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Natallia Hersche



Prison no. 4, Gomel, Belarus – this is where 51-year-old Natallia Hersche from St Gallen has been incarcerated since being convicted of “violent resistance against a law enforcement officer” over an incident that happened during a women’s demonstration in Minsk at the end of 2020. Hersche was detained but reportedly “resisted arrest”. She ripped off a police officer’s balaclava, causing “slight damage to the garment in the area of the eye slit”. Many who have protested against the Belarus president, Alexander Lukaschenko, have been deprived of freedom. But why did Hersche leave her comfortable neighbourhood near Lake Constance to demonstrate in Minsk? Switzerland played a big part in her decision. Her adopted home is a democracy that guarantees the right to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. The Swiss-Belarus dual citizen wishes the same were true of her country of birth, making her “a symbol of our revolution” in the eyes of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. The Swiss ambassador in Minsk, Claude Altermatt, is doing all he can to help Hersche. However, the Swiss diplomat has to tread carefully. When Switzerland opened its embassy in Belarus as recently as 2020, one of its stated goals was to deepen economic ties with the country, which Lukaschenko rules with an iron fist. In contrast, Hersche is in no mood to compromise. She could have asked Lukaschenko for a pardon in April, but didn’t. “I will never plea to this regime for anything,” she says. Who knows what price she is paying for her tenacity.

MARC LETTAU

Olympic medal bonanza for Switzerland

Switzerland ended the Tokyo Olympics on 13 medals – the biggest haul by the nation’s athletes since 1952. Three of these were gold, thanks to Belinda Bencic in the tennis, Nina Christen in the shooting, and Jolanda Neff in the mountain bike event. Neff’s podium ceremony was particularly gratifying, as the gold medal winner was flanked by two other Swiss riders, Sina Frei (silver) and Linda Indergand (bronze). Switzerland’s previous medal sweep came 85 years ago in gymnastics, at the 1936 Berlin games. (MUL)

Taliban catch Switzerland unawares

The Taliban’s seizure of power in Afghanistan wrong-footed the Swiss authorities, who were saying at the beginning of August that they would be proceeding with the repatriation of failed Afghan asylum seekers. Only days later came the U-turn. The same asylum seekers can now apply for hardship support and the right to stay. Furthermore, Switzerland is considering taking in refugees in particular need of protection. It has also withdrawn its aid workers from Afghanistan. (MUL)

Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis visits Thailand

Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis visited Thailand in August as part of his tour of South East Asia. Swiss expats used his visit to complain that they are still waiting to be vaccinated. According to media reports, Cassis said he was going to recommend to the Thai authorities that they allow foreign nationals to get vaccinated – as is the practice in Switzerland. The Swiss embassy in Thailand took a pragmatic approach by organising vaccination appointments at a private hospital. (MUL)

The new man at the FDP helm

Thierry Burkart is set to become the new leader of the FDP in Switzerland. The 45-year-old Aargau member of the Council of States is the only candidate for the post. He is due to be elected in October. Burkart will succeed Petra Gössi, who tried to give the FDP a greener image. Gössi resigned after the electorate rejected the CO2 Act – a piece of legislation that she had supported. Burkart is no friend of Gössi’s climate policies and belongs to the conservative wing of the party. (MUL)

Murat Yakin is the new Switzerland coach

Murat Yakin is the new Swiss national football team coach. He succeeds Vladimir Petkovic, who surprisingly stepped down from the post this summer (see page 10). Yakin is well known in Swiss football. As a player, he had spells in the Bundesliga as well as a very successful stint at FC Basel. Teams that he has coached include FC Thun, FC Luzern, FC Basel and Spartak Moscow. (MUL)