalries

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the policies which have been introduced to deal with it, daily life in Switzerland has changed drastically. The reactions to those regulations depend on the cultural setting within Switzerland and it is clear that the changes are bringing back some old-fashioned cultural rivalries between the areas of the country influenced by countries in which Romance and Germanic languages are spoken. The German-speaking Swiss are holding on to their individual rights and the concept of federalism, while the French-speaking population appears to prefer stricter regulations. As a result of these different mindsets, Swiss politicians have to strike the right balance and we can see their efforts to do so in their choice of words and style of address.

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