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Policy on Europe put to the test

Voters will be invited to cast ballots on three initiatives on the next federal referendum date. The central theme is Swiss policy on Europe, with the "Yes to Europe!" initiative. The electorate are also asked to vote on a proposal to introduce a 30 km/h limit in built-up areas and an initiative to lower the price of medicines in Switzerland.

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

The "Yes to Europe!" popular initiative is simple and straightforward. It demands that Switzerland enter negotiations for admission to the European Union (EU) "without delay". Launched at the beginning of 1995 by five pro-European movements who subsequently merged, the proposal was submitted one year later with 122,000 valid signatures.

"Yes to Europe!" – a delicate subject

To put this initiative in the proper perspective, it is important to review the key dates in



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann

Mythological elements will once more play a role in the decision on Switzerland's relationship with the EU.

Switzerland's policy towards Europe. May 1992: The Federal Council urges the opening of negotiations with a view to EU membership. 6 December 1992: In a federal referendum, voters reject Switzerland's participation in the European Economic Area (EEA). Consequently the Federal Council puts its plans on hold but makes full membership of Switzerland in the European Union a "strategic objective" of its European policy and expresses its desire to negotiate with Brussels regarding an extension of the 1972 free trade agreement. After several years of silence, bilateral negotiations commence on seven different areas and the electorate approves the sectoral accords on 2 May 2000.

The above-mentioned popular initiative pursues a dual objective: It aims to support the government's pro-European policy and exert pressure in order to jump-start the opening of membership negotiations. Even if the Federal Council welcomes the support of these young pro-Europeans, their initiative would put the Federal Council in an awkward position primarily because it calls for an immediate start to negotiations with Brussels. Foreign policy lies within the remit of the Federal Council, and its members want to wait for the right moment to reactivate application for membership.

Hence the national government recommends that the popular initiative be reject-

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ed. Parliament also seeks appropriate means of avoiding a federal referendum on the initiative. There is talk of a federal decree which strengthens the Federal Council's European policy options but empowers it to choose the right moment for commencing negotiations. The National Council is looking at formulations to prevent the EU membership issue being put on the back burner. But all these indirect counterproposals have floundered on the rocks of the State Council's unsympathetic attitude. The initiators have therefore decided to uphold their initiative, and less than a year after the bilateral accords were accepted, the European issue is once more being put to the vote.

It is also important to remember that on 8 June 1997 the electorate overwhelmingly rejected a right-wing popular initiative which sought to forbid the Federal Council to open membership negotiations without consulting voters and cantons in advance. At the time the Federal Council and parliament stressed that, while the people were entitled to vote on EU membership, their decision should be based on concrete knowledge of the topic i.e. the vote should be cast after ne-

gotiations and not before. This argument is now being cited in connection with the "Yes to Europe!" initiative: While the initiative is basically in line with the national government's intentions, it is unacceptable to the extent that it dictates the time at which the executive should reactivate its application for membership.

The "Yes to Europe!" initiative is a thorn in the side of a number of pro-European groups in Switzerland who assume that the majority of Swiss will reject. They fear that a rejection will be interpreted by the fifteen member states as another No to the European Union. Opponents of EU membership have every reason to welcome this referendum because it may deal a fatal blow to the strategic objective of the Federal Council's European policy.


30 km/h in built-up areas?

The popular initiative "Roads for everyone" was prompted by members of the Swiss Traffic Club and calls for an improvement in traffic security by introducing a general speed limit of 30 km/h in built-up areas with exemptions permitted in justifiable cases. According to the initiative, the responsible authorities would be entitled "to increase speed on main roads provided the safety of travellers and the protection of residents against noise is ensured".

Both councils recommend rejection of this initiative (95 against 63 in the National Council and 32 against 9 in the State Council). Opponents of the initiative (centre-right parties and automobile associations) emphasise that reducing the speed from 50 to 30 km/h in built-up areas to avoid accidents would only be practical were it accompanied by substantial construction measures (islands, obstacles etc.), at a cost of CHF 1 to 2 billion to cantons and communities. A new study quoted by Minister of Transport Moritz Leuenberger shows that such construction measures would reduce the number of accidents in built-up areas by half, but would increase it by 40% if the 30 km/h speed limit were introduced without changing the road network. Those in favour of the initiative (left-wing parties and Greens) dispute these findings and point in particular to the experience of Graz, Austria, which in 1992 experimented with a speed limit of 30 on all side roads. They reason that a crash at the speed of 30 km/h is less severe than one at 50 km/h.

Against high medicament prices

The initiative "for lower medicament prices" calls for a reduction in the price of medicaments sold in Switzerland. To achieve this it recommends two measures: Firstly, a liberalisation of the Swiss market with no special authorisation required for medicaments which are approved for sale in neighbouring countries; secondly, the obligation to issue generic rather than proprietary drugs which are no longer covered by health insurance companies.

The Federal Council and parliament recommend rejection of this initiative which was spearheaded by Denner and submitted more than three years ago with 127,000 valid signatures. The initiative was unanimously rejected by the National Council (149 votes to 0) and by the State Council (39 to 0). Opponents of the initiative point to the fact that the obligation to distribute generic drugs would represent "a severe assault on the therapeutic freedom and responsibility of doctors", as the Federal Council put it in its message to parliament. Minister of Health Ruth Dreifuss also cited her negotiations with the pharmaceutical industry for a reduction in medicament prices, which led to an annual reduction in health insurance costs of around CHF 200 million. 

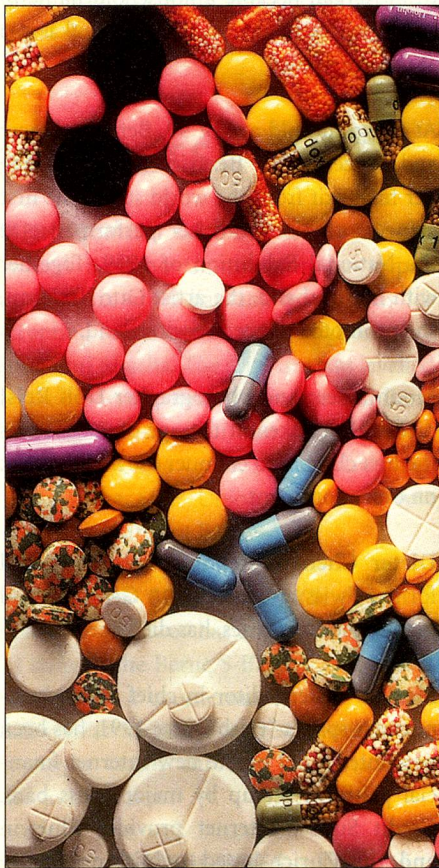


Photo: Prisma

Despite the mountain of pills consumed, drug prices are higher in Switzerland than abroad.

Federal Referendums

4 March 2001

- Popular initiative "Yes to Europe"
- Popular initiative "for lower-priced medicines"
- Popular initiative "for greater traffic safety based on a speed limit of 30 km/h for built-up areas with exceptions (roads for everyone)"

10 June 2001

Subjects not yet decided.

23 September 2001

Subjects not yet decided.

2 December 2001

Subjects not yet decided.