

Politics/Voting : preview to the referendum of 26 November : 1. contributions to the new EU Member States : 2. uniform child allowance of at least CHF 200

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Preview to the referendum of 26 November

1. Contributions to the new EU Member States
2. Uniform child allowance of at least CHF 200

In conjunction with the second package of bilateral negotiations, Switzerland and the EU have come to two more agreements. These concern the extension of free movement of persons to include the ten new EU Member States, and a contribution of CHF 1 billion to these countries. The negotiation dossier itself and the extension of the agreement on free movement of persons already passed the referendum test last year. Now the electorate must also vote on the third part. The Swiss People's Party (SVP), supported by the Swiss Democrats and the Campaign for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland, has succeeded in pressing for a referendum on these cohesion contributions.

The Federal Council and parliament want this financial support to be paid within the framework of the Federal Law on Eastern Europe. Rather than being made to the EU Cohesion Fund, payments would constitute direct contributions by Switzerland to bilaterally-agreed projects in eastern European countries. Only the overall total and its distribution among the different countries is defined. The payments are to be staggered over ten years. The two ministries that provide development aid to the east will be required to cover 60 percent of the extra expenditure through internal cost-cutting without compromising development aid to countries in the southern hemisphere. The remaining 40 percent will come from general federal budgets.

The price of bilateral cooperation

The SVP demanded that the CHF 1 billion be funded budget-neutrally. It also wanted the law amended to prevent Switzerland having to make similar payments if Romania, Bulgaria or other countries also joined the EU. Having failed to get either demand approved in parliament, the SVP has now sought a referendum. The bill was passed by 127 votes to 53 in the National Council, and 37 votes to 1 in the Council of States.

The Federal Council and the majority of parliament look on the payment as the price

Results of the referendum of 24 September

1. New foreigners' law and amended asylum law approved
2. Proposal to divert National Bank profits to the AHV rejected

It's final: Switzerland can modernise its immigration policies. The voters have brushed aside a centre-left referendum and clearly approved legislative changes proposed by the Federal Council and parliament. The new regulations will lay down a twin-track immigration system. Whereas bilateral agreements mean that European Union citizens are treated just like Swiss nationals, would-be immigrants from outside the EU will now only have access to the Swiss labour market if they are highly skilled. Foreigners already living in Switzerland will be helped to integrate better.

In addition to the foreigners' law, the Swiss also voted to toughen up the asylum regulations. Although the referendum committee got broader support in opposing such changes and campaigning focussed almost entirely on this issue, the two bills received almost identical backing: 68 percent of voters said "Yes" to the foreigners' law, while 67.8 percent approved the amended asylum law. The moves were endorsed by all cantons. The "Yes" votes for both bills topped the 75 percent-mark in the cantons of Aargau, Appenzell-Innerhoden, Glarus, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Schwyz, Thurgau and Zug. The new laws fared less well in western Switzerland than in the German-speaking areas, getting slightly over 50 percent support in Geneva, Jura and Neuenburg.

National Bank profits not for the AHV

A Social Democrat-led bid to redirect some of the Swiss National Bank's profits to the old-age and survivors' pension scheme (AHV) failed to get popular approval. Overall, 58.3 percent of voters said "No" to the proposal. Only the cantons of Ticino (57.5%), Basel City (53.6%) and Geneva (51.3%) backed the move. The outcome was very tight in Jura (49.2% Yes votes), while the proposal was most unambiguously rejected in Appenzell-Innerrhoden (No: 74.9%), Zug (66.8%), Glarus (66.5%) as well as Appenzell-Ausserrhoden and Thurgau (both 66.2%).

RL

Comment *Bitter defeat for the left*

Before Sunday's referendum, the left was confident it would get majority backing for its "National Bank profits for the AHV" campaign. The outcome was therefore extremely sobering: Three-fifths of eligible voters in 23 of the 26 cantons opposed the move. In other words, a clear majority of the Swiss population has shied away from taking a gamble that no country has yet embarked on, namely linking economic and welfare policies. As enticing as the windfall may be for the AHV, the people see it neither as a lasting solution for safeguarding pensions nor did they want federal and cantonal revenues cut by CHF 1.5 billion a year.

However despite the clear verdict, the day's winners can't afford to rest on their laurels. An ageing population means the AHV faces serious shortfalls in the near future. Switzerland must therefore put together reforms capable of securing a majority based on a combination of tweaking expenditure and raising contributions. The political left suffered an even greater defeat on the amendments to the asylum and foreigners' laws. Although even the popular parties had criticised the laws, and asylum applications are at their lowest point in years, the majority of the Swiss people is convinced that the asylum regulations need further toughening up. And yet the outcome is hardly surprising since voters have endorsed all immigration policy changes proposed by the Federal Council and parliament in recent years.

By backing the foreigners' law, the electorate has paved the way for modern immigration and integration policies. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the amended asylum law will meet its backers' high expectations. After all, the tougher regulations are unlikely to prevent people coming to Switzerland not because of persecution in their home country, but simply in search of a better life in the rich north.

RENÉ LENZIN

Swiss achievements would cost too much. So patriotism fell to the only party left: the SVP.

Do democracies need patriotism?

Democracy requires a belief in a common element. It requires loyalty and acceptance. Why else should we bow to democratic decisions? That is why democracy is completely unthinkable without patriotism. Amazingly enough, both left-wingers and centrists either overlooked or forgot this fact for many years. But that's not all. Switzerland was even rejected and condemned as an outdated model. Many people thought a globalised world no longer needed national identities anymore.

What role does the EU issue play?

A decisive one because it split the elites. In the past, politics and economics always went hand-in-hand. And this schism was not good for the country's national identity.

A lot of the patriotism has come from the "secondos" (second-generation immigrants, ed.), of all people. Shouldn't they be more multiculturalist?

That's the outcome of successful integration, which always leads to a kind of over-identification. The banlieues in France, where entire subcultures of un-integrated immigrants have developed, are witnessing the opposite effect.

Is this new patriotism fashionable around the world?

Yes. The nation state is undergoing a revival as a primary organisational model for the global society, and taking on more than merely a symbolic significance. People are identifying themselves through their nation state. That's a reaction to globalisation. At the same time, democracy is also increasingly being debated worldwide.

How important is national consciousness for one's own identity?

From the political standpoint it is of decisive importance. Democracies simply cannot govern or regulate without patriotic national consciousness. But the importance of national consciousness varies at the subjective level.

So you consider the current developments positive?

Absolutely. Our democracy would be unthinkable without sovereignty coupled with a self-image as a Swiss citizen.

Do "Euroturbos" (campaigners for immediate negotiations on Swiss entry to the EU, ed.) see it that way too?

The "Euroturbos" have forgotten that because they only ever see the primacy of the economy and the market as a regulatory principle.

Isn't identification with Europe enough?

The European identity is based on either defending against new wars, Christianity or enlightenment. Of these, only enlightenment is suitable as a common denominator for a European identity.

Patriotism is always also a question of mass.

How much can it tolerate?

It depends what the patriotism is based on. Ethnic patriotism excludes all others and is thus as dangerous as religious patriotism, which harbours the idea of being a chosen nation. There is too much of both of these around. By contrast, there cannot be enough open republican patriotism, which stems from an act of volition by the citizens of a state.

Will the new patriotism have a political impact on the next federal elections?

I'm certain of it. It just depends to what extent the political left and the centrists are able to offer projects and visions for Switzerland and focus their attention on their own country. Possible topics include education, the family, transport, concordance and democracy. If the SP, FDP and CVP take up the cause of Switzerland and its institutions, the SVP will lose momentum. European policies must also be based on sovereignty, and European politicians must set themselves the target of "swissifying" Europe. Then the objective will be achieved.

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to pay for bilateralism. They say Switzerland benefits from the opening of the new markets in central and eastern Europe, and must therefore also contribute towards the development of this region. They also claim that a Swiss "No" could threaten the bilateral path. Brussels may not have said how the EU would react to a negative vote in the referendum, but it must be assumed that such an outcome would hamper further negotiations. Ratification of Switzerland's inclusion in the Schengen Agreement also still hangs in the balance. In addition, preparatory talks are underway on an agreement over the electricity market, and Switzerland has indicated it would be interested in negotiating a free trade agreement on agriculture.

At least CHF 200 per child

"One child, one allowance" – this is the principle agreed by parliament in March this year. If Swiss voters now approve the move at the end of November, every child in Switzerland will receive an allowance of at least CHF 200 and every adolescent in vocational training at least CHF 250 per month, no matter how much their parents earn. The only exception is self-employed parents, who will not benefit from the nationwide scheme.

Allowances are currently the responsibility of the cantons, and vary from CHF 154 for a first child in the canton of Jura to CHF 260 in the Valais. Parents in 17 cantons currently receive less than CHF 200 a month for their first child. But these are the minimum rates. Many cantons already grant higher allowances for second and third children as well as young people in vocational training. In addition, employers are free to pay higher allowances. For instance, civil servants receive CHF 330 a month for their first child.

The harmonisation will increase expenditure by about CHF 600 million. Three-quarters of this will be met by the economy, which will finance the allowances through employer's contributions. That is why the Swiss Trade Association and Employers' Association have called for a referendum, supported by the FDP and SVP. By contrast, the bill is backed by trade unions, the SVP, the SP and the Greens, who see the current cantonal differences as objectionable and consider child benefit payments an important element of family policy. The National Council voted 106 to 85 in favour of a universal minimum child benefit, while the Council of States approved the bill by 23 votes to 21. (RL).