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Autor: Lenzin, René
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Green light for Switzerland-wide education system.

85.6 percent of the people and all cantons have voted for the harmonisation of the Swiss education system. From the first year of primary school to university graduation, a single educational area is to be formed for the whole of Switzerland. Attendance at the polls hit an all-time low: just one in four registered voters took part in the vote. By René Lenzin

The result could not be clearer: the people and cantons have approved the Federal Constitution's framework article on education by an overwhelming majority. In most cantons the share of 'yes' votes was between 80 and 90 percent. Six cantons actually topped the 90 percent mark: Berne (92.9), Neuchâtel (92.6), Basel-Stadt (92.1), Vaud (92.0), Solothurn (91.4) and Basel-Landschaft (90.7). The chorus of approval fell short of 80 percent in just six cantons: Appenzell Ausserrhoden (79.8), Schaffhausen (79.3), Uri (75.6), Schwyz (74.5), Ticino (59.7) and Appenzell Innerrhoden (59.2). There was no urban/rural divide and no significant difference between German- and French-speaking Switzerland.

This unequivocal vote reflects the history of the draft law's development and the broad agreement of all major parties as well as industrial associations, trade unions and educational organisations. The new articles in the Constitution have arisen out of a parliamentary initiative whose implementation has been addressed by parliament in close collaboration with the cantons and the Federal Government. Because only one left-wing and one right-wing splinter group opposed the bill, there was virtually no voting campaign. The downside of this "total harmony" can be seen in the poor turnout: only 27.2 percent of registered voters took part, the second-lowest figure since the Swiss Confederation was founded in 1848.

And now to implementation

The new constitutional provisions will basically change nothing in the allocation of educational authority. The cantons will continue to be responsible for compulsory schooling. However, the Confederation will be able to intervene if the cantons cannot agree on a harmonious solution in certain areas. Those cited include the school entry age, the length of compulsory school attendance and the individual levels, educational targets and mutual recognition of qualifications. In the case of universities and colleges of higher education, the Confederation and cantons have to set up joint bodies that

will ensure standardised levels of studies, transitions and final qualifications. Such managing bodies will be provided for in the new Higher Education Act currently being prepared by the Federal Government. The desired interchangeability and transparency are intended not least to provide the Confederation with a clearer basis for its subsidies to cantonal further education establishments.

In the area of compulsory education, too, standardisation is in train. Under the title 'Harmos', the Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education has been working for quite some time now on an agreement that will give substance to the general formulations of the constitution's mission. Following the unequivocal 'yes' from the people, Hans Ulrich Stöckling, St.Gallen Executive Council member and President of the Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, assumed on the day of the poll that Harmos could now soon be implemented.

Two foreign languages in primary school

Stöckling's confidence is based on cantonal referenda on the teaching of foreign languages. The Ministers of Education had agreed that every canton should start instruction in a new foreign language in years three and five. At least one of the two languages must be one of the Swiss official languages. This so-called 3/5 model has been opposed by popular initiatives in five cantons. In Schaffhausen, Thurgau and Zug, voters rejected the initiatives and thus confirmed the linguistic compromise. Voting is still pending in Lucerne and Zurich. The Zurich result is of central importance, since no harmonisation can be achieved without the most densely populated canton, in German-speaking Switzerland at least.

Commentary

The work begins here

The vote on the Federal Constitution's new education article has not exactly made great waves. There was too much consensus among political parties, cantons and educational associations for that. The opposition of a very few dissidents from the SVP and extreme left-wing politicians from French-speaking Switzerland was too weak. The people and cantons followed the Federal Council and parliament and gave unequivocal consent. The fact that there was no major controversy among the people either is demonstrated by the extremely low turnout at the polls of 27.2 percent.

The education article establishes the framework for Switzerland as a single educational area from primary school to university. That is an important basis for the successful future of education, research and innovation in our country. The solution the country has opted for also takes account of the historically grown education system: the cantons will retain their autonomy, and the Confederation will only intervene if they do not voluntarily ensure interchangeability and transparency. The quite emphatic popular vote should be sufficient incentive for them to address harmonisation with all promptness. The general happiness and satisfaction concerning the vote's success should not blind us to the fact that what has been created is really just a shell, which now has to be filled with content. It seems likely that this clear consent was achieved partly because the vote was only a declaration of intent that puts the formalities in place. There is very little in the articles about real content.

The real work is therefore only just beginning. And the truly controversial decisions that will be painful for those involved still need to be taken. At higher education level, in particular, a pruning of subjects is indicated. For the Swiss universities to hold their own by international comparison, they have to join forces and focus in a more targeted way on specific disciplines. The Confederation and cantons have to initiate a process of coordination and concentration without strait-jacketing the individual universities' autonomy. At the compulsory education level, formal harmonisation should not be permitted to lead to a rigid one-size-fits-all system. The challenge will lie in creating enough scope for children's individual development within a single organisation with unified objectives.

RENE LENZIN