

Immigration initiative opposes free movement of persons

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Immigration initiative opposes free movement of persons

The Swiss people will once again vote on the thorny issue of what level of immigration Switzerland can sustain. A referendum will be held on the "Against mass immigration" initiative on 9 February 2014. Experts in constitutional law have issued warnings, and the business community is on edge.

By Marc Lettau

Shadowy figures in black boots trample over a red carpet symbolising Switzerland. This is the kind of image that the Swiss People's Party (SVP) is using to fight immigration. It claims that immigrants are putting pressure on the social security and healthcare systems, making habitable space scarce and expensive, and causing overcrowding in prisons. The "Against mass immigration" initiative does not provide any figures for how much immigration Switzerland can sustain. It calls for controls on immigration by means of quotas set annually and demands that these figures be made dependent on the nation's economic interests.

The explosive element of the initiative is that it aims to prohibit international agreements that stand in the way of such immigration control. In specific terms, this means that those behind the initiative are seeking to end the free movement of persons accord with the European Union (EU). They are particularly critical of the fact that immigrants from the EU do not have to leave if they lose their jobs but are instead entitled to Swiss social security benefits. Their verdict is: "Only those wishing to harm Switzerland can support the free movement of persons."

The initiative combines concerns over immigration-related "density stress" with latent EU scepticism. This is no one-off. In the past, it was guest workers from the south who caused fears over competition, whereas today it is highly qualified specialists from the EU provoking anxiety in some quarters. According to the political scientist Michael Herrmann, this new competition means that criticism of immigration is being voiced by social milieus previously regarded as extremely "receptive to a policy of openness" – scepticism over immigration is currently in vogue among higher earners and the better educated.

The Federal Council and a clear majority of members of parliament oppose the SVP initiative. They are supported by all the major business federations. These are vehemently opposed to the initiative.

There is much anxiety, with experts in constitutional law warning that the rescission of the free movement of persons will put the entire set of bilateral agreements negotiated with the EU in jeopardy, much to the detriment of Switzerland and its economy. The referendum campaign being run by the opposing committees is therefore primarily focusing on highlighting the fundamental importance of the "Bilaterals" to "Switzerland's model of success" and its prosperity.

The next challenges

Further challenges concerning immigration and the free movement of persons are already on the horizon. The Ecopop society's initiative is pending. This is seeking to radi-

cally curb immigration for environmental reasons and to restructure development aid. Ecopop is calling for 10 percent of state development aid to be used for birth control in developing countries in order to stem population growth.

A new development has also emerged in the debate over the free movement of persons – this concerns Croatia, which has been an EU Member State since 2013. Right-wing and conservative groups have already called a referendum against the forthcoming extension of the free movement of persons to Croatia. The Swiss people also look set to have the final say on this issue.

www.masseneinwanderung.ch
<http://bilaterale.ch/>
www.ecopop.ch



FIVE "NO" VOTES IN SUCCESSION

Five popular initiatives aiming to reduce the number of foreigners living in Switzerland have gone to referendum since 1970. The first was the initiative submitted by James Schwarzenbach, a right-wing populist, in 1970. The proposal, which sought to restrict the proportion of foreigners to 10 percent and would have resulted in the expulsion

of 300,000 foreigners, was rejected by the Swiss people with 54 percent voting "no". The National Action's (NA) excessive immigration initiative of 1974 was defeated with 66 percent voting against it. 70 percent of the Swiss people opposed the revised version of the initiative in 1977. In 1988, the NA's "In favour of limits on immigration" initiative

was rejected with 67 percent opposed to it. An initiative that sought to restrict the proportion of foreigners to 18 percent was defeated in 2000 with 64 percent against it.

1.86 million foreigners live in Switzerland today. They make up 23.2 percent of the total resident population. Two thirds of them come from the EU. (mul)