



Shortlist 2010

Public Eye Swiss Award

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**Nominated for the Public Eye Swiss Award 2010  
by the Group for a Switzerland Without an Army (GSoA):**

## Farner PR

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| Headquarters: | Zurich, Switzerland  |
| Sector:       | Public relations, advertising and political communication  |
| Turnover:     | CHF 14 million   |
| Owned by:     | Publicly-traded corporation                                |
| Employees:    | 60 in Switzerland, numerous international partner agencies |
| CEO:          | Christian König  |

### In Brief

*Undercover duty for the arms industry: During the campaign for a Swiss ban on war material exports, the Zurich-based public relations agency Farner PR adopted methods reminiscent of the cold war. In June 2009, it sent a political scientist as undercover informant to a strategy weekend of the Group for a Switzerland Without an Army (GSoA). The woman claimed that she wanted to write a project paper, but asked so many expert questions that others became suspicious. In August, her boyfriend spoke with the press, claiming his girlfriend had been “poorly briefed” by Farner PR, and that she only took the assignment because there are currently few jobs for political scientists. Farner PR rejected “in the strongest terms” the accusation of having sent an informant. The media later received a Farner PR document from 2005: It contained references to “observation of activist groups” and “public disavowal of opponents.” In October, the Swiss newspaper “Blick” published the political scientist’s report – on Farner PR stationery. Legally, the spying on political opponents violates not only decency and propriety, but also freedom of assembly and expression.*

### Irresponsible Corporate Behavior

In June 2009, the Zurich-based public relations agency Farner PR sent an undercover informant to a strategy meeting of the Group for a Switzerland Without an Army (GSoA). The Swiss arms lobby had given Farner PR the contract to manage the campaign against the GSoA initiative for a ban on war material exports. The informant covertly obtained, among other things, a folder with confidential campaign materials. She had introduced herself as a political science student who wanted to write a project paper on conducting political campaigns. When the case was first discovered by the Zurich-based newspaper “Wochezeitung” (WOZ), Farner PR claimed that the affair had been made up by GSoA and WOZ. The informant, who worked for Farner PR as a freelancer, initially lied to WOZ: “Farner PR did not ask me to attend.” However the Swiss TV news program “10vor10”

showed at the end of August that the action was planned well in advance. Internal Farner PR documents, obtained by "10vor10," mentioned not only the "observation of activist groups," but also the "undercover investigation of management" – notably in the Swiss Foreign Office (EDA) – as an urgent measure to help the arms lobby successfully defeat the initiative. The "public disavowal" of opponents was also considered as a method within the documents. Farner PR professed to have always abided by the provisions of the law. In early October, "Blick" presented another Farner PR document proving that the agency in actual fact had spied on the GSoA. With a grinding of teeth, Farner PR admitted to having a "communications problem." In addition, in November 2009 it was made public that the government-owned aerospace and defense firm RUAG had supported the opposition campaign with a payment of 200,000 Swiss francs. Which means that the undercover operation was at least partially financed with funds from a government entity.

### **Consequences**

Social movements live and grow based on their openness vis-a-vis potential new activists. Therefore the spying caused not only direct harm, since confidential information fell into the wrong hands. It is also an attack on the democratic fundamental right to openly organize with volunteers. The infiltration of social movements has two important effects: Obtaining confidential information by deceptive means, and the fueling of mistrust. The violation of the right of privacy is consciously accepted. The GSoA affair follows on the heels of a similar Swiss case: In 2008, the so-called "Nestlégate" exposed that Nestlé had spied on the global justice group Attac for years.

### **Current Status and Demands**

The GSoA, at once both nominating and aggrieved organization, continues to call on Farner PR to reveal exactly what personal information the agency collected on the GSoA. Farner PR should also state to which third parties any of this data was given. Furthermore, were other people hired by Farner PR to take part in internal GSoA meetings? And finally, GSoA calls for full transparency regarding the financing of the campaign against the ban on war material exports.

### **Further Information**

- <http://www.gsoa.ch/english/>