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New initiative to facilitate naturalisation

Will the second generation of foreigners enjoy facilitated naturalisation, and will this be automatic for the third generation? Voters and cantons are being asked to vote on this as well as maternity leave and the post initiative on 26 September.

RENÉ LENZIN

TEN YEARS AGO, on 12 June 1994, the majority of Swiss voters said Yes to facilitated naturalisation for second-generation foreigners. But the proposal was ultimately rejected by a cantonal majority. Now the Federal Council and parliament have adopted a different approach and are taking the issue one step further: in addition to facilitated naturalisation for second-generation foreigners, they also propose automatic naturalisation for third-generation foreigners. However, both projects will be voted on separately. Since both require an amendment to the constitution, they are subject to an obligatory consultation process by the people and cantons.

Currently almost 1.5 million foreigners reside in Switzerland. Of these, 24 percent were born here, and 50 percent have lived here for more than eight years. The citizenship law is to be amended to facilitate naturalisation for integrated young people and adults. Between the ages of 14 and 24, these young people and adults would be able to apply for facilitated naturalisation provided they have completed at least five years of obligatory schooling in Switzerland, have a residency permit, have lived in the relevant community for at least two years, are inte-

grated in Switzerland, are familiar with a national language and are law-abiding.

Third-generation foreign children born in Switzerland would automatically receive Swiss nationality if one of their parents was born or grew up here. The parent must have completed at least five years of obligatory schooling in Switzerland and have been in possession of a residency permit for five years prior to the birth of the child. Foreign parents can refuse Swiss citizenship for their child, but the child can revoke this refusal on reaching maturity and acquire Swiss citizenship at that stage.

Both proposals are opposed only by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Swiss Democrats. All other parties as well as the Federal Council have declared their support of this amendment to the citizenship law. If the constitutional amendment for facilitated naturalisation is passed, further legal measures are planned. For instance, the federal residency period would be reduced from twelve to eight years, and the cantonal and community-level residency period would be set to a maximum of three years. Moreover, naturalisation fees would be at most sufficient to cover costs. And finally, children born outside marriage and of Swiss fathers would automatically receive citizenship. Up to now, only children of Swiss mothers have enjoyed this right.


Paid maternity leave

The Federal Council and parliament are also having another shot at introducing paid maternity leave. The proposal for maternity insurance was last rejected in the people's initiative of 13 June 1999. The new proposal differs from the latter by recommending continued pay for working women rather than an across-the-board insurance for all mothers. These women would receive 80 percent of their current salary for a period of 14 weeks. The entire process would be implemented via the income substitution directive which already covers income substitution for conscripts. The revision of the

income substitution directive will simultaneously raise the entitlement to income substitution for conscripts from 65 to 80 percent of their current civilian salary.

The income substitution directive is financed through wage deductions. Since the armed forces have been drastically reduced and the income substitution fund still has reserves, funding for maternity leave is assured for several years. Thereafter, employer and employee contributions will need to be raised slightly. Nevertheless, most employers will fare better since at present they pay all voluntary maternity benefits themselves. The SVP has successfully launched a referendum against introduction of maternity leave. All other major parties support the proposal.

A nation-wide post office network

The "post initiative" was launched in response to measures to reduce and restructure Switzerland's post office network. It calls for a nation-wide post office network, the right of communities to have a say in proposed changes to the network, and government compensation if the Post Office is no longer able to finance its network on its own. With the exception of financial compensation, the demands of the initiative have largely been met. The Federal Council and parliament therefore recommend that voters reject the people's initiative. However, it is supported by the Left and by the unions. 

Date of forthcoming referendum in 2004

28 November

BDK